



THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS

It was the dirtiest place on earth.

That's what people used to say, anyway. Of course it was a bit of an exaggeration, or colloquial hyperbole. Nevertheless, in the early 1960s the Burgess Battery plant—11 buildings stretched across six acres hugging the west bank of the murky Pecatonica River—was certainly one of the dirtiest places in all of Freeport, Illinois.

Down in the basement of the main building was where most of the black men employed at the company were relegated. This was also where the filthiest part of the process of manufacturing dry cell batteries took place. A carbon-based substance known as slip mix was dumped into huge vats, hardened, and turned into thin sticks of carbon. This was the central part of a battery, and the sticks, or "pitch," as they were called, were made in different sizes, depending on the type of battery they were to be used for. Burgess made virtually all kinds of batteries, from common household cells for companies like Ray-O-Vac and EverReady to huge emergency powerpacks for hospitals and high-voltage batteries for mobile radio receivers used by the military.

The pitch sticks were loaded onto rolling hoppers and transported up to the fourth floor, where the dirty work continued.

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There the workers, many of them women, stood along conveyor belts, dropping the carbon sticks into aluminum tubes, then sealing the casings closed.

Throughout the process, the black, gritty carbon stuck to everything. If the carbon got on a worker's hands, that worker could forget about scratching an itch or touching his or her face without getting smudged and marked up like a coal miner. Workers wore special boots and rubber gloves, and they scrubbed at huge washbasins after each shift. Still, the grime prevailed. "The dirt was so pervasive," recalls Geraldine Jones, who worked at the plant, "people really didn't want anyone from Burgess getting into their car. It was a filthy thing."

In 1965, at the age of 19, Robert L. Johnson landed a summer job at Burgess, where he soon discovered he was not cut out for taking orders and working for someone else. The company had a hiring policy that gave preference to the children of its workers, and because Johnson's mother, Edna, worked at the plant, he, too, got a job. Each day, Johnson climbed the main building's metal stairs to the second floor, where all workers punched the primary clock. Then he proceeded to the fourth floor, where he was required to punch yet another clock, the department clock, officially starting his pay period.

The minimum wage job was simple enough. As the workers dropped the pitch into the aluminum tubes, carbon dust would fall under the conveyor belt onto the floor and Johnson had to sweep it up. From the start, he hated the grimy, mindless work, and developed a system for himself that made it easier to bear. He'd let the dirt accumulate, sweep it up, then kill time socializing with other workers. The foreman, of course, did not like Johnson's system.

"Keep the floor constantly swept," the foreman ordered.

Johnson refused. What difference did it make, he argued, as long as the floor was clean at the end of the day?

Fed up with his obstinate young employee, the foreman approached Johnson one Wednesday during a shift. "You know, Johnson," he said, "Friday is your last day."

"No, Friday is not my last day," Johnson replied.

"What do you mean?" the foreman asked.

"*Today* is my last day," Johnson declared.

As Johnson gathered his belongings before leaving the plant, the foreman made a suggestion. "If you're going to get a job, you'd better work for yourself," the foreman said. "Working for other people just doesn't seem to be your cup of tea because you've got a unique way of how you want to do things."¹ The foreman's words stayed with Johnson for years to come. More than mere advice, they were sheer prophecy.

When Robert Louis Johnson was born on April 8, 1946, in Hickory, Mississippi, the future held little promise for a black boy greeted with open arms by poverty, poor education, and oppression. He would be known to his family as Bobby, but his formal first name came from a great-uncle, Robert C. Johnson. The origin of his great-uncle's middle initial underscores the times in which the early generations of Johnsons lived. There were two other Robert Johnsons, both white, who resided in the Hickory area around the turn of the century, so in order to keep the black Robert distinguished from the white Roberts, Johnson's great-uncle adopted "Colored" as his middle name.

Located 60 miles east of Jackson, Hickory in those days was home to about 650 people, and the Johnson family alone accounted for a large number of the residents. Bobby was the ninth of 10 children born to Edna and Archie Johnson. Both of his parents grew up five miles outside of Hickory, deep in the sticks, in a small community called Good Hope. Johnson's great-grandfather, Filmore Johnson, who had been born into slavery, planted the first seeds of self-sufficiency in the family. A man ahead of his time, Filmore managed to purchase dozens of acres of land for

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his family in Good Hope. Farming was the primary source of income in the area, and there were a couple of cotton gins and some small dairies. With the abundance of forestland, there was also a sawmill that produced lumber and a stave mill that made barrels for storing whiskey.

