



In this photo from 1935, Leroy E. Johnson stands with all six employees who were working in the dealership in Downtown Kirkland. (L-R are Ed Brooks, Homer Morford, Ed Murray, Johnson, Wayne Jussila, Floyd Berkey, and Eldon Berkey.)



This 1932 Chevrolet represents our first decade of business. Owned by a friend of Leroy M. Johnson this vehicle was purchased in the early 1960's by Leroy to "make a car deal" since the used vehicle manager at the time wasn't interested in bringing it into stock.

## Lee Johnson Auto Family Celebrates 85 Years!

In 1933, when the Kirkland Telephone Directory consisted of 10 pages, Leroy E. Johnson began a venture that would span the course of 85 years.

After growing up in Seattle and graduating from the University of Washington, he found an opportunity across the lake in the small town of Kirkland.

A converted garage, located at 109 Kirkland Ave, provided the setting where the 26 year old entrepreneur would set up shop and start the legacy that would define three generations of family, countless employees and customers, and a focus on community involvement that would be emulated throughout the region.

After graduating from the University of Washington, Johnson partnered with Hayden Williams and John Swanson, a couple of friends and Fraternity brothers who already owned a Chevrolet dealership in Renton. They recognized that Johnson had the talent and drive to be successful in the same industry.

So on May 23, 1933, East Side Motors began. That first year a grand total of six vehicles were sold!

As the U.S. dealt with the midwestern dustbowl and the nationwide depression during the mid 1930's, East Side Motors slowly found a niche by providing reasonable sales and service to the people of Kirkland. Starting a business and growing it during those difficult times was not an easy proposition but fortunately Kirkland was a community that supported it's local businesses and the local businesses did everything they could to support the people.

In the early 1930's a group of Kirkland residents convened to establish an "organization of Kirkland's unemployed." This group, unaffiliated with any state or national government, had as it's sole purpose to "assist others in obtaining employment and other aid through cooperative policies." <sup>1</sup> This "giving back" mentality of the community must have struck a chord as Johnson would make community support one of

rock themes of running a successful business.

As the '30's rolled on LeRoy brought in another key employee. Brother in Law Edward Murray joined the store in 1935. Ed would handle bookkeeping as well as oversee the parts and service departments. Ed also became a partner in the dealership.

One of the first organizations to come together and work to support the Kirkland community began in 1937 with the formation of the Kirkland Rotary Club. Johnson, along with 40 other Kirkland business leaders, <sup>2</sup> became a charter member of the club. Still in existence today, this club has been involved in countless community events and has supported thousands of people through the years. Generations of the Johnson family were also involved in this club as well as the Monroe Rotary Club.

As tough as starting a business in the 1930's was, the next decade proved to be one of the most challenging for the entire country. On Sunday morning, December 7th, 1941, LeRoy and wife Nellie had just returned home from golfing with good friend and attorney Maury Powell and his wife. In 1935 Powell opened the first law firm on the Eastside <sup>3</sup> and became close friends with Johnson. The firm would go on to become another fixture in the Kirkland community. Now called Livengood Alskog, the firm still represents Lee Johnson Auto Family. The Johnson's were just starting breakfast as radio reports were coming in about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Brother in Law and store bookkeeper Ed Murray was heading to a soccer game near Woodland Park when the news hit. The soccer game dispersed and everyone huddled around radios to try and get the latest news. A shocked country declared war on Japan the next day. On that day Johnson decided to enlist into the military. <sup>35</sup> at the time, Johnson and his wife Nellie had a 23 month old son (Leroy M. Johnson). Making the decision to leave a young family and a business was not easy however Johnson declared that the country had been very good to him and he felt that it was his duty to give back. Johnson felt that the navy was the best fit for him



As a convenient service to his customers, LeRoy E. Johnson began in 1938 to drive around Lake Washington to the King County building to pick up all the customers license plates. The customers no longer had to make that trek themselves. The State of Washington was so impressed by this service that they decided to create a "sub agency" model where people could get their license plates as well as complete their vehicle title work in more convenient locations. They awarded Johnson the first "Sub Agency" in the state, originally called Lee Johnson Auto License it is now Eastside Auto Licensing.



so he went to the recruiting office where he promptly failed the eye examination. He then went to the Marine office and failed again. Undaunted, he decided to memorize the eye chart. He went to the Army and was able to pass the test. At that time the Air Corps was a combat arm of the Army and that is where Johnson went.

The war years brought conservation and automotive production came to a halt while all efforts went into winning the war. While Johnson was away, Ed Murray managed the dealership.

1945 brought the end of the war and Johnson back to Kirkland. New car production was in full swing and after 4 years of rations and war effort the industry was running at full capacity.



Representing the decade of the 1940's, this 1946 convertible Chevrolet Fleetmaster was purchased by Leroy M. Johnson in the early 1990's. 1946 was the first model produced after the war by Chevrolet and was basically the same design as the 1941 model.

