



# A QUIET, SIMPLE, LONG LIFE

MARTIN JOHNSON, A COVENANTER FROM  
ESSEX, IOWA, TURNS 108 THIS MONTH.

Martha Freeman

**O**n December 16, Martin Johnson of Essex, Iowa, will observe his 108th birthday, celebrating a lifetime that has straddled three centuries. Still handsome, yet with eyesight and hearing fading, Martin is warm and charming, content to be surrounded by family and to pass his days in his comfortable living room, full of photographs and trophies, and steeped in memories.

Most likely the oldest living Covenanter, Martin was born in 1894, the oldest child of Otto and Ida Johnson, who lived one half mile east of Essex. His family moved several times when Martin was growing up. He was confirmed in 1910 by Pastor Axelson of the Fremont Covenant Church, while his younger brothers and sisters were confirmed in the Swedish Evangelical Mission Church of Essex, now Faith Covenant Church.

Martin and his siblings were raised in a godly and reverent home. His voice is still adamant as he recalls that there were “no checkers on Sunday!” There were regular family devotions, and a deep sense of God

being present and leading them in their daily lives.

The Johnson family traveled to church in an open horse-drawn lumber wagon. When weather and road conditions sometimes made church attendance impossible, Martin's father would hold family worship in their home.

At Christmastime, the family would prepare for Christmas by setting up a small home-grown evergreen tree in their living room, and decorating it with small candles on clips. Early Christmas morning, before dawn, the family would hitch up the wagon and head to church for *Julotta*, a Swedish Christmas service. One year they had to turn back because of the bitter cold. The menu for Christmas dinner would include *korv* (potato sausage), *ostakaka* (a baked cheese custard), brown beans, pickled herring, and spritz cookies. Martin was especially fond of lutefisk.

"There weren't many presents," he says, "but we didn't need much."

J. A. Hultman, an early Covenant pastor and hymnwriter, was a neighbor of the Johnson family in Essex. Martin has fond early memories of one of Hultman's hymns, "Thanks to God for My Redeemer."

However, Martin's own musical career (as a member of the church choir) was a blessedly brief one. His father told him, in no uncertain terms, "You can't sing, Martin," and counseled him to pursue other ways of serving in the church.

A lifelong member of the farming community, Martin was involved in the 4-H Club from the very beginning of the organization. Jesse Field Shambaugh, a local school teacher and later county school superintendent, started an agricultural club for boys in 1901, a forerunner of the 4-H program. Martin and two of his friends won several corn judging contests, including a state championship. He still retains a strong sense of pride about those contests. People called them the "Pony Team" because of their youth. The only year the Pony Team lost the competition was the time Martin had to stay home because of a cold.

Martin learned his corn judging skills when, as a small child, he helped his family with the corn harvest. Each corn picker would carry a special box, and the most perfect ears of corn would be placed in the box to be selected for seed. He would help his family cut and sew

Top: The Johnson family (Martin front row, left)

Left: Martin Johnson as a young man

Bottom: Irene and Martin Johnson were married on July 12, 1919



He tells a story about a little girl who asked him how he had lived so long. Martin replied, "The Scripture says 'Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the earth.' I must've honored mine pretty good!"

special corn picking gloves using the family's sewing machine.

From his earliest years Martin understood the importance of farming. He told a reporter from the *Des Moines Register* in 1994: "I'll never forget the man in Ames who told a group of us as children that it would be up to us to learn to feed the world."

Over his lifetime, Martin has seen astonishing changes in the world. He remembers when people thought that flying was a crazy idea, almost science fiction. He remembers

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seeing his first plane in flight in 1905 or 1906, and learned all he could of the Wright brothers. Those early planes “didn’t work out so good,” he says. Martin had seen his first car just a few year earlier, in 1901.

While Martin’s father bought one of the early Model T Fords (black, of course), he did not have much patience with it. Martin took care of the repairs and maintenance. A few years later, his father traded the car in for a newer model without telling his son.

