



King of the Roadside Restaurants

by HAROLD WOLFF

HOWARD JOHNSON, FABULOUS pioneer of highway eateries, dreams of a day when travel-conscious Americans will be able to drive from coast to coast and eat every meal at a glamorous roadside restaurant bearing, of course, the name of Howard Johnson. This dream project has carried Johnson from a drugstore counter in his native Wollaston, Massachusetts, to a roadside empire that extends from Maine to Florida and west to Ohio.

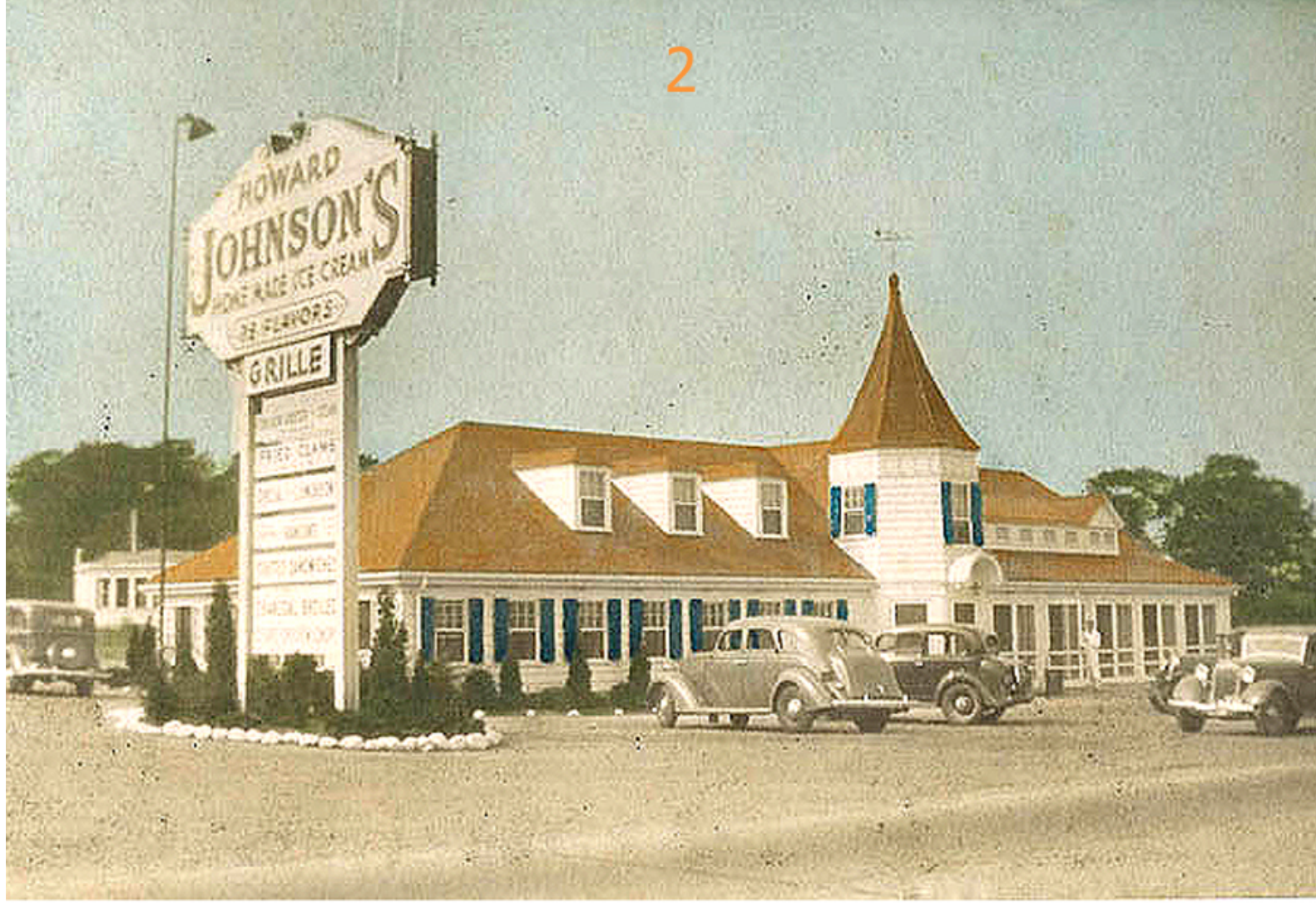
Some 130,000,000 patrons yearly think of him as the No. 1 impresario of the tasty morsel, the man who took the ants out of Sunday picnics, taught Virginians to crave New England fried clams and made Miami clamor for mother's cooking—Howard Johnson's mother's, that is.