With the increase in demand the executive team of the dealership (Johnson, Murray, and service manager Al Locati) decided that in order to meet it they would need to add space to the current facility. So plans were made to double the size of the dealership. This project would start what would be to come over 85 years many additions, moves, remodels, and rebuilds that the dealership is still doing to this day.

**Planning and Growing With the East Side SINCE 1933**  
 As the East Side's Chevrolet Dealer  
 Working and growing together for 35 years we have built a reputation for honesty, integrity and service. Al Locati, Service Manager, and Jerry Johnson, Sales Manager, are proud to have served the East Side for 35 years. They are proud to have helped build the building you see today.  
 "There is Nothing We Can't Do for You!"  
**East Side Motor Co.**  
 Your Family Chevrolet Dealer  
 Phone 22-1221 109 Kirkland Ave.

Here is an advertisement announcing the plan to double the size of the dealership. Ed Murray (left), Al Locati (Center) and LeRoy E. Johnson (Right).

Community support continued after the conclusion of the war. Johnson and wife Nellie now had three children (Leroy, Merrily and Diane.) With the kids Johnson wanted to make supporting youth in the community one of the hallmarks of his business. By 1946 the local school district had decided to create its own education program for new drivers. East Side Motor Co. partnered with the district and supplied them with all of their driver training vehicles. This partnership with the school district lasted for over 50 years and finally ended when the school district decided to get out of the driver training business.

As their three children grew, the Johnson's began to realize that while Kirkland was a wonder-

**ALL the Best Buys bear this tag**  
 Only at Your Chevrolet Dealer

**This is an OK USED CAR**

**6 WAYS BETTER**

- 1-Thoroughly Inspected
- 2-Reconditioned for Safety
- 3-Reconditioned for Performance
- 4-Reconditioned for Value
- 5-Honestly Advertised
- 6-Warranted in Writing

**LEROY JOHNSON**  
 Manager

March 1937

Below: LeRoy E. Johnson stands with officials and presents a new vehicle to be used in the newly created Driver Training program for Kirkland Schools.

(L-R) WSP Trooper John Olseene, Unknown, LeRoy E. Johnson, Mort Johnson, Doug Hendle and Rusty Sawyer



This 1949 Chevrolet 3500 was purchased by the dealership to represent the decade of the 1940's as well as honor the importance of the work truck to the Eastside.

ful community to raise a family it was lacking in many organized activities that supported kids. Having two daughters in those days meant supporting the local dance clubs, school cheerleading and eventually being a sponsor and supporter of the Miss Kirkland Pageant. Daughter Merrily would take home that title in July, 1960.<sup>4</sup> For a son, it meant sports. With a 10 year old boy in 1950, LeRoy and a number of community leaders heard about a new youth baseball club that was providing a real life baseball experience to boys aged 10-12. The teams could model their names and uniforms after Major League Baseball clubs. So after these leaders visited Little League Headquarters in Williamsport, PA a new league charter was awarded to Kirkland making it the first Little League in Western Washington. The inaugural season of the league, consisting of four teams (the Tigers, Red Sox, Dodgers and Pirates) took place in 1951 to much Kirkland fanfare.

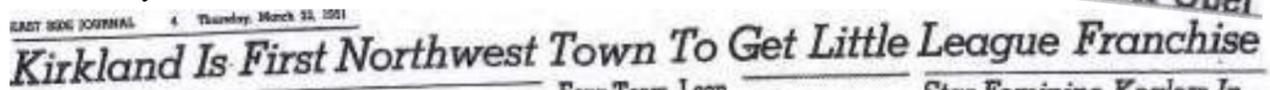
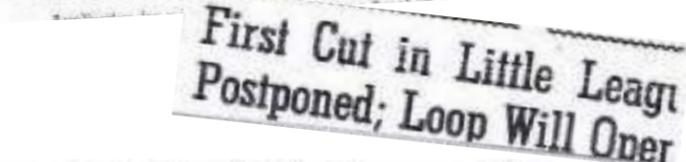
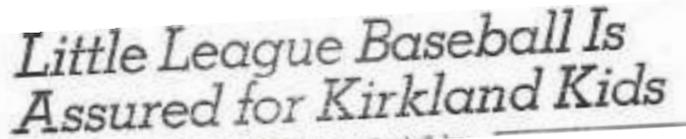


Formation of 4-Team "Little League" Baseball Circ



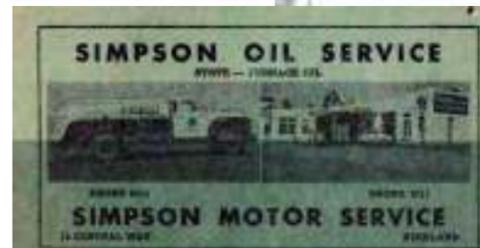
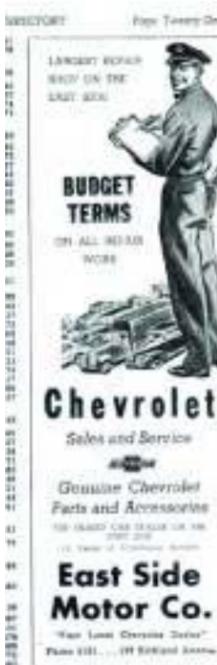
(Left) Eleven year old Leroy M. Johnson is suited up and ready to play for the Tigers. (Upper Right) The Kirkland Little League Tigers pose for a team photo.

