



Ray E. Johnson Class of 2012

Ray E. Johnson was born on October 11, 1911 in Oroville, CA. He graduated from Oroville High School (OHS) in 1929 and was awarded a full athletic scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley (UC). Printed next to his photo in the yearbook were the words, "Those who knew him liked him." He was a member of the student crew, headed by OUHSD Hall of Famers Ernest and Morrow Steadman, who constructed the Block O on Table Mountain during the spring of 1929. Ray was the first Eagle Scout in Butte County and embodied the Boy Scout oath. He also worked as a newspaper boy for several years while attending school.

Ray chose to not attend UC immediately after graduation and instead spent two years working as a surveyor with a local lumber company. He played semi-pro baseball as a catcher for the Oroville Olives, Chico Colts, and Colusa Pruners and was good enough to be selected for a tryout with the Seattle team in the Pacific Coast League. The need for year-round employment prevented him from participating in the tryouts.

He then attended UC as a freshman but the extended illness of his father caused him to have to leave school after one year and forced him to return to Oroville where he found a job driving an ice truck. In 1933, he went to work for Union Oil Company and, within three years, became one of the company's youngest plant managers. In 1937, he left the oil business, moved to Arbuckle, CA with his new wife Lorraine Christian and joined his father-in-law in the farming and grain brokerage business.

In 1940, he and his father-in-law founded the Christian & Johnson Company, opened a second store in Woodland, CA, and a third store in Chico in 1943 where they were in business for nineteen years. Ray bought a home there and went on to live in that same home for the rest of his life.

Between 1950 and 1960 Butte County experienced great expansion and the Highway 99E project brought great controversy to Chico. In short, the freeway fight served as a catalyst for Ray's political career and his aspirations began as a personal "not in my backyard" pursuit. In 1962, he decided to run for the California State Assembly, and lost the election by a narrow margin.

His distinguished legislative career began in 1965 when he won a seat in the California State Assembly where he served five successive two-year terms. In 1976, he was elected California State Senator by defeating a 37 year incumbent, who was considered unbeatable, and served two successive four-year terms. Due to reapportionment, Ray's eighteen year political career ended in 1984.

Senator Johnson's community service over a forty-five year period is varied and extensive, making significant contributions to the City of Chico, Butte County, and the State of California as evidenced by his legislative and public service record. He maintained membership in several service clubs, the Butte County Board of Education, the Bidwell District Boy Scouts of America, and the Methodist Church, as well as serving on many boards and commissions for the State of California.

He was inducted into the Northern California Sports Hall of Fame in 1977, and in 1993, the portion of State Highway Route 99 south of Chico was designated by the state legislature as the Ray E. Johnson Expressway.

Former Governor of California Pete Wilson described Ray as, "A thoroughly decent man who represented the best tradition of citizen turned lawmaker."

Bill Lee, former editor of the Chico Enterprise-Record wrote in an editorial following Ray's passing in 1993, "Johnson had a reputation of being "up front" and "calling em" as he sees em" He was that rare legislative breed, "an honest man who had a deep concern for what was right for the people."

For an abridged biography, please refer to the winter 2010-11 edition of the Butte County Historical Society (BCHS) publication DIGGIN'S. California State Senator Ray E. Johnson: Citizen Turned Lawmaker, by Claudia Beaty. The original complete biography is available at the BCHS archives.