Filmore Johnson farmed on his land and he traded at the local general store. Robert "Johnnie" Brand, whose white family ran the store, recalls Filmore in the 1930s arriving at the store on a horse-pulled buggy and loading up staples like huge sacks of sugar and barrels of flour to take home. Sometimes Brand would ride a bicycle to deliver goods to Filmore and his wife, Betty. He'd follow a dirt trail about a mile off the road, and when he reached the house, Betty would greet him with freshly made cakes and pies. "I was a little boy, and I called her 'Aunt Betty,'" says Brand, who is now in his late seventies. "To call her Aunt meant that she was someone who we had respect for. The Johnsons were poor, working people. But they were nice, good people."

Filmore was known as a proud, stubborn man. Once he fixed his mind on doing something a certain way, nothing and no one could dissuade him. It was a personality trait that would pass down through the generations. When a descendant was caught being particularly bullheaded, someone might note, "That's the Filmore showing up." Once, after they were well along in age, Betty became so tired of Filmore's hardheaded ways that she moved out of the house and into a nearby place of her own. But shortly thereafter they made up and were back together. Filmore died at age 86 in 1945, and Betty died seven years later, in her early nineties.

Their grandson, Archie, did not go very far in school, but he followed Filmore's legacy of self-sufficiency. Archie, who was Bobby's father, provided for his large family mostly by cutting and selling wood. Known to everyone by his nickname "Peck," Archie Johnson drove a pickup truck, hauling pulpwood to nearby railroad yards, where it was loaded onto trains and taken to pulp

mills to be turned into lumber, paper, and other downstream products. The truck provided a means of self-employment for Archie: Anytime he needed a little cash, he'd go and cut some wood, take it to the rail yard, and sell it.

As a small boy in the South during the early 1950s, Bobby lived in a segregated world in and around Hickory. The town's population was evenly split along racial lines, and everything from water fountains to classrooms were separated based on race. His mother, Edna, taught children at an all-black, one-room school in Good Hope. Yet even after Good Hope's schools consolidated with the school district in Hickory in the 1950s, the students remained segregated and Edna continued to teach elementary grades at an all-black school in Hickory.

Race relations were "pretty rough," recalls Johnson's cousin, Tom E. Johnson, who has lived most of his more than 80 years in the Hickory area. "Everybody got along because you knew what you had to do." In the early 1960s, when three civil rights workers were killed just 35 miles away from Hickory in the small town of Philadelphia, the FBI agents who descended on the state to investigate the famous case questioned residents in Hickory. The murders became a flashpoint in the nation's struggle with race, underscoring Mississippi's entrenched resistance to the civil rights movement and defining the state for years as a bastion of racism.

By the time that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was delivering his historic 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he referred to Mississippi as "a state sweltering with the heat of injustice," Archie and Edna Johnson had already packed up their 10 children and their belongings and headed north.

Like so many Southern blacks who pursued better lives in the industrial areas of the Midwest, they followed the path of the Illinois Central Railroad, finally settling 150 miles northwest of Chicago in Freeport, Illinois, a rural town of factories and farms.

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Freeport, host to one of the famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas in their 1858 Senate race, had a population of 26,000 residents, less than 10 percent of whom were black. Many of the black residents worked at factories like Newell Manufacturing, the maker of Rubbermaid Products. Some of these factories, such as the Kraft cheese plant, were not yet hiring many black workers when the Johnsons arrived. Beyond the factories, many blacks worked on the railroad, cleaning trains, shoveling coal, and serving as dining car porters.

The Pecatonica River and the Illinois Central Railroad tracks were next to each other, running parallel through town and separating the west side from the east side and, for the most part, whites from blacks. Most of the town's black residents lived on the east side. Some black homes spilled over onto the west side, but just barely. Most of the blacks who were on the white side of town were within 100 yards of the railroad tracks. They lived close to the tracks, many people surmised, because they arrived from the South on the trains and thus settled near where they got off.

Blacks shared their dilapidated neighborhoods with a sizable group of Italian immigrants who had come in search of Freeport's industrial opportunities. The Johnsons over a period of many years lived in a succession of old rental homes on the east side, mostly in and around an area that people disdainfully called the "3-D" neighborhood. It stood for dagos, darkies, and dogs.