Here are some of the headlines in the local paper describing the what the excitement of having a new baseball league in Kirkland was to the community.



Meanwhile, business in the 1950's was growing for the dealership as well as for the city of Kirkland. Having become the economic center of the Eastside (with Bellevue not incorporating as a city until 1953), Kirkland housed all of the automobile dealers.

By 1953 East Side Motors had grown to 24 employees and the competition between auto dealerships was high, albeit friendly. Halls Motor Co., representing Ford, began in Kirkland in 1937 and by the '50's had already moved once and added on twice. Emil Hanson started Hanson Buick in 1919 and would eventually move his operation to a brick building on Market Street. Down on Central Way stood Simpson Oldsmobile and the entire Simpson family took part in running the operations for a time. Dodge and Plymouth were represented by a couple of partners named Bill Wills and Ray Schmidt and they ran Wills Schmidt Motors on Kirkland Avenue. Finally King Pontiac represented that brand with a name change in the '50's to Big Chief Pontiac. Partner Bill Byers ran the day to day operations.<sup>5</sup> During this time Bellevue was on the upswing and aggressively promoting



These ads, placed in the local phone books, are all from Kirkland Auto Dealerships.

plentiful land with easy access. Prior to 1940 the only way for Eastsiders to get to Seattle without driving around Lake Washington was via a passenger car ferry that left daily from downtown Kirkland. So while Kirkland thrived economically Bellevue remained a peaceful, quiet farming town. However in 1940 the first floating bridge was completed. This bridge provided quick access between Seattle and Bellevue and the dynamics began to change. The Bellevue Chamber of Commerce started a full fledged post war marketing campaign to new families and businesses that would change the Eastside for decades. <sup>6</sup> The growth was rapid and by 1953 Bellevue incorporated into a city.

The viability of operating an automobile dealership in Kirkland was changing fast in the 1950's and gradually there was an exodus to the growing city of Bellevue.



(Above) The Kirkland Ferry



(Right) The first floating bridge connecting Seattle with Bellevue



But for the Johnsons, moving out of a community that was so supportive of their business and family was not an option. So they remained and all three kids attended and graduated from Lake Washington High School. Leroy M., who got to play on the first Western Washington Little League team in 1951, expanded his love of sports to include playing basketball and football.



(Above) A couple of newspaper articles with Leroy M. Johnson (#7) describing the potential for another record season for Lake Washington High School.

He pitched for the high school baseball team and was quarterback in football. The Lake Washington High School football team was in the midst of a dynasty during these years and Johnson helped quarterback the team as they accomplished a record 58 game winning streak. That record would stand until Bellevue High school eclipsed it by 9 games in 2014. <sup>7</sup>



Leroy M. Johnson (Right) poses for a newspaper picture in his baseball uniform.

By the end of the 1950's it was clear that decisions for the Johnson family were on the horizon. The growth of the Eastside, including Bellevue, Redmond and Bothell were beginning to take a toll on business. Leroy M. would graduate from High School in 1958 and return home in 1963. After owning the store and keeping it in the same building for almost 30 years LeRoy E. was getting pressure to do something. Chevrolet Motor Company had expressed a desire to expand and had awarded additional Chevrolet franchise opportunities in Bellevue and Bothell. After receiving a letter from Chevrolet Zone Manager V.P. Whetstone on January 30th, 1961 it became apparent that something needed to be done to increase market share and overall sales.



Representing the 1950's, this 1953 Corvette was purchased by the dealership in the mid '70's. The car had originally been raced and ended up at Bigelow Chevrolet in Aberdeen, WA in boxes. Lee Johnson purchased the car, along with all of Bigelow's obsolete parts. The entire dealership got behind the restoration and the car has been in the collection ever since.



(Left and Below) The 17,000 sq ft "Flying W" building (Chevrolet's image at the time) was constructed in 92 days.

Upon Leroy M.'s return home from the University of Washington it was time to think about expanding and doing what was needed to stay viable in the growing Eastside community. East Side Motor Co. was not able to do this by staying in downtown Kirkland. Plans were made and in 1964 the dealership moved to the top of Piccadilly Hill (between present day NE 85th and NE 87th St). They had found a wonderful corner near US Route 410 which was a two lane highway traversing through Kirkland connecting Renton in the south all the way to Highway 99 to the north in Everett. After breaking ground, and taking 92 days to build, the 17,000 square foot building construction was completed in 1964.