Johnson launched his campaign to glamorize roadside eating in 1929. In those days, U. S. highways bulged with 50,000,000 regular auto tourists, and catering to their needs had become a five-billion-dollar-a-year industry. But while cars were getting sleeker and sleeker and highways more and more super, the 70,000 roadside stands were still in the horse and buggy days.

For the billions spent annually on roadside meals, U. S. travelers often received poorly-planned portions of just passable food, served in dishes sometimes more attractive to flies. If roadside stands began to sparkle, they were still far from satisfying weary travelers.

In Pasadena, an ingenious fellow put a piece of cheese on a hamburger and made himself a fortune. His cheeseburger started a national craze, siring a family that now includes nutburgers, chickenburgers, clamburgers, twinburgers, even atombomburgers. In Texas, drive-in stands hired voluptuous waitresses, dressed them in abbreviated colorful uniforms and trained them in smiling and laughing at customers' jokes.

OldMagazineArticles.com



But the food remained generally so bad that newspapers and magazines ran campaigns against the perils of roadside eating. One editorial dubbed the picturesque proprietor of the typical stand "Pto-maine Joe." The American Medical Association warned the public that everything from a tummy-ache to amoebic dysentery threatened the unwary motorist.

With a fortune awaiting anyone who could tap the lucrative roadside business, enterprising *restaurateurs* sallied onto the highways, armed with neon and chrome, and paying more attention to good food. None of them, however, have been as bold or as successful as Howard Johnson, whose chain before the war numbered 195 restaurants and was expanding at the rate of a new stand every ten days.

On a sunny summer Sunday, 1,250,000 footloose customers drive, bicycle, walk or are wheeled into his stands. On the famous Pennsylvania Turnpike, Johnson's 10 stands do a business of \$1,500,000 a year. The newest addition to the chain, a palatial emporium on the Atlantic City boardwalk, is expected to gross almost a million in its first year. In 1945, Johnson stores sold 12,000,000 frankfurters, 2,800,000 servings of fried clams, 1,500,000 gallons of ice cream. Today, his business is running far ahead of even those imposing figures.

JOHNSON'S FORMULA for the way to a tourist's heart is simple: good meals served in attractive surroundings. His food is cooked mostly according to the homey recipes of his mother, an old-fashioned New England housewife.

To make sure that the food in every one of his restaurants is exactly the same, the Johnson rule-books are as precise as an army manual. Whether you buy fried clams in Manchester or Miami, there will always be from 19 to 21 in a portion, fried at precisely 375 degrees. Your cup of coffee will always be filled to $\frac{3}{8}$ of an inch from the top. An ice cream cone always has the same amount of extra cream dripping over the edge. This little extra fillip must be on the outside so that it will be seen by the customer.

The book insists, too, that every frankfurter should be cut slightly at an angle six times on each side, and the instructions make it clear that the counterman who attempts a seventh incision jeopardizes his



future with the organization.

Punctilious instructions govern the life of a Howard Johnson employee. Literally from head to foot, everything must be according to the book. Someone figured out that food served by a girl wearing laced oxfords with military heels is peculiarly appealing, so all Johnson girls wear them. Hair must be tied in a ribbon with a bow on the side, says the book, which also prescribes that the girls may not eat food that contains garlic or onions. And above all else, SMILE, not only with your face but also with your voice. And never, never say to a customer: "Hey, mister!"

