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# MANFRED HISTORY AND PRESERVATION

P.O. Box 321 Harvey, North Dakota 58341

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## Greetings from Manfred!

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## John A. and Malena Johnson

Husband's Full Name: John A. Johnson  
Husband's Place of Birth: West Salem, Wisconsin  
Husband's Father's Name: Nils Jensen  
Husband's Mother's Name:  
Husband's Siblings' Names: Albert, Mary, Dave, Dora,  
Anna, Ole, John, Nennie  
Wife's Full Name: Malena Johnson  
Wife's Place of Birth: Iowa  
Wife's Father's Name: James Johnson  
Wife's Mother's Name: Perilla Johnson  
Wife's Siblings' Names:  
Children's Names: Alvin, Edna, Pearl, Miles, Leslie,  
Russell, Everett

## John A. and Malena Johnson

THE JOHN AND MALENA JOHNSON FAMILY

by Laverne Johnson

John Andy Johnson was born in West Salem, Wisconsin February 2, 1871, and Malena (nee Johnson) was born in Iowa, August 16, 1874. They were both children of Norwegian immigrants. Malena's family were prosperous farm owners who had cotters working on their farm in central Norway, and John's family were farmers and fishermen in the northern part of Norway.

John's ancestral surname was "Jensen," and Leslie Johnson in *Some Facts and Thoughts Relating to the Johnson Ancestry* (1995) explained how the name change came about: "During the mid-19th century, Nils Jensen emigrated with his family from northern Norway to West Salem, Wisconsin. Upon enrolling in a country school, the children were, of course, asked their surnames. The obviously ignorant teacher said, 'Jensen? That's no American name!' She wrote down 'Johnson.' Nils said, 'All right, if that's the way it is in America, we are Johnsons.'"

John had an older sister, Anna, who had married Peter B. Anderson, and they had procured Preemption and Tree Claims in Paradise Township near McHenry in Foster County. At that time, John was not yet old enough to file his own claim, but he, along with his brother, Nennie, came to North Dakota during the summers. Nennie, later married Alpha Skogmo (the same family as the Gamble-Skogmo hardware store fame) and settled in the platted town of Manfred where he built and operated Hotel Johnson and other businesses.

John worked in the area on various jobs, such as construction on the Wells County Courthouse, and in the harvest fields. On his return trips home from "The West," Malena Johnson, a neighbor girl who had been cool to him formerly, began regarding him as a dashing and romantic figure. They became engaged.

Poor land, drought, and grasshoppers had prompted Anna and Peter Anderson, along with several of their Paradise Township neighbors, to look elsewhere for permanent settlement. The Soo Line Railroad had been platted through Wells County, and this area was opened for homesteading. In 1896, John filed on a homestead northwest of Manfred, adjacent to his brother-in-law, Peter Anderson's homestead. (The Johnson family still has the original homestead deed signed by Theodore Roosevelt.) John built a sod shanty and went back to Wisconsin where he and Malena were married April 28, 1896.

Life for a young pioneer family on the prairie had its share of hardships, and John and Malena's first child, born in the sod house, died in infancy.

In 1898, John replaced the soddie with a small frame house that he had bought from a neighboring homesteader. Their son, Alvin, was born the same year. Five other children were also born in this house: Edna in 1900, Pearl in 1902, Miles who died in infancy in 1908, Leslie in 1910, and Russell in 1912. (Everett was born in 1917 in the new Sears house.) The old house is still standing in the farmyard and was used as a granary for many years.

John began his farming enterprise by breaking sod with a one-bottom walking plow pulled by four horses. After a few years of successful farming in small grains and some livestock, John and Malena expanded into the dairy business. John obtained an exclusive contract with the Soo Line Railroad to provide milk for the Soo Line restaurants located at Harvey, Portal, and Enderlin.

The restaurants leased by the Soo Line Railroad were owned by W.M. Laslie, after whom John and Malena's son, Leslie (with a slight variation in spelling) was named.