But not long thereafter word came from the Washington State Department of Transportation about a project that would severely impact this brand new building. Boeing Airplane Co. had been manufacturing its planes in Renton and Seattle since 1916. In March of 1966 the company decided to build the 747 jumbo jet. A new location to build its brand new flagship was considered and the city of Everett came out on top over other cities like Monroe, Moses Lake and even Cleveland, Ohio. In June, 1966 Boeing purchased 780 acres northeast of an old military base called Paine Field. <sup>8</sup> To accommodate Boeing, the Federal and State transportation departments moved forward with plans to change the two lane highway going through Kirkland to a full fledged Interstate. Property acquisition and condemnation began immediately and it was clear that the new dealership was right in the middle of a proposed cloverleaf interchange.



(Left) Aerial photograph of the construction of I-405. The 1964 dealership located on the bottom right (red arrow) was torn down to make room for the cloverleaf. The new store was constructed on the east side of the new freeway. (blue arrow)

After financing the new property and building in 1964, the Johnsons were not in the best position to find yet another location to build a brand new building. However, with help from the United States Small Business Administration, a loan was secured and a location was scouted.

Outside of the Kirkland city limits, but only a stone's throw away in what would now be the kitty corner of the I-405 interchange, stood a chicken farm. This three acre parcel seemed like a good choice to place a dealership, possibly an even better location than the one they were vacating.

Lee Johnson's Chevy Mover's Have Moved!

WE MOVE TO WASHINGTON'S NEWEST AND MOST MODERN CHEVROLET FACILITY

**OPEN HOUSE - APRIL 18th - 21st**

FREE! FREE! FREE!  
NEW CHEVROLET IMPALA C/P.E. FOR '68

WE RENT OR LEASE CARS  
**CHEVY II**

NOVA... Long hood.

USED CARS: Largest Inventory of O.K. Used Cars in our history!

PARTS DEPT.: Largest 504 parts inventory and 4000 sq ft of Sublets of Life Washington

SPECIAL: New State Inspection, Wash. Alignment, 19% financing

Lee Johnson  
OUR NEW ADDRESS: INTERSECTION HWY 99 & 85th ST. KIRKLAND  
VA 2-1221

The 1968 version of the dealership was touted as "Washington's Newest and Most Modern Chevrolet Facility." After 35 years LeRoy E. Johnson was proud to have his son, Leroy M. Johnson come aboard and help navigate the years of 1963 to 1968. This move also prompted a name change. By the 1960's, Chevrolet Motor Company stressed the importance of having a dealer's name associated with the franchise they represented. So with the move in 1968 East Side Motors was replaced with Lee Johnson Chevrolet.

(Left) This ad, touting the new facility was placed in the local paper.



(Right) A picture looking west of the relatively new facility. This picture was taken in 1971.



Representing the 1960's are these three cars. On the left is a 1968 Convertible Z-28 Camaro. Tod Johnson bought this white exterior with light blue trim in the late 1990's. He would eventually purchase a 2011 white Camaro Convertible and customize it's interior and exterior stripes to match the '68. In the center is a 1964 Corvair Monza Convertible. Originally purchased at East Side Motors, Leroy M. Johnson located it in the late 1980's and bought it back. On the right is a 1964 Impala SS Convertible. Brett Johnson bought this car when he was a junior in high school. Originally sold in Iowa this car had much rust and was in need of a fairly complete restoration. The body shop worked for over a year putting this car back together.

The remaining focus for the company and the Johnsons was to create a friendly, family environment where people felt like they were dealing with their friends and neighbors with every transaction. In keeping with the strategy of community support especially focused on youth, another opportunity came to the city when a group of leaders wanted to install a swimming pool for the entire community. LeRoy E. was one of many people who donated part of the \$30,000 needed to construct a pool where local kids could learn to swim. This pool, located in downtown Kirkland is still in use to this day.

For the Johnsons, even though there were some tough decisions and major investments made during the 1960's, it was probably the best in terms of timing. With Boeing as the main economic driver, the Puget Sound economy soared and employment at the airplane company reached a high of 100,000 people in 1968. But by the early '70's air travel drastically decreased and this led to little demand for airplanes, especially jumbo jets like the 747. Known as the "Boeing Bust" the company in 1971 began to lay off workers. After two years, more than 60,000 people were let go, creating havoc in the local economy. 9

After opening a second new dealership in the span of four years, the expenses of running the daily operations were great. With LeRoy E. reaching his mid sixties and Leroy M. taking on more responsibilities, the Johnsons recognized that changes needed to be made. It was mid 1971 when a very bright automotive talent was brought into the organization. Richard (Dick) Meyer had learned the car business by living it and was the perfect complement to Lee M. Johnson. Very close in age, these two would go on to forge a relationship and business partnership that would take the company to a brand new level. But in 1971, when the local economy was in tatters and the infamous billboard stood near Sea Tac Airport imploring "Would the last person leaving SEATTLE turn out the lights" it couldn't have been a better time for Meyer to come aboard.

Starting as the used car manager, Dick Meyer would bring with him an entire new philosophy as well as a host of new people who were well equipped to handle the many changes going on in the industry.