To make it easier for people who liked his stands to find them again, Johnson decided on a standard decor, something that would make touring families or nomadic businessmen feel at home. With slight variations, every Johnson stand is a white colonial cottage, with dormer windows and blue shutters. He persuaded a manufacturer to make a special orange-colored roof tile, to be used only on his stands. Even when he invaded the swank Park Avenue section of New York City, Johnson kept to the color scheme of his original ice cream shack on Wollaston beach.

Behind the success of this roadside empire is a career in which real life out-Algered Horatio. Cocky, outspoken, unconventional, 49-year-old Howard Johnson tips his Homburg on the back of his head, tilts his swivel chair and talks not of how he saved and scrimped, but of the number of times he has been on the verge of going broke in a big way.

Known in his native Wollaston as "that wild Johnson boy," he began his business career in 1922 when his father's death left him with a debt of \$40,000 and a mother and three sisters to support. Then only 25; Johnson started breaking business precedents by borrowing another \$20,000 to buy a drugstore that was losing money hand over fist. On a hunch that people would come great distances to get the kind of ice cream his mother used to make, he installed a churn, rolled up his sleeves and put himself in the ice cream business.

That summer he opened a small stand at a near-by beach, and overnight became the envy of all the veterans of the ice cream industry, who watched their business beat a path to Johnson's door. Riding his original hunch hard, he added more kinds of ice cream, fried clams and the inevitable sizzling hot dog, all according to his mother's recipe,

OldMagazineArticles.com



and was on his way to his first fortune. Somewhere along the line he figured out that what America needed even more than a good five-cent cigar was a chain of stands that would take the chance out of roadside eating.

By the time Johnson had reached this conclusion he was broke again. A venture into the restaurant business had wiped out his ice cream profits. Meanwhile the Depression had coined the word retrenchment, and caution was indicated. But not for the Wollaston enterpriser.

He borrowed another stake and roadside stands began popping up along the highways. Johnson reinvested his own money as fast as he made it, but it still wasn't enough to finance his ambitious plans. Bankers considered him too unpredictable. He decided he needed partners, hundreds of them, men and women who wanted to cut loose from whatever else they were doing and venture onto the roadside. Johnson would supply the name and the know-how; they would put up the money and agree to buy ice cream, hot dogs and other supplies from Johnson and to maintain the Johnson standards.

PROSPECTIVE agents flocked to his colors. The first candidate was a Cape Cod skipper who wanted to settle down on shore. Later came an ex-sheriff and an ex-bootlegger; a boy who used to deliver newspapers for Johnson's original drugstore and a retired vice-president of a large grocery chain. In the New York area, his partner is Miss Lydia Pinkham Gove, heiress of the Lydia Pinkham patent medicine fortune. By 1941, Johnson's agents owned three times as many stores as he did.

Meanwhile, from the simple roadside stand had evolved larger and more elaborate establishments. In order to assure the agents a year-round business and a steady profit, to the ice cream and hot dog counter he added regular restaurants serving everything from a snack to a steak. Halfway along the 160-mile Pennsylvania Turnpike, Johnson built the Midway, a landscaped flagstone building with two lunchrooms and a pine-paneled dining room seating 220. For the truck drivers who ply that highway, there are dormitories—one for the men and one for the lady-drivers—where they can catch forty winks before resuming their trip.

