

# Martin Johnson & the Martin Johnson House T-29

Deborah Day

Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archives

1 February 2002



Martin Johnson, 1949

Martin Wiggo Johnson was born in a sod roofed farmhouse in Chandler, South Dakota September 30, 1893. He received a B.S. from the University of Washington in 1923, an M.S. in 1930 and a Ph.D. in 1932. After teaching in the public schools to fund his own education, he served as Curator at the Puget Sound Biological

Station and planktonologist for the International Passamaquoddy Fisheries Commission during the 1920's. He considered himself very fortunate to find employment in 1932 at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography as an instructor at a salary of \$100 a month. He, like other members of the faculty, rented a modest cottage on campus, one of a group of cottages built by E.W. Scripps in 1915 to house the staff of the Scripps Institution, which was then quite remote from the village of La Jolla.

He was hired, in part, because he had experience at sea, and he spent his early years at the institution on coastal biological cruises on Scripps vessels. In 1939, he was a member of the Gulf of California Expedition, the first hydrographic survey of the Gulf of California and the first substantial seagoing expedition of the Scripps Institution. Scripps offered the first American curriculum in oceanography, and its director, Harald Sverdrup, decided to write a textbook to facilitate instruction. Johnson was one of three authors of *The Oceans: Their Physics, Chemistry and General Biology* which was published in 1942, but was considered so valuable that the American military restricted its distribution abroad. It was used by students for half a century and is still known as “the Bible” by oceanographers.

During the war, Johnson worked at the University of California Division of War Research, a navy funded laboratory established by Scripps at Point Loma. There, he investigated the origins of noise that interfered with sonar reception. He identified the snapping shrimp as one source of submarine sound. However, his major wartime achievement was the discovery of the “Deep Scattering Layer,” a layer of organisms that rose and fell within the sea in a diurnal cycle and was dense enough to scatter sound and create serious problems for sonar officers on submarines. He received commendations from the navy and from Franklin Roosevelt for these achievements. After the war, he returned to his substantial work on the pelagic biogeography of the Pacific.

Johnson had impressive talents in both music and art. He played the clarinet, and he entertained shipmates on R/V E.W. SCRIPPS on the mandolin. Scientists of his generation were expected to prepare their own illustrations for scientific papers, but Johnson's articulate and precise drawings of plankton species seen through the microscope were much admired by his colleagues. He was a quiet, diffident man, but his papers at the Scripps Archives include caricatures of some of his fellow faculty members and remarkable cartoons often featuring ridiculous interactions between men and marine life.



Martin Johnson House T-29 from the west



Martin Johnson House T-29 from the east

Martin Johnson and his wife Phyllis raised two children in T-29, a modest cottage on a cliff at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. By 1960, the campus was expanding and the residential cottages were removed to make room for new laboratory buildings. A few cottages, including T-29 were saved and renovated for use as a conference center. Martin Johnson often attended meetings there late in his life, and remarked on how elegant the house was, in contrast to the small, remote and drafty cottage with unreliable electricity that he and his family remembered. He remarked that the view was about the same.