John and Malena called their property Riverside Farm, and they registered this name at the Wells County Courthouse. The Leslie Johnson children, who now own the farm, have registered this name with the North Dakota Secretary of State, and thus Riverside Farm remains the official name of the Johnson farm.

In 1914, John and Malena decided to build a new and bigger house, and since Sears Roebuck seemed to offer the best choices and most economical buys, the Johnsons ordered "Sears Modern Home No. 114." This package consisted of the blueprints and all materials including lumber (which was not pre-cut). The basement of the Johnson house was dug in the summer of 1914 by Oscar Ongstad from Manfred using a 2-horse scraper, which is still in the possession of the Johnson family. The materials were shipped by rail freight on the Soo Line Railroad from Chicago to Manfred, and John hauled them to the farm in a horse-drawn wagon in the spring of 1915. Local builders, the Meland Brothers from Wellsburg, were contracted to construct the house, and the first thing they built was a ladder, recalled Leslie who was almost five years old at the time.

The Johnsons moved into their new home in the fall of 1915. Malena furnished the home with Mission Style furniture, and several pieces of this furniture are still in daily use by one of her granddaughters, Dianne Aull, and several of her great grandchildren. The Johnson Sears Home is now in the process of being listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

During Prohibition years, the Johnsons occasionally noticed that the empty milk cans which returned from Portal, on the Canadian border, contained labels or other evidence of Canadian liquor. They speculated that someone at Portal was smuggling liquor from Canada in their milk cans, with a confederate removing it for distribution and sale somewhere along the line before their cans were returned to Manfred.

John and Malena were members of Vang Lutheran Church, and all of their children were baptized and confirmed there. In view of the fact that both John and Malena had been born in America and thought of themselves as Americans, they did not feel a kinship with the "Old Country" and had no interest in perpetuating the Norwegian language and traditions; therefore, because the worship services were held in the Norwegian language, they seldom attended. They were, however, a viable part of the community, attending special church events, Sons of Norway dances, and other community activities.

In the summer of 1925, Malena was troubled by gallstones and took the train to Minneapolis to have surgery. She wrote home regularly, and one day Leslie went to Manfred to see if another letter from his mother had arrived on the train. He returned home empty handed, and when he got there, his Uncle Peter Anderson, was at the house delivering sad news. On August 18, two days after her 51st birthday, Malena died from the effects of ether pneumonia. Daughters Edna and Pearl came home to help with the three boys still at home, Leslie, Russell, and Everett who ranged in age from 14 to 7. John also hired house-keepers to help out.

John and his three youngest sons continued the farming and dairy business, and after John retired, he moved to Long Beach, California, where he resided until his death in 1960.

Alvin had left the farm in his early 20s to work in Seattle. He married Lila Kielly and they had four children: Marlys, James, Landis, and Darrel.

Edna married David Howie, and they moved to Seattle in the 1930s. They had five children: Ada Mae, Eileen, Jeannine, Malena, and David.

Pearl married Edward Gutschmidt and they also lived in Seattle. They had 12 children: Marlyce, Earl, JoAnn, Carol, Edward, William (Bill), Mylo, Roy, Everett (Nicky), Charlotte, Ralph, and James.

Leslie married Olga Opsal, and they lived on the Johnson Farm all of their married life with the exception of five years at "The Other Farm" in the late 1940s. Their six children are Larry, Laverne, James (Orville), David, Dianne, and Marilyn.

Russell married Mary Phippen in Washington State when he was in the Army during World War II. They lived on the Johnson farm from 1946-1951 before moving to Seattle. Their four sons are John, Russell (Russ), Terry, and Charles (Chuck).

Everett moved to Seattle where he became a Merchant Mariner and traveled to exotic ports all over the world. Everett was twice widowed.

Alvin, Edna, Pearl, and Leslie are deceased. Russell lives in Retsil, Washington, and Everett and his wife, Winifred, reside in Wenatchee, Washington.

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**John A. Johnson Family**