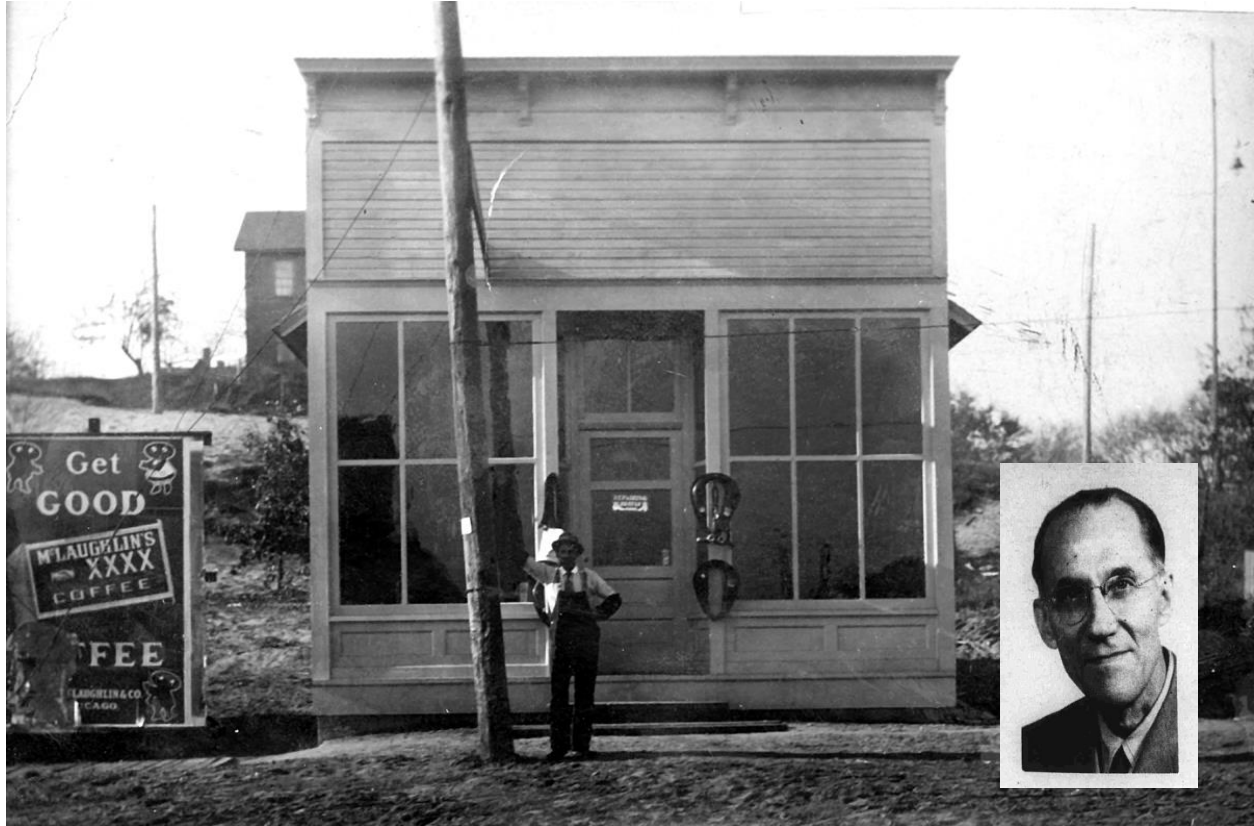


Citizens – Axel C. Johnson

By Barbara Bedau Brow  
White Lake Area Historical Society



*C1909 – Axel Johnson in front of his Harness Shop on south Ferry Street.*

Axel Conrad Johnson was oldest of two sons born to Andrew and Sara Peterson Johnson on May 3, 1886, in Whitehall. He started his life work at the age of 13 working at various sawmills in the White Lake area for 40 cents per day. In May 1905 he had the misfortune to crack a bone in his right arm while working at L. T. Covell's mill.

He learned the harness making trade in Chicago, and after a while he returned to White Lake to open his own harness and shoe repair shop in the fall of 1906.

Axel bought an E-Flat cornet from W. B. Conley of Whitehall and joined the Whitehall Cornet Band in 1906.

He opened a harness shop on 1 September 1907 in Montague in the former Veenstra & Watson building on Ferry Street, opposite the Montague Observer office at the time.

Axel married Elizabeth Anderson of Chicago in Whitehall on November 25, 1908. They had two children. Their son Howard was born in Montague in May 1909 and died in January 2001. Their daughter Helen was born in Montague in September 1918 and died in October 2005.

In May 1909 Axel purchased a lot from Anna Dowling which was located next to Potter's store in the Bank block. By June he had the land cleared and leveled in preparation to erect a 20x50 building. In October, the building was ready, and he moved his harness shop into the new building.

In 1913 he built a second story on his harness shop and in July he moved his family in from a house on Colby in Whitehall.

In 1917 he was operating a shoe repair shop at this location. During the depression Axel would often repair the shoes of the school children so that they could keep on in school.

On September 12, 1918, Axel registered for WW I. Local resident Adolph Anderson was the Registrar. Axel was also a member of the Registration Board along with A. F. Casselman and John Grof.

In March 1924, Axel was elected Village President to succeed W. E. Osmun. He held the position for two years. In March 1929 he was again elected Village President, a position he held until 1934, when he announced he would not be a candidate as he had other business interests. He was succeeded by George H. Smith.

Johnson was appointed Conservation officer in June 1930 and was in charge of issuing fishing and hunting licenses.

In September 1934, Axel Johnson was elected to the Board of Directors of the Farmers State Bank.

During the Great Depression, Axel would often repair discarded shoes and donate them to those in need.

In May 1944, Johnson sold his hardware store to Ludwig Schmidt of Chicago. Schmidt took over the management of the store in July of that year. The shoe repair department was operated by Paul Wiedemann.

In 1945, Axel Johnson sold a 66-foot lot on Ferry Street to Bartel Adema. There were two buildings on the site at the time which Adema planned to remove. Johnson stated that the buildings were old landmarks. The first one dated back to the lumber days when it was first used by Veenstra and Watson, makers of boots for river drivers. Around 1902 it had been used for a second-hand store operated by John Wallman. It was also used as a paint shop operated by A. F. Casselman and Son before Johnson took it over for his first harness shop in 1907.

In January 1948, Axel Johnson was named City Assessor with an increase in salary. The salary at the time was \$225 per year. The Council approved an increase to \$400 per year. He retired as City Assessor in November 1963.

He was Chairman of the Muskegon County Board of Supervisors in 1959.

He was also Director of the Montague Bank for 25 years and had served as its President for a time.

He was a life member of the Masonic lodge and past president of the Muskegon Shrine Club.

Axel died in Muskegon on 15 April 1969. His wife Elizabeth had died on 26 Jan 1966. They are both buried in Oak Grove Cemetery in Montague.