After founding a small automobile dealership in the depth of the Great Depression, steering it through a World War, expanding, remodeling, moving and rebuilding, hitting highs and lows with respect to the economy, having a strategy that would support the community while also running a successful business and finally preparing his



(Left) Picture from 1968 of the new Kirkland Pool.

(Below) The Kirkland Pool still in use to this day.



son to take the business on, LeRoy E. Johnson passed away in June, 1972.

Leroy M. Johnson immediately succeeded his dad and became the dealer operator. He still had some of the "old guard" to help guide him through. His uncle, Ed Murray, stayed close throughout the rest of his life keeping tabs and helping out when needed. "Shorty" Locati also stayed close to the store during this time to help with any service or parts issues. But it was Johnson and Meyer working together to build a new team that would propel the dealership



(Left) Al "Shorty" Locati, Lee M. Johnson, and Ed Murray pose for a picture next to an old Chevrolet.

through the struggles of the '70's. A key member of that team began working for them on the first day of 1973. Like Lee M. Johnson, Ken Wheadon grew up in Kirkland and was part of a local family legacy. His family had been part of the history of Kirkland long before LeRoy E. Johnson ever considered moving there. Their business was in flowers. And Wheadon Florists

served Kirkland for many decades. Ken, though, was interested in the car business and after having spent some time working for the famous “Dick Balch” Chevrolet store in Federal Way, he returned to his hometown of Kirkland.

By the mid 1970’s, the dealership showed traction and was becoming a major player with respect to its sales and market share in the Seattle Metropolitan area. Dick Meyer had helped successfully navigate the store through some very troubling times and was offered an ownership stake in the store.

Getting through the tough times allowed the dealership to again support the local community as well as for the first time reach out to bigger, regional organizations. Lee M. Johnson’s college alma mater was the University of Washington. After graduating high school in 1958 he initially attended the University of Idaho on a football scholarship. However after getting hurt and spending two years in Moscow, ID he moved back home and attended the UW playing baseball. The University of Washington Athletic Program had dominated the sports scene in Western Washington. By the mid ‘70’s a new concept had been developed where dealers could support the athletic program by providing vehicles to the various coaches and administrators. This allowed the university an extra avenue to recruit and retain staff, coaches and administrators to their program. Along with a few other dealers, Lee Johnson started the Car Coach Program. Still involved to this day, the Lee Johnson Auto Family now supplies four vehicles to the program.

As the late seventies came to a close, the nation was back in the midst of a down economy. Interest rates spiked near 20 percent and this hit dealerships with vast flooring expenses especially hard. Some semblance of relief came in the early eighties when business began picking up and rates started to decline. By 1983 things were again looking positive and the dealership celebrated, with much fanfare, its 50th anniversary.

In the mid eighties Meyer brought on another talent to the team. Scott “Scotty” Thompson began working for the dealership as a salesperson. Dick got to know Scotty and asked him to coach his youngest son for his pee wee foot-



Representing the 1970’s, this 1975 Caprice Classic Convertible was ordered “Specially Made” for Lee Johnson. It was a Seafair vehicle and Lee M. Johnson took it as a demo and eventually would purchase it.

ball team. Scotty, a standout athlete, had played quarterback for the Inglemoor Vikings. After graduation he went to work for his family business doing underground utility development. What Dick saw in Scotty as a coach he felt also could be a talent in the automobile business.

As the 1980’s wore on, the automotive business was again in the middle of some major shifts. It became increasingly clear that the best way to survive the up and down economy was to try to diversify. Many dealerships at this time began to add other automobile franchises to their respective stores. Dealers would continue to use the same showroom and just split it in half essentially offering competing brands next to each other. While Lee Johnson was born and raised knowing the Chevrolet business it was decided that expanding with another make made a lot of sense. Johnson had always dreamed of the potential for the property they were on and had pictured an entire “General Motors Center” that could offer not just Chevrolet vehicles but the entire offering GM had available. Chevrolet, Pontiac, Buick, Oldsmobile and Cadillac and GMC Trucks would be perfect. General Motors had other ideas however and that vision never became a reality.

(Below) This “retro 1930’s” picture was taken of the sales staff during the 1983 50th Anniversary celebrations.



Instead, the opportunity to expand came in an unanticipated way. The area that the dealership was located is named Rose Hill. When the dealership moved there in 1968 there were few other businesses. However with the easy access of Interstate 405 and the huge population boom going on, Rose Hill became an ideal place for business to locate. By the mid eighties, Costco Wholesale had decided to locate their headquarters in the Totem Lake area of Kirkland. They also opened a warehouse in Kirkland. One of the first of Costco's warehouses, it was located across NE 85th street from the dealership. Growth continued and on a piece of land between NE 85th and Costco, a new building was built to house an incoming Pontiac dealership. However the building was a wildly unconventional design for an automotive dealership and the Pontiac franchise was quickly sold and moved to Totem Lake. Another automobile franchise owner attempted to make a go of it there as well but could not get any traction. This franchise was Mazda. Within a very short time it was clear that the building's design was better suited for office than automotive retail and the Mazda franchise was for sale. Lee Johnson and Dick Meyer took that opportunity in 1988 and subsequently moved all of the Mazda operations to the dealership.



