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A Twist of Fate

Ann Johnson Barton*

The fourth son of *arbetskarl* (workingman) Carl Petersson had little chance in the 1880s to use his God-given talents in his native Kalmar *län* in the province of Småland. His pockets were nearly empty when he borrowed his fare for steamship passage to America in 1882. Although a man of slight build who was physically unable to serve his compulsory military duty, Adolf Alfred Carlsson nevertheless intended to become a homesteader in Minnesota. First, however, he had both the obligation to repay his debt in Sweden and the need to earn sufficient capital to develop a homestead farm. He thus began his American experience in Chicago, where he found work as a factory laborer. As his industrial instincts matured, he lost all interest in farming and instead became a keen businessman beloved and respected by employees and customers, as well as those in his church and social circle.

In the 1893 collapse of Wall Street and the country-wide financial panic that accompanied it, Adolf Alfred Carlson saw opportunity. He had worked the past ten of his eleven American years in the manufacture of wooden tanks, accumulating a small savings even with a wife and four children to support. In partnership with two Chicago immigrants named Johnson, Alfred Carlson bought the tank-making machinery of his bankrupt former boss. It was a risky move.

The trio of would-be entrepreneurs named their fledgling enterprise Johnson, Carlson & Co. On 25 April 1895 Andrew Johnson withdrew from the business, selling his interest to the other two for \$325. The bill of sale confirmed Andrew Johnson's complete resignation. He sold "my share and interest in all material, machinery, tools, outstanding accounts and monies belonging to the firm of Johnson, Carlson & Co., doing business at 71 N. Union Street, including the good will of the said business."

After Andrew Johnson's retirement, the remaining partners changed the firm name to Johnson & Carlson. The business continued its operations at 71 N. Union Street until 1898, when the company relocated to 96-98 W. Lake.

One of its earliest products was railroad tanks with capacities ranging from 4,000 to 10,000 gallons. Fitted onto flatbed cars, the railroad tanks were primarily used to transport freshly-picked cucumbers in brine to pickle plants for processing. The low-maintenance railroad cars were economical to operate and

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boasted an early payback. Customers included pickle giants H. J. Heinz, Vlasic, Ma Brown, and Dean Foods.

According to company advertisements, other products were “all kinds of distillers’, brewers’, and vinegar tanks; cisterns; roof tanks; milk vats; water troughs, etc.” One of the company’s first customers was the Chicago Northwestern Railroad.

The young business grew steadily. On 6 September 1899, John Johnson and Alfred Carlson engaged the law firm of Deneen & Hamill to search the title to Lot 1 in Block 35 of Ogden’s Addition to the city of Chicago. The street address was 256-258 N. Halsted. The partners purchased the property and were doing business at that location in 1901.

In August of the following year, Johnson and Carlson commissioned a search of Lot 2 in Block 35 of Ogden’s Addition. Purchase of that land enabled the partners to double their factory size. The company address was 252-258 N. Halsted.

By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, business was booming. In 1906 the partners seriously considered incorporation and building a larger, more modern factory. The first step came on 13 July 1906 when Johnson and Carlson sold their two lots on N. Halsted, with the provision their company could occupy the premises free of rent until 21 May 1907.

On 25 September 1906, John A. Johnson and Adolf Alfred Carlson, as individuals, signed a warranty deed for Block 57 (139-155 Eastman Street) in the Elston Addition to the city of Chicago. This was to be the site of the new factory.

Architect Nils Hallstrom was commissioned to draw up plans for a two-story office and factory building, with basement and a two-story barn, to be situated on the corner of Eastman and Judson Streets. On 14 February 1907 the property owners contracted with Axel Peterson to construct the building and stable according to Hallstrom’s plans.

With the new factory building in place, partners Johnson and Carlson energized their plan to incorporate their growing company. They applied to the Illinois secretary of state for a license to issue stock. Authorization to incorporate was granted on 21 January 1908. In addition to the two founders, stockholders were John Johnson’s adopted son, Clas, Alfred Carlson’s two adult sons, Carl E. and Emil A., and his nephew, Carl J. Peterson.

One hundred shares were issued, each with a par value of \$100. John A. Johnson and Adolf Alfred Carlson split the shares equally. Johnson gave one share to his son and Carlson gave one share each to his two sons and his nephew. At the first stockholders’ meeting held on 2 April 1908, John A. Johnson was elected chairman of the board and Carl E. Carlson, secretary.

The stockholders passed a resolution to fully and immediately pay all the subscriptions to the capital stock of the corporation. To that end, John Johnson and Alfred Carlson proposed that payment be made by transfer of the merchandise, machinery, and fixtures of the former partnership, which had been

appraised at \$12,700. Since the value of these assets exceeded the par value of the capital stock of the new corporation, the offer was voted affirmatively and unanimously. Messrs. Johnson and Carlson finalized the act by delivering to Carl E. Carlson, the newly-elected secretary of the corporation, a duly executed conveyance of all the merchandise, equipment and fixtures of the partnership at the agreed-upon value of \$10,000.

With the capital stock fully subscribed and paid, petition was made to the Illinois secretary of state for legalization of Johnson & Carlson as a corporation. On 4 April 1908, the secretary of state certified that Johnson & Carlson was a legitimate corporation under the laws of the State of Illinois.

In addition to adopting by-laws for the corporation, the first board also embraced a mission statement: "To carry on the business of manufacturing generally, and particularly to manufacture, repair, buy, sell, deal in, set up, and install wooden tanks and vats, and to do any and all carpenter or other work connected therewith, or necessary or incidental thereto."

Dividends were regularly declared at the annual meetings, with the undivided profits passing to the private ledger account. At the annual meeting of 1910, note was made of the street number change from 139-155 to 848-864 Eastman Street, resulting from the Chicago city council's renumbering scheme.

At the 1912 annual meeting, John Johnson tendered his resignation. It was not unexpected and it was accepted. Alfred Carlson was elected president and treasurer and each of the younger stockholders had a position on the board, including John Johnson's son Clas. In 1915 Clas Johnson resigned from the company, leaving it solely in the hands of the Alfred Carlson family. Alfred's youngest son, Arthur B., joined the firm in 1916.

Business continued to be brisk. Each of the Carlson sons developed expertise in specific areas of the wooden tank business. Carl E. specialized in fire protection tanks on the tops of buildings; Emil A. oversaw the beer, pickle and other food processing orders; and Arthur B. interfaced with the tannery industry.

Johnson & Carlson had a one-hundred-year relationship with the Wisconsin-based vinegar manufacturing firm of A. M. Richter. Because the wooden tanks were long-lived, orders from Richter and the pickle customers turned to replacement of the metal hoops that had been corroded by vinegar. This after-market became a profitable adjunct to the primary business.

When Adolf Alfred Carlson died unexpectedly in mid-January 1920, people thronged to his funeral. In addition to friends and relatives, the family received condolences from customers who knew A. A. Carlson as a sound and honest businessman and from strangers with Swedish accents who recalled that Mr. Carlson had housed and fed them and helped them find a job when they first came to this country. A. A. Carlson was forever grateful for the opportunities his adopted country afforded him and it gave him great pleasure to help other Swedish immigrants get started in this bountiful, but sometimes bewildering, land.