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Page One Feature

S.C. Johnson Patriarch Confronts Demons in Candid Filmed Memoir

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RACINE, Wis. -- When the Golden Rondelle theater here held a screening of "Carnauba: A Son's Memoir," the invited audience had already heard the buzz surrounding the film. According to the publicity, the hourlong movie follows Sam Johnson, multibillionaire patriarch of the Johnson Wax clan, as he traces his father's 1935 journey to Brazil to glimpse palm trees prized for wax that helped make the family famous.



Sam Johnson

James Scalzo, a 33-year-old loan officer at Johnson Bank, owned by the Johnson family, settled into his seat expecting the corporate equivalent of a National Geographic travelogue. At first, it seemed, that was what he would get: mostly uneventful footage of an amphibious airplane soaring over sea and featureless landscape, alternating with Mr. Johnson's talking head.

But as Mr. Johnson's narration proceeded, the revelations multiplied: The 73-year-old is a recovering alcoholic. His mother was an alcoholic, too. And for much of his life, he was haunted by his relationship with his father, H.F. Johnson, who was largely absent when Sam was young, and harshly critical of his son later in life. "My biggest doubt about my father was whether he loved me as much as the company," Sam Johnson says at one point.

The boss's candor inspired Mr. Scalzo. Later that January night, he talked for the first time with relatives and friends about the grief he had kept bottled up since his own father's death from a heart attack last October. "Sam gave me a piece of his soul," Mr. Scalzo says. "I didn't think this film was going to be so emotionally meaningful."

Nor did many of the 8,000 other people who have seen the film. Since late last year, the Johnson clan has been showing "Carnauba: A Son's Memoir" to many of the 16,000 employees of S.C. Johnson & Son Inc. and other family-controlled companies, as well as to friends, associates and others connected to the Johnsons and their businesses. For many, the experience has proved cathartic.



H.F. Johnson

Richard Turner, an audiovisual worker at S.C. Johnson, saw a preview last October. He didn't pay much attention until about 20 minutes in, when Mr. Johnson mentions that his mother was an alcoholic. "I kind of was intense in listening after that," Mr. Turner says.

That same day, Mr. Turner redoubled his efforts to get a loved one into treatment for alcoholism. Mr. Turner says his argument began with: "Mr. Johnson is an alcoholic." Later that month, the relative began treatment.

Mr. Johnson says he has so far heard from about two dozen people who, after watching "Carnauba: A Son's Memoir," either entered alcohol counseling or encouraged a loved one to do so. "If the film helps just a few people," Mr. Johnson says in an interview, "that will be worth it."

The movie is shaping up to be an extraordinary exception in the annals of executive image-building. At most big companies, teams of publicists work hard to craft personas for their bosses that are entirely wholesome and upbeat.

In a 1988 book Mr. Johnson wrote to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the family business two years earlier, he inventories the many things he admired about his father, H.F. Johnson -- astute chemist, humane boss -- without any mention of their difficult relationship. Nor does drinking enter the picture.

Under Sam Johnson, who cut back his duties in 1993 and fully retired last year, S.C. Johnson evolved into a group of companies with \$6 billion a year in sales. In the process, the core consumer-products company expanded well beyond the waxes, to include Ziploc bags, Windex window cleaner and dozens of other ubiquitous household products. He and his family -- the business is now principally owned by 62 members of the clan -- have shared the wealth, donating millions to support local charities, schools and civic projects.

Sam Johnson was born in Racine in 1928, the same year his father took over the old Johnson Wax. When Sam was three, his father divorced his mother, Gertrude. The rest of his childhood, he divided his time between his father in Racine and his mother in Ithaca, N.Y. -- one busy with the business (and marrying three more times), the other subsiding into drink.

"The earliest memory I have of my mother and father was not really understanding why they would not be together for the long term, when they got the divorce," Mr. Johnson says in the film. "Years later my father told me the reason that they got the divorce, which was that my mother was an alcoholic."

The Depression took its toll on Johnson Wax. From 1932 to 1936, sales fell from \$5 million to \$3 million. In 1935, H.F., then 35 years old, hired a pilot and took off on a two-month, 15,550-mile trek in a Sikorsky S38 amphibious plane. The ostensible reason was to scout for undiscovered stands of the carnauba palm and to study the economics of the tree to ensure a growing supply. The fronds of the palm are coated with a wax that is the hardest in nature, making it a crucial material in Johnson Wax.