Archie found work at W. T. Rawleigh, a liniment, cosmetics, and spice manufacturer that occupied a vast six-story redbrick complex along the river. Each day, the factory's smokestacks emitted a different aroma, which would waft with the wind and fill the quaint downtown air with the smell of butterscotch, vanilla, and countless other flavorings and seasonings. Just as the Johnsons were known as enterprising people back in Hickory, Archie gained the same reputation in Freeport. Between factory jobs, he drove his small truck, salvaging junk in and around

town. Edna, meanwhile, worked at Burgess Battery, and later for the Micro Switch division of Honeywell.

The couple managed to keep their large family clothed and fed. Archie's wife, whom people called "Miss Edna," watched over their clan and earned money as a hairstylist working inside her home. Archie would sometimes return to Hickory to visit with friends and family, and to cut and haul more wood. A short, slightly built man, Archie—like his grandfather Filmore—could be stubborn and headstrong. But he also had a fun-loving nature. In later years, one of Bobby's buddies accompanied him home for a visit and slept in the bed that belonged to Johnson's older sister, Paulette. In the middle of the night, Archie decided to play a practical joke on the unsuspecting houseguest. Standing outside the bedroom door, Archie started shouting and feigning anger. "Who's that man in Paulette's bed?" he yelled. He frightened Bobby's poor friend nearly to death.

Archie also found time to, as one old friend who asked to remain anonymous delicately put it, "kind of meander around." Once, a neighbor in Freeport offered to give the Johnsons a huge deep freezer—free of charge. With all the mouths that Archie and Edna were feeding, an extra place to store food sounded quite useful. All they had to do was go to the neighbor's home and haul the freezer away. Archie dutifully arrived at the neighbor's place and loaded the freezer onto his truck. But instead of taking it home to Edna and the children, Archie took the freezer and presented it, as a gift, to another lady friend. Despite such episodes over the years, the Johnson family remained close-knit. It was not until many years later, once all of their children were grown, that Archie and Edna divorced after 36 years of marriage. He later remarried, and Edna remained single for the remainder of her life.

Bobby began working hard at an early age. The summer position at Burgess Battery was not his first job, nor was it his first exposure to dirty work. As a young teen, he was hired by one

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of his neighbors to work at the nearby Stephenson County Fairgrounds each summer. While local residents were enjoying the livestock competitions, the carnival, and the country music, Bobby was working as a roustabout, removing cow and horse manure from the animal pens and keeping the public bathrooms clean. He also earned money mowing lawns around Freeport. "I always worked," Johnson said in a 2002 article in *Fortune Small Business*. "I was not afraid of getting my hands dirty."² He even tried operating a newspaper route, delivering the *Rockford Morning Star*. Trying to collect payments from recalcitrant subscribers and walking up and down the streets on Freeport's bone-chilling mornings proved to be more than he could stand, however. Eventually, one of his older brothers took over the route. It was the only time that Johnson would fail as a businessman.

For Bobby and other black kids growing up in Freeport in those days, the best that the future had to offer was limited in scope. A job at one of the factories; a modest house on the black side of town; and Friday nights reserved for partying, drinking, cursing, and fighting seemed to be about as good as it would ever get. "Get an education" is what Bobby and other young black kids like himself kept hearing from their elders. But the legacy of poor education within the families created a vicious circle: The children often found themselves following the paths of their parents—unsure about how to get into college, unable to pay for it, and consequently locked in, at a young age, to a lifetime of menial work.

The only way out, it seemed, was through the military or sports. And Bobby and his three brothers were athletic and competitive. One of Bobby's best friends at the time, Preston Pearson, recalls that he and his own brothers competed fiercely against the Johnson boys throughout grade school. Pearson, who at Freeport High School was a standout in football, basketball, and track and field, went on to play for the

Dallas Cowboys and the Pittsburgh Steelers. Over a 15-year career in the National Football League, Pearson played in five Super Bowl games.

At Freeport High School, Bobby also ran track and played on the football team and the basketball team. "I wouldn't say he was Michael Jordan," Pearson says jokingly. "But he played." Standing at little more than five and a half feet and weighing about 150 pounds with his winter coat on, Bobby realized early on that he'd have to find another ticket out of Freeport. "Even back then," Pearson recalls, "his long-term thoughts had that intellectual bent. He was a very deep thinker."³ Even the older people around Freeport noticed that Johnson was awfully serious-minded and uncommonly self-assured for his age. Almeida Jones, an elderly woman who lived a couple of homes down the road from the Johnsons, would observe her young neighbor and predict: "He's gonna amount to something."