Indignant, Martin marched right into the Ford dealership and demanded, “How much did you pay him for it?” The dealer told Martin that he gave his father \$200 for the car. Martin immediately bought it back. (He does recall feeling some envy for a friend whose family had a much fancier car—with windows!)

He also has vivid memories of when the telephone first came to Iowa—he helped put up the poles. The crews dug the post holes by hand in the autumn, but when the temperature froze they had to leave the project unfinished until spring, placing straw in the bottom of the holes. When the weather thawed, they then were able to erect the poles for use.

On July 2, 1919, Martin married Irene Peterson in her mother’s home. Irene was a schoolteacher who Martin had known all his life. He first met her as a two-month-old infant when Irene’s parents brought the newborn to show to Martin’s parents. Their families had long been friends.

Irene taught children’s Sunday-school classes in the Essex Covenant Church until she was eighty years old. Martin and Irene had a long and happy marriage. A son, Wayne, was born to them in 1923, and a daughter, Phyllis, in 1930. Irene died in 1979 shortly before they were to celebrate their sixtieth wedding anniversary.

In 1927, Martin, along with his brothers Gilbert and Carroll, began

their own company, Johnson Brothers Mills. They started out milling pig feeds in an old Shenandoah flour mill, under the trade name GMC. Martin continued to go in to work well into his nineties and watched over his own farm with interest, even though he had leased it to long-term tenants.

Politics has always been an important part of Martin’s life, and he has remained an ardent Republican. When Martin was 101, he attended a gathering of Iowa centenarians hosted by Republican governor Terry Bransted



Martin Johnson, (center) with daughter Phyllis (left) and son Wayne (right)

in Des Moines. Martin was by far the spryest member of the group. When he shook his hand, Martin said, “I voted for you—every time!”

Martin’s primary hobbies have been reading and gardening. For many years he kept a large strawberry garden, and has always enjoyed watching baseball games, especially the Kansas City Royals. He has also enjoyed spending time with his family and attended family reunions until quite recently.

While in his mid-nineties, he attended a family reunion in the Ozarks. During a rousing sand volleyball game, the ball began to bounce toward the water. Using his cane to catch it, Martin bounded after the ball, only to trip and fall. He was treated for scrapes at the local hospital and soon released, but the hospital staff was amazed that a ninety-five-year-old man would have been chasing a volleyball at all!

Martin is known for his friendliness, kindness, and generosity. He has lots of friends, and everywhere he goes he loves to engage people in conversation, especially farmers. A long-time adult Sunday-school teacher, Martin attended worship and Sunday school until he was 105. He still attends worship services quite regularly, although he will fairly sometimes nod off during the service.

He now lives in a townhouse in Essex, just across the driveway from his son, Wayne, and daughter-in-law, Ruth Marie. His daughter, Phyllis, is only fifteen minutes away. They have been Martin’s primary caregivers for many years, although now they are joined by people from the community who help out in shifts. In the last year, it has been necessary for someone to stay overnight with Martin. Wayne and Ruth Marie have recently added a short circuit television in Martin’s living room so that they can observe him from their own home.

Martin has always had a strong and living Christian faith. He doesn’t remember a time when he did not know Jesus as his Lord and Savior. He has lived out his faith every day with quiet consistency and faithfulness.

Wayne relates that theirs was “a Christ-centered family home. The Lord was very much a part of our lives.” The family feels extremely blessed by their children and grandchildren, all of them professing Christians. Wayne gives credit to his parents and grandparents and says, “It is a holy inheritance to pass down. It is not pride to say this, but gratitude. Good things come from a godly home.”

Many people ask Martin about the secret to his longevity. He tells a story about a little girl who asked him how he had lived so long. Martin replied, “The Scripture says, ‘Honor thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long upon the earth.’ I must’ve honored mine pretty good!” □