On the trip, he bought land for a plantation for growing and studying the carnauba. The trip ended in Florida, when the plane was forced to make an emergency landing. Back home in Racine, he wrote a book about his adventures and had a batch of copies privately printed. Years later, H.F. ordered Wisconsin dairy cows shipped to an area where he had encountered undernourished children. He also had a schoolhouse built in one locale.

Sam Johnson recalls only his father's absence. "For a long time, I couldn't admit that my father wasn't around enough of the time when I needed him," he says in the film. "I felt maybe I was just an instrumentality of his to carry on what he had created, versus genuine affection."

Sam attended his father's alma mater, Cornell University, in the late 1940s. Harvard Business School and a stint in the Navy came before he joined the family company. His duties were modest -- among them, answering his father's mail. Eventually, he demanded more, and was put in charge of new-product development.

Between 1956 and 1958, he oversaw the launch of Raid insecticide and Off! bug repellent, Pledge

furniture polish and Glade air freshener. Within a year of hitting the market, these products accounted for 35% of the company's domestic sales. Sam's responsibilities expanded.

So did his family. In 1954, he married Imogene Powers, whom he had met in college. They had four children: sons Samuel Curtis III (Curt) and Herbert Fisk III (Fisk) and daughters Winifred and Helen.

Setback in Netherlands

Sam Johnson's first big setback came in 1965 while he was overseeing construction of a huge new aerosol plant in the Netherlands. He brought on too much capacity, underestimated start-up problems and overestimated sales. European profits plunged. Sam was recalled to Racine that summer.

Weeks later, on Labor Day, the 65-year-old H.F. suffered a stroke. Sam, still smarting from the sting of his European missteps, became president at age 37. "I always wondered whether I had given him the stroke because of the mess-up I'd made in Europe," he says in the film.

No longer able to read or write well, and lame in the right arm, H.F. developed a short fuse. During winters, when H.F. stayed in Florida, Sam had to fly down twice a month to brief his father. Good numbers or bad, H.F. would say: "Well, I don't like those numbers. And I don't like you either. And you're fired," Sam recalls in the film.

When H.F. died in 1978, Sam received a note his father had written years earlier and saved for posthumous delivery. The note warned him that people would complain to Sam that he wasn't running the company his father's way, but "pay no heed to that because what you have to do is what you think is right for the company and its people at that point in time." It was signed, "with great fatherly love," Mr. Johnson says in the film.

A Paternal Release

The letter "released me to be myself and not just a clone of my father," he says.

The company prospered. Sales, \$171 million in 1965, reached \$1 billion in 1978 and \$4 billion in 1999. With acquisitions of Drackett Co. in 1993 (Windex and Drano) and Dow Brands in 1998 (Saran Wrap, Fantastik, Ziploc bags), sales for all Johnson family companies combined hit \$6 billion last year, when Mr. Johnson retired. (The family-owned Johnson companies don't disclose profit figures.)

Mr. Johnson always liked his vodka, but by the late '80s, his intake had developed into a dependence alarming to his family. He drank at home in the evenings, dozing off right after dinner, then waking up in the middle of the night.

"Eventually, I developed my mother's disease," he says in the film. "I really had a hard time admitting it to myself because when I was a child I said the one thing I never want to be is like my mother in terms of this problem."

His daughter Helen Johnson-Leipold, now 44 and head of Johnson Outdoors Inc., says her father seemed to get no joy from life during this period. Finally, in 1992, Imogene Johnson called a family meeting to confront Mr. Johnson about his drinking. Afterward, a company pilot flew Mr. Johnson to Minnesota to check into the Mayo Clinic. He had served as chairman of the hospital's board and feared embarrassment, but no one seemed to recognize him. "I kind of blended into the scenery with all the other patients," he says in the interview. Without a drink, he had trouble falling asleep the first night, but

slept fine thereafter.

Twenty-eight days later, he went home, confident he could stay off the bottle. To reinforce the Mayo treatment, Mr. Johnson joined Alcoholics Anonymous. A college fraternity brother urged Mr. Johnson to join him at an A.A. meeting Tuesday mornings in a Milwaukee church basement. He still attends the same group, though infrequently.

