

Paul and Thelma (Boeka) Johnson

For almost three decades, anyone who lived and ate in Wood River knew Paul and Thelma Johnson. Open for business six days a week from 1953 to 1980, Johnson's Grocery provided Paul and Thelma plenty of opportunity to welcome folks to the community. Wood River residents will remember charging groceries and paying by the month, Thelma at the old cash register giving out free candy to the kids, and Paul in his apron at the meat counter cutting to order everything from braunschweiger to steaks.

When Paul Ganson Johnson was born on March 19, 1918, he joined six older sisters. He was a talented athlete and was recruited to play minor league baseball. However, since that would mean he would work on Sundays, his Methodist minister father objected and Paul declined. He graduated from high school in Henry, Nebraska, and attended college at Chadron State where he sang in the Mixed Chorus. Many recall his beautiful deep base voice booming "How Great Thou Art" during Sunday church services. After Chadron, he played basketball at Nebraska Wesleyan where he graduated with a degree in???? He moved to Wood River where his father had been called to preach and worked for Anstine and Brittin Groceries.

Thelma Augusta Boeka was born September 8, 1921 in Goehner, Nebraska, where she grew up on a dairy farm with her four brothers and two sisters. She recalled the hard work a farm entailed and was happiest when she could get out of "women's work" and help with the milking and garden. On her Senior Class skip day to Omaha, she recalled watching a handsome young fellow play basketball at Nebraska Wesleyan. After graduating from High School, she moved to Wood River where she worked at Brittin's Grocery and where she finally met Paul. He entered the coffee shop where she and her sister were discussing a possible move to California. Upon seeing Paul, she told her sister she might just stick around Wood River for a while.

Paul and Thelma married on May 30, 1942, by his father at the Methodist parsonage at midnight to avoid a prank planned by friends to separate the two after the wedding. Paul was called to serve in World War II just four months later and spent three and a half years in the South Pacific. Thelma moved to San Luis Obispo, California, where Paul was initially stationed, and worked there for two years as a Payroll Clerk. After Paul's discharge, the couple moved back to Wood River, purchased the Harper Grocery and raised their two sons, Paul Gaylord and Billy Lee.

Paul was quiet, hard-working, loved to fish and had a deep faith. Thelma was always giving to others. After her surgery for breast cancer while still recovering, she visited other women in the hospital to encourage and share with them. Upon retirement they enjoyed winters in Lake Havasu City, AZ, and searching out garage sales and auctions in the summer. Thelma loved finding a bargain and Paul loved the hunt. They were involved grandparents, attending their five grandchildren's activities and providing a basement full of garage sale treasures for them to explore. Paul died August 13, 2003, at age 85 of kidney failure. Thelma continued to live in the home they had built in 1953 until her death December 9, 2013, at the age of 92.