The 1980's are represented by this 1988 Cavalier Convertible Z-24. The only convertible offered by Chevrolet this particular year.

The late eighties proved to be big years for diversification of the business. It was then when an opportunity came to the ownership group about a store in Bellingham. Located 90 miles north of Seattle, Dewey Griffin Pontiac Buick Oldsmobile Cadillac GMC Truck and Subaru became available. As he was learning the automobile business, Dick Meyer had developed a special friendship with Dewey Griffin. When Griffin passed away and the dealership was for sale, the partners decided to, for the first time, expand their reach to another community with a new car franchise.



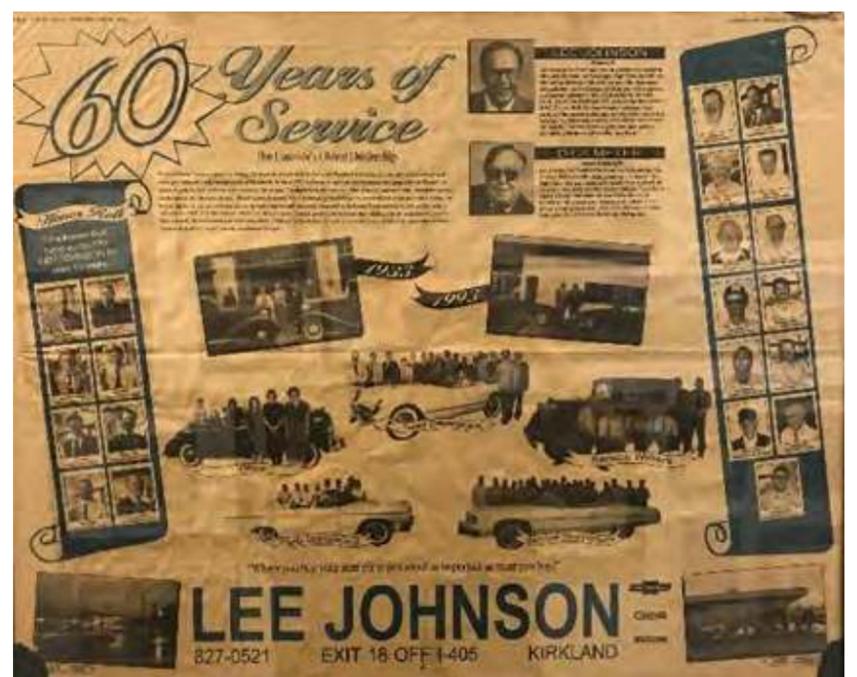
(Above) The building above was originally constructed as a Pontiac dealership. Mazda would also be housed here for a short time before it was purchased and moved to the Chevrolet dealership.

In 1984 Lee and his wife Ginny decided to move to the city of Monroe. By the late eighties, their daughter JeNell was in college at Whitman in Walla Walla and son Tod followed his dad's footsteps by playing baseball and attending the University of Washington. Brett, while still going to high school in Monroe began to show an interest in the dealership and started working part time after school.



(Above) The logo of Dewey Griffin included a sketch of the building. This dealership was purchased in 1987.

As the eighties faded and the onset of the nineties came on, Lee and Dick stayed loyal to the philosophies of the original owners. Lee's uncle and former partner in the dealership, Ed Murray, passed away in the late eighties along with his sister and Lee's mom Nellie. The first generation was now gone and the second generation was making it's own distinctive mark on the business.



(Above) This ad, placed in 1993, celebrated 60 years of ownership and recognized many of the employees who were a part of the growth over the years.



(Left) Chevrolet re introduced a brand new Camaro in 1993. The first convertible edition came in 1994 and this red Z-28 represents the decade of the '90's.



(Above) Lee Johnson hands keys to Jan Gill, Driver Training Coordinator for the Lake Washington School District in celebration of 50 years of providing vehicles for the program. (L-R) Brett Johnson, Tod Johnson, Lee Johnson, Jan Gill, Bud Scarr, Unknown name but Principal of Lake Washington High School.

By 1995, Tod graduated from law school from Willamette University in Oregon and Brett was graduating from Western Washington University. Brett had worked at the dealership interspersing his time at college with working in the different departments including parts, sales and office. With a law degree, Tod was considering his career options when his dad suggested he give the family business a chance. Both sons began working full time at the dealership in 1996.

The first year of their full employment also marked a significant anniversary and the dealership celebrated 50 years of providing driver training vehicles to the Lake Washington School District.



(Left) Groundbreaking of Speedway Chevrolet in Monroe. (L-R) Brett Johnson, Ken Wheadon, Lee Johnson and Tod Johnson.