Sober and approaching retirement from day-to-day responsibilities in 1993, Mr. Johnson began to think about his father's journey. He had flown for years himself as an amateur pilot, and he resolved to fly the route himself, in the very same plane. From the start, he wanted it committed to film, as a legacy for his family and his companies.

But his father had sold the original aircraft, and it had later crashed in the sea off New Guinea. Five years ago, Mr. Johnson set off with his two sons in search of the wreck, which they hoped to raise and restore.

For about a week, flying as low as 100 feet above the sea, father and sons worked 10 hours a day using magnetometers and sonar to scan for submerged metal. At one point, Mr. Johnson dived into water 100 feet deep to retrieve a chunk of metal that they thought could have been a piece of the tail. That was all they ever found.

Mr. Johnson still wanted to duplicate his father's experience. "I wanted us to feel how he felt," he says in the interview. "It's so much different flying an old airplane with loud engines and air leaking through the windshield."

The Johnsons hired Born Again Restorations Inc., Owatonna, Minn., to help them build their own plane. For three years, and at a cost no one will disclose, a team of as many as 17 people worked to duplicate H.F.'s plane. The result wasn't an exact facsimile. The original held 12 passengers; the copy, only seven, allowing space for a writing desk and other luxuries. The new plane has aluminum, not wire, wheels, and advanced navigating gear, in place of a Morse-code radio and two compasses. It does retain the name "Spirit of Carnauba," with "S.C. Johnson & Son" painted on the outriggers.

Vintage Cap, 'Lucky' Belt

On a crisp morning in October 1998, Mr. Johnson donned a vintage aviator's cap, goggles, scarf and the "lucky" leather belt he had crafted while in alcoholism treatment, and took off with his sons. A six-person film crew followed closely in a second plane. The outbound journey took 20 days, with stops in, among other places, the Bahamas, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Grenada, Trinidad and finally, Brazil, where the goal was to see the carnauba palms H.F. had planted more than six decades earlier in Fortaleza.

It sounds exotic, but once back in Racine, they confronted a mountain of film focused largely on an airplane aloft. That was a problem. They were in danger of producing a \$5 million exercise in executive self-indulgence. "I don't just want a flying film," Mr. Johnson told Landon Parvin, a consultant hired to help complete the project. "I want a story that people are interested in."

So in February last year, Mr. Parvin sat down with Mr. Johnson at Council House, an S.C. Johnson facility in Racine, and without rehearsing, began to interview him. Initially, "Carnauba: A Son's Memoir" wasn't meant to plumb the depths of Mr. Johnson's life, especially not the alcoholism. "I thought it was a rather personal matter, between me and my family," Mr. Johnson says in the interview.

But after a while, he seemed to forget the camera was there. When the time came to decide what to cut and what to keep, he decided: "The trip itself was maybe something I never would have done, had I not conquered the problem."

When Mr. Parvin showed the rough cut to Mr. Johnson, he feared "that the film was more personal than he would accept." But Mr. Johnson was pleased, and later the same day, he showed it to his wife and three of his four children.

"He lived a pretty tough childhood," says Ms. Johnson-Leipold. "I don't think I had ever put those pieces together." Son Fisk, 42 and chairman of S.C. Johnson, says that before hearing his father on the soundtrack, "I didn't fully comprehend the degree of difficulty he had in the relationship with his father."

Lots of Latitude

Mr. Johnson had given his own children lots of latitude to establish careers in the family businesses. "My brother and sisters and I have been huge beneficiaries of the relationship that my father had with his father," Fisk Johnson says. "I think my father said to himself, 'I'm never going to put my children through this.' "

Last June, Mr. Johnson showed the film to a group of about 600 people, including many of Mr. Johnson's Cornell classmates.

"We still weren't sure how an outside audience would like it," Mr. Parvin says. But afterward, the verdict was clear. "It was as if he were a rock star. People came up all around him."

In October, the first group of employees, in Hong Kong, saw the film. In December, Mr. Johnson held the first U.S. screening for employees, in Racine. In January, he showed it to a group of Racine community leaders.

Mary Berryman-Agard, an organizational-development consultant in Madison, Wis., was in the audience that night: "I seldom see a message with such frankness anywhere," she says. "And I seldom see a male addressing in a public arena the personal problems of his life."

Her husband, Steven Agard, manager of a graphic-arts firm, says that after seeing the film, he resolved to spend more time with his children: "I don't want my kids to have to search for who and what I am."

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