The largest of the Johnson stands is located in the Queens section of New York, on the main highway

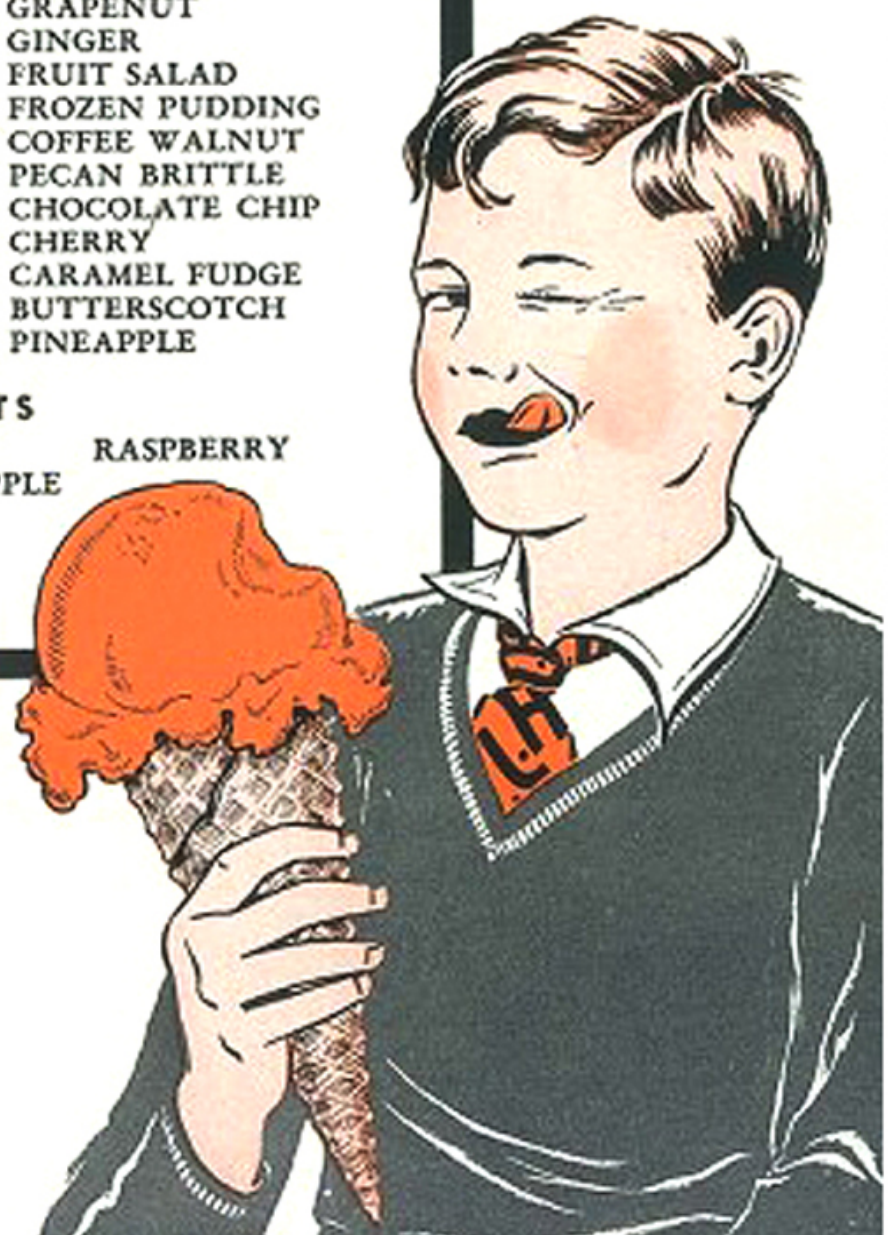
28⁵ Delicious / Flavors!

VANILLA
CHOCOLATE
STRAWBERRY
COFFEE
FRESH COCOANUT
PEPPERMINT STICK
PEANUT BRITTLE
PEACH
ORANGE PINEAPPLE
PISTACHIO
NUT SPECIAL
MAPLE WALNUT
BUTTER PECAN
MACAROON

LEMON
BUTTERCRUNCH
BANANA
GRAPENUT
GINGER
FRUIT SALAD
FROZEN PUDDING
COFFEE WALNUT
PECAN BRITTLE
CHOCOLATE CHIP
CHERRY
CARAMEL FUDGE
BUTTERSCOTCH
PINEAPPLE

