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Drive-In Johnson

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Johnson's Service Station, Arkadelphia

“Drive-In Johnson”

Arkadelphia residents tagged a Ouachita college professor with the nickname “Drive-In Johnson” in the early part of the twentieth century with good reason. Dr. W.S. Johnson, an educator-turned-entrepreneur, had capitalized on serving the needs of those new-fangled machines known as automobiles by opening the town’s first service station.

W. S. Johnson had quite a distinguished career in education prior to entering the business world. According to Little Rock newspapers, he was the first native Arkansan to receive a doctor of philosophy degree, after having completed undergraduate work at Ouachita in 1890. He taught high school at Emmet and Lewisville before moving into higher education. Johnson joined the faculty of the University of Arkansas in 1904, and founded the School of Education and Department of Home Economics there, serving as dean of both. He also worked at a couple of colleges in Oklahoma before returning to Arkansas for health reasons.

By this time, automobiles were beginning to appear on the primitive roads of Arkansas, and Johnson sensed a growing need to provide gasoline and other services for the machines. His drive-in service station opened on July 19, 1920, and sold sixty-five gallons of gas the first day, in addition to some oil. Johnson later recalled that the day’s receipts totaled a whopping \$17.65! While it seemed the intellectual college professor was an unusual fit for such a business, it succeeded.

Business boomed as the number of cars on the road mushroomed. Even though others opened similar operations in town, there appeared to be plenty of business for all. Johnson told newspaperman W.H. Halliburton that his sales increased every year for fifteen years. He became an independent oil dealer and one of the largest wholesaler-retailers in southwest Arkansas.

Ouachita College dedicated a new dormitory to its distinguished alumnus and benefactor in 1955. Dr. W.S. Johnson passed away later that same year and was buried in Rose Hill Cemetery.