Where Bobby excelled most was in the classroom. Whites and blacks in Freeport attended the same high school, but over 90 percent of the students at the school were white. It was an environment that taught Johnson early on how to socialize, compete, and succeed in a setting where he was often the only black person, as was the case in many of his classes and in after-school activities. He was friendly and engaging, and seemed confident and comfortable around everyone. "He was one who would not make a lot of noise to be recognized," recalls Lyle Reedy, who was the dean of boys at the school. "He went about his way. I don't remember ever having to discipline him."

By the time he reached his senior year in 1964, Johnson's grades were so good that he was on his way to graduating with honors. But because none of his brothers or sisters had attended college, he had no plans to do so, either. "The problem was I couldn't afford college, so I hadn't even considered it," Johnson later said. "My destiny was set, I thought. I was going

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to follow my older brother into the air force. I wanted to become a fighter pilot."⁴

But one day, while sitting in an advanced English class, Johnson's fate was altered when the teacher asked, "How many of you are going to college?" Every hand went up, except for Johnson's. And he was the only black student in the class. As he quickly looked around the room and saw the white kids proudly holding their hands high, he felt "completely embarrassed," he later recalled.⁵ "I did not want to be singled out, so I raised my hand." The teacher was persistent in the coming weeks, requiring each of the students to see a guidance counselor and follow through with the application process. Because Johnson had raised his hand to avoid embarrassment, he was now forced to pursue college. The problem was he had no idea where to apply.

His buddy Pearson, however, had graduated from Freeport the previous year and gone off to the University of Illinois on a basketball scholarship. So Johnson called Pearson and the two arranged for Johnson to visit the campus in Champaign, Illinois. After the visit, Johnson applied and was accepted. The tuition was just \$224 a semester for state residents, but to pay for room and board he took out a low-interest student loan and got a job cleaning a microbiology lab on campus.

It was a fortuitous twist of fate. Because he was smart enough to be sitting there in that advanced English class when the teacher asked a simple question, Robert L. Johnson, the ninth of 10 children, was now the first one who was college bound. The cycle of poor education within his family was broken, and Johnson had learned a vital lesson. From that day on, throughout his life, he would seize opportunities that came his way simply because he was in the right room, with the right people, at the right time. "It is being in what I call the deal flow," Johnson later said, relating the phenomenon to the business world. "You are there inside the room when deals are get-

ting done. All of this happens within the white world on a regular basis. But there are few black people who are regularly in that deal flow."⁶

When he arrived on the University of Illinois campus in 1964, the civil rights movement was in full swing, and there was plenty of racial tension on the campus. The small fraction of the college's students who were black always watched their backs, as it was not beneath their white classmates to get drunk and become verbally abusive.

Many of the black students on campus were from Chicago and its suburbs. Some had been raised in the street-smart ways of the city's predominantly black urban neighborhoods. Others hailed from the city's large and sophisticated black bourgeoisie families headed by doctors, lawyers, teachers, and small-business owners. Johnson, on the other hand, was one of the few hayseeds, seemingly naive and countrified compared to many of his classmates. Yet his innocence and friendly manner were assets.

"He wasn't slick at all," recalls Virgil Hemphill, who roomed with Johnson their freshman year. "But he had a nice personality and could talk to anybody. He would keep you laughing." Johnson would joke about how large his family was, or sometimes he made Freeport the butt of his jokes. He and Pearson would laugh about how they could not wait to catch the "first thing smoking" to get away from their hometown. Johnson would warn other students: "If you're ever on a train and it goes through Freeport, don't get off."

Johnson majored in history, and during his first year on campus he followed in Pearson's footsteps and joined a popular black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi. Members of the fraternity, which was founded in 1911 on the campus of Indiana University, taught all young initiates that high achievement should be their primary goal in college and throughout life. One of the nation's largest black fraternities, Kappa Alpha Psi has inducted over

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120,000 men into its ranks, including famous members such as tennis legend Arthur Ashe, the famous defense attorney Johnnie Cochran, and basketball legends Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlin.⁷

While at Illinois, Johnson lived at the Kappa house, along with Pearson, Hemphill, and other members. Through the fraternity, he gained one of his first lessons in leadership, serving as the chapter's president. He also served one year as the frat's social chairman. This was a job of the highest order. For although the fraternity brothers took great pride in their charitable work in the local community, there was little doubt about who *really* had the most important responsibility in the frat. Everyone knew it was the social chairman—the guy in charge of throwing the parties. The Kappas fancied themselves as suave, fun-loving playboys, and Johnson and his brothers had plenty of parties and good times inside the small, clapboard dwelling that served as their official frat house.