SHERBETS
ORANGE LEMON RASPBERRY
STRAWBERRY PINEAPPLE

Cone 10¢



HOWARD JOHNSON'S

FAMOUS ICE CREAM

leading from the city out to Long Island. It was built at a cost of \$750,000 in 1939 to catch crowds on their way to the World's Fair. This store now does a business of more than \$700,000 a year, serves as many as 6,000 customers a day, and has averaged 600 ice cream cones an hour on a record Sunday. Proud boast of the house is "from a frankfurt to a banquet," and in the two second-floor dining rooms, local business groups and clubs meet for elaborate luncheons and dinners.

THE EXPANSION OF Johnson's chain presented interesting problems. Policemen, for example, have no love for Johnson. On more than one occasion the opening of a new store has been accompanied by a riot call to handle the enthusiastic crowd. And a Howard Johnson restaurant always creates a highway traffic problem.

Other difficulties center around the stubbornness of American eating habits. When Johnson tried to introduce fried clams to Coney Island, he found that New Yorkers would have none of them, and the first day not a single clam was ordered. For some time Johnson emissaries mingled with the crowd, giving away handfuls of clams, until the customers caught on. The same experience was repeated as Johnson moved inland from the coast, and now the biggest demand for clams comes from a Howard Johnson in Springfield, Massachusetts.

By 1941, Johnson had successfully established the first large-scale chain of roadside eating emporiums in history. But just as his adventures in defying orthodox business practices seemed at an end, along came gas rationing. May 15, 1942, ranks close to Pearl Harbor in the memory of every staff member, for it was on that day, in the East, that gas became something you got with a punch card.

Two-thirds of Johnson's business patriotically stayed home. The books of the company for the months that

HOWARD JOHNSON'S

followed look like an illuminated manuscript, with red predominating. By January, 1943, it was literally a question of enough money to meet payrolls and creditors.

Hat in hand, Johnson went to Washington and sat for hours outside innumerable government offices, until someone finally was persuaded to let him try making marmalade for overseas shipment. Then came other Army and Navy contracts, and Johnson was in the black again. Last year his various enterprises broke all pre-war records, selling more than \$28,000,000 worth of food, retail and wholesale.

His rather violent financial fluctuations have had little effect on Johnson's personal habits. Affluent or broke, he is always a free spender. In his early days Johnson had a weakness for flashy automobiles, but he has outgrown that. His pre-war pride was a 57-foot yacht, which Johnson rarely used but loaned freely to friends.

Persistent, too, is his almost superstitious attitude toward people and places connected with his early success. Though it costs him more to do it, Johnson's fleet of trucks has always bought gas from Carl Smith's little station, which used to stake him to a tankful when Johnson couldn't pay his bills. He still buys his fire and liability insurance from the agent who insured his first Ford, though the \$10,000,000 Johnson account has been sought by the biggest brokers in the country.

By the same token, he still runs his business from a one-story wooden building on a back street in Wollaston. On one corner Johnson's original drugstore is still functioning, much as it was when he took it over. His company's offices are cramped between a taxi stand and a billiard parlor. Johnson's personal office is barely large enough for a chair, a desk and a phone. On the walls are an oil painting of his mother and a few family snapshots.

Johnson runs his multi-million-dollar business without any organization worthy of the name. He does not even have a secretary, preferring to use the phone rather than dictate letters. The Johnson staff consists of 68-year-old Joe Brennan, who was Johnson's father's lawyer, and short, plump, jolly Victor Melson, who functions as a trouble-shooter and general checker-upper. Each morning the three men have a brief informal chat before Johnson issues orders for the day.

Right now, with U. S. tourists panting with pent-up wanderlust, Johnson's eyes are again on the road maps, where every highway is for him a potential bonanza. As far as anyone knows the Pacific is the only boundary to his dreams of an American roadside empire.

Coronet

October, 1946: p. 36

OldMagazineArticles.com