By 1998 the ownership team got word from Chevrolet Motor Division that the factory was considering adding a dealership in Monroe, WA. Lee Johnson and his family had by this time lived in Monroe since 1984 and had developed numerous community ties and relationships there. Even though his sons had only worked with him for two full years he felt that it was an excellent time to pursue this opportunity. Knowing what a wonderful team of employees he and Dick had developed, everyone felt that it was a great time to expand again into a familiar place. It was at this time that they asked longtime General Sales Manager Ken Wheadon if he would like to buy in to the dealership in Monroe and become the dealer there.



Ken was very enthusiastic about the future so they agreed with the factory to construct a brand new Chevrolet facility just off of State Route 522 in Monroe. Completion of the dealership took place in early 2000 and the grand opening of the store was on April 1st, 2000.

(Above) Speedway Chevrolet opened in Monroe, WA with partners Lee Johnson, Dick Meyer and new partner Ken Wheadon running the day to day operations as the dealer operator.

After only two years of owning a dealership in Monroe and spending 39 years with the family business, Leroy M. Johnson died on November 23rd, 2002. Lee left an incredible legacy and the community outreach in the wake of his passing was incredible. Because of the tremendous mark he left on the Lake Washington School District, in terms of activities he was involved with as well as the support he gave them, Lake Washington High School honored his memory by naming their entrance drive after him. Now, when you turn south out of the Kirkland dealership and head up the hill the street you are on turns directly into the entrance of the high school. It is this entrance that is called "Lee Johnson Drive."



(Left and Below) Lake Washington High School honored Lee Johnson after he passed away by naming their entrance drive after him. Brett (Left) and Tod pose for a picture with the new sign.



The city of Kirkland also bestowed a great honor to Lee. Having been involved and supported so many organizations, many of which had to do with baseball, the city decided to name the downtown baseball field after Lee. He had spent many summer days on this field as the first Little League Teams in Western Washington squared off. After Little League, the field remained a part of his life as he played many games there as well as sponsored teams that continue to play there to this day. The field has been a part of the lives of thousands of baseball and softball players through the years and Lee would be honored to know that games are still taking place and that this hallowed ground is still a part of Kirkland.



(Left) Lee Johnson Field is located in the heart of downtown Kirkland. The city named the field after Lee Johnson when he passed away in 2002.

With Lee's passing Tod and Brett became owners and were suddenly faced with a great responsibility. However they were incredibly fortunate to have the people that their dad and his partners had put together. From Dick Meyer and Ken Wheadon to all of the department managers and employees, everybody came together to try to continue the legacy that they had built together.

In 2003 Brett officially became the dealer of the two franchises in Kirkland. Also on the horizon at this time was Dick's intention to retire. They all agreed that finding a replacement for him would take just the right person. In the 1980's, Dick had hired Scotty Thompson to be a salesperson. Dick always thought that Scotty had the ability to become a General Manager of a dealership someday. When Scotty left Lee Johnson they both somehow knew that their careers would cross paths again. Scotty got a lot of experience working at Brooks McKnight Chevrolet in Bellevue, eventually navigating through ownership changes and jobs. By the time he came back to Lee Johnson he was the dealer in Bellevue. In 2004, Scotty returned to his automotive roots and became the General Manager of Lee Johnson.

While that was going on, the partners were having many serious discussions with Mazda Motors. Mazda had a strong desire to have exclusive representation of their brand. This meant that any dealerships around the country that had competing brands on their showrooms would need to separate those brands by building exclusive Mazda only buildings. Much like their dad and grandfather before them, they were faced with a decision to move forward with a complete redevelopment of the site. In 2005, they broke ground on the redevelopment of the entire operation in Kirkland. Both franchises (Chevrolet and Mazda) would now have their own exclusive showrooms.

Also in the works in late 2005, was an opportunity to expand with another automobile franchise. Owned by the Courter family, KIA of Kirkland was now up for sale and the Johnsons were interested. They had always enjoyed a great relationship with the Courters who owned Honda of Bellevue and Honda of Kirkland. They were able to work together and in early January, 2006, Lee Johnson KIA was added to the auto family. The KIA dealership itself was located in the Par Mac area of Totem Lake and so plans started immediately to design a building that would enable the partners to bring the franchise to the NE 85th St location, next to the Chevrolet and Mazda buildings.

Another round of construction ensued and the KIA building was completed in September, 2008.

Financing the expansion over the course of three years was helped by record breaking nationwide new vehicle sales as well as skyrocketing property values for residential and commercial locations. At this time, Scotty Thompson brought in as General Manager, became a partner in the dealership. But signs of prosperity were quickly turning into signs of impending trouble. Officially the Great Recession started in July of 2008 when the economy shrank 0.3%. Then in August, 2008, government backed mortgage insurance companies Fannie Mae and Freddy Mac declared bankruptcy. Anything related to securing financing became extremely difficult to get. By 2009, new vehicle sales had been cut in half from the 2007 levels and General Motors was forced to declare bankruptcy.<sup>10</sup>



(Above) This purple Chevrolet SSR in the collection represents the decade of the 2000's.