But for Johnson, the good times got out of hand. Before new members could join the fraternity, they were required to go through a long and rigorous pledge period that could last several weeks and often included physical and mental hazing. On one occasion, a pledging ritual escalated and Johnson was accused by a fellow member of physically hazing an initiate, or "scroller," as the young pledges were dubbed. The national arm of the fraternity had become zealous in its efforts to put an end to hazing incidents, and after the charges against Johnson were investigated, the ultimate punishment was exacted: He was expelled from the fraternity. Little did it matter to many of the organization's brothers, however, because once a man was "made," or taught all of the rituals and secrets shared by members, there was in practical terms no undoing it. Still, it was a harsh and cruel rejection for Johnson.

During Johnson's junior year he met a pretty black freshman named Sheila Crump, who hailed from an upper-middle-class,

suburban Chicago family. Crump, the daughter of a neurosurgeon, had been a cheerleader at a predominantly white high school in Maywood, Illinois, and was a violin virtuoso, having studied the instrument since her early childhood. She was on a music scholarship at Illinois and she became the university's first black female cheerleader.

Around the same time, Johnson learned of a new effort to attract minorities into the field of foreign service. Funded by the Ford Foundation, the program would pay for graduate school for anyone who completed a foreign service program with the U.S. State Department. Johnson applied to the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton University and was accepted. He would ultimately bypass the foreign service, however, as Princeton's master's in public administration program was fully funded by a foundation that provided full scholarships and funding to the entire student body. Designed to train future government leaders, the two-year program attracted a small, yet elite group of students each year. Among those who attended during Johnson's days were the author Taylor Branch and former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke.

The graduate school was making its first real push to attract black students, and for Johnson and the four or five other black students who were among the total class of about 70 students, it was a difficult existence. Located in central New Jersey, the elite Ivy League university was very white and filled with neoliberals who could sometimes be condescending toward the new black students. It was September 1968, the Vietnam War was raging, and Martin Luther King Jr. had been slain months earlier. While the white students in Johnson's class were pinning on peace signs and protesting the war, most of their black counterparts were congregating among themselves, captivated by the nation's black power movement and asserting, for the first time in their lives, that their blackness was a source of pride, a thing of beauty. For

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the white students, this newfound black power was confusing and disconcerting.

"It was pretty hard for the black students and the white students to make it work," recalls James B. Lindheim, a white classmate of Johnson's. "There was a black and white thing going on. For those of us trying to be liberal, it was like 'How do I relate to this?' There was a big wall, and it wasn't easy to get across it."

Johnson was not notably active in the black power movement. He was his regular cordial and charming self, but some of his classmates thought he was unusually quiet. For the first time in his life, it seemed, he was struggling academically. "We thought he was a cool guy, but we weren't sure that he was that effective as a student or as a member of the student community," recalls classmate Michael Aron. "We all liked him, but we could see he was kind of treading water."

The rigorous Ivy League academics may have been a contributing factor, but Johnson had something far greater on his mind: Sheila Crump. He was in love, and totally distracted by it. Instead of focusing on his studies, he spent a lot of time on the telephone, calling Sheila back at the University of Illinois, running up expensive phone bills.

Unfocused on his studies, Johnson dropped out. In 1969, as he and Sheila exchanged vows on the campus where they had met two years earlier, Johnson formed his first major partnership: Robert and Sheila Johnson. While Sheila stayed at Illinois to complete her studies and receive her bachelor's degree in music, Johnson found work 150 miles away as a high school teacher on Chicago's South Side. Although he had earlier considered teaching as a career, his ambition had now grown much larger. His new life with Sheila introduced him to a whole new class of highly successful and affluent black professionals. His bride's upper-middle-class background gave him great incentive and made him ever more determined to prove himself to both Sheila and

her family, and to distance himself from his lowly, blue-collar background.

Content that he now had a ring on Sheila's finger, Johnson refocused on graduate school. He returned to Princeton and in 1972 he received his master's degree in public administration. Johnson was now fully prepared to accomplish far greater things.