(Above) This aerial picture was taken before construction began on the new facility in 2005. (Inset) Brett (L) and Tod (R) break ground on the redevelopment.

(Below) After completion, this picture was taken in September of 2006



(Below) Google image of the dealership property with the KIA building on the west side of the main shop.





(Above) Dick Meyer (standing) and Lee M. Johnson (in car) pose for a picture in the mid 1990's.

ruptcy.

With Scotty leading the team in Kirkland and Kenny doing the same in Monroe, the businesses were able to survive. As the market slowly started to recover, things were beginning to normalize. Dick Meyer, after coming on board when the Boeing Bust was in full swing, had helped the family navigate through a tremendous number of highs and lows over 40 years. When Dick retired from the Kirkland dealership in 2011, he ended up taking full control of the Bellingham store. Now Dewey Griffin is a single point Subaru dealer and they just finished a complete redevelopment of their site.

As the market continued to gain traction, opportunities were again on the horizon for the group. Since it's opening in 2000, Speedway Chevrolet had been a single point store meaning that it only sold the new Chevrolet product and used vehicles.



(Above) Speedway RV Center located next to Speedway Chevrolet started with six trailers and now has grown to sell almost 20 per month. They offer small travel trailers all the way to Class A motorhomes.

Around the state, some Chevrolet dealers decided to bring on other opportunities to their stores. Roy Robinson in Marysville had been an RV dealer for many years. Sunset Chevrolet in Sumner was just getting in the RV business. So in 2013 the partners decided to become an RV dealer. They

started with only six trailers that summer and the demand was felt immediately. Growth was instant and by 2018 the entire auxiliary lot was filled with trailers, campers and Class A motorhomes.



(Left) Autoright Motors was opened in 2013. Located directly across from the famous "Yakima Fruit Stand"

Things were happening as well in Kirkland with the hiring of Tom Murdoch. After spending many years in highly competitive California, Tom moved to the Eastside and worked at a number of new car dealerships around town. He spent time working with Scotty at Chevrolet of Bellevue and Chevrolet of Issaquah. He also became the General Manager at Good Chevrolet in Renton. Coincidentally the Chevrolet Store in Renton became Good Chevrolet in the early 1970's when Williams and Swanson Chevrolet sold. Williams and Swanson were the two fraternity brothers that helped LeRoy E. Johnson start in 1933.



(Left) At the Speedway grand opening, owners Ken Wheadon and Lee Johnson get a picture with representatives from Chevrolet. (L-R) Mike Ward, Ken Wheadon, Tom Mendonca, Lee Johnson.

Murdoch and Scotty saw a huge potential for growth in the used vehicle market. Their suggestion was to try to find a location that was not contiguous to any of the current properties. Tod Johnson found a perfect location in Bothell. Between Highway 522 and the Sammamish Slough stood a former used car facility that was exactly what the partners were looking for. The site was secured and the partners opened up Autoright Motors in 2013.



(Left) Taken at the company picnic/softball game, Brett Johnson (L), Scotty Thompson (Center) and Tod Johnson (R) pose for a picture.

Over the course of 15 years between 2000 and 2015 the Lee Johnson Auto Family added a new Chevrolet dealership, redeveloped the entire property in Kirkland to accommodate the manufacturers, bought a new KIA franchise and built a building for it, added RV sales in Monroe and started a new used car store in Bothell.

By 2015 Ken Wheadon decided it was time to retire. Starting his career at Lee Johnson in 1973 Ken led the entire sales department for many years. He then led Speed-

way for fifteen years helping the Johnsons go through some very tough personal times with the passing of their father. He helped develop an outstanding group of people of which many are still working at Speedway today.

In 2016 Tom Murdoch joined the ownership team and became a partner. The Lee Johnson Auto Family has continued to grow and seek out opportunities when they come up. In late summer of 2017, one did arise in the form of another franchise. Gary Micallef owned the Hyundai of Everett store and was thinking about retiring in the next few years. Gary had known Tod because they both served on the Snohomish County Boy's and Girl's Club Board of Directors. An inquiry was made and Gary felt it was the right time so he sold Hyundai of Everett to the Lee Johnson Auto Family.



(Above) Hyundai of Everett was acquired on November 1st, 2017. It is located at 7800 Evergreen Way in Everett, WA.

On May 23rd, 2018 the Lee Johnson Auto Family will celebrate it's 85th anniversary. None of the years would have been possible without all of the amazing employees that have been a part of the business and have represented the family so well. The family is humbled and has a deep gratitude to everyone who is currently and who has ever worked for the business. Your continued work allows the dealership to continue to thrive, support the communities they are in and always make the customers satisfied. Without all of you, none of the last 85 years would have been possible.

Thank you,



(Right) Tom Murdoch became a partner in 2016 and currently oversees the day to day operations of the original dealership in Kirkland.



(Above) This 2011 Convertible Camaro represents the decade of 2010-2020. Dressed up for the Kirkland Parade in this picture, it is one of many vehicles that the Lee Johnson Auto Family supplies every year to the different parades that take place over the summer.

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