

My Favorite Johnson, the PO-15

By: Ron Stevenson

In this article, I thought that instead of doing a technical writing, I would highlight one of my favorite old Johnson outboards, the model PO-15.

To identify the outboards which Johnson manufactured, the Johnson management decided to identify each outboard with the letter of the alphabet. The first year of Johnson production, 1922, these motors came out of the factory with the letter A followed by a sequential serial number stamped into the rope plate.

Johnson continued to use the alphabet with such models as J, K, S, P. Not much is known as to the logic Johnson used in naming their models. After many years of collecting, I've managed to memorize most of the models and horsepowers.

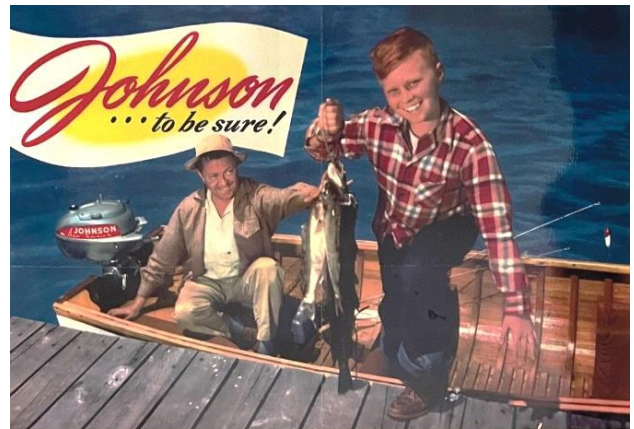
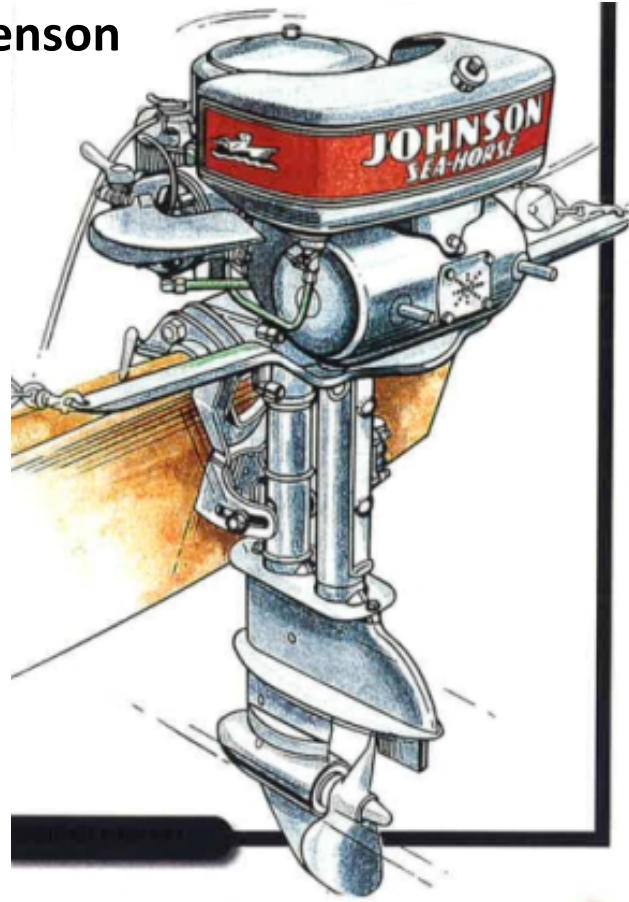
In 1935 Johnson came out with a fairly large, opposed twin called the "P-75" rated at 22 HP. However, in 1937, Johnson renamed this model the PO-37. The "PO" model became the PO-15 in 1941 and this designation continued from 1941 to 1950. Now I bet you're asking yourself, "what the heck is a "PO" model?"

Johnson identified this 22 HP motor as the model "P", and the "O" meant that the cylinders were opposed. In other words, facing away from each other, but firing both plugs at the same time. This somewhat unbalanced motor, with simultaneous firing spark plugs and no gear shift, is a handful to start and run.

This big, robust, awkward monster did survive the buying public and served industry as well. Many of the POs were used in logging camps to tow log booms across lakes to the sawmills. This torque monster was also the answer to towing water skiers and surf boards long before the famous green Johnson 25 HP debuted in '51. With no gearshift to shift it into neutral, you must be ready with your boat pointing the right way, because when the motor starts, away you go.

The US military used the big PO, but had it modified to push barges, pontoon floats and storm boats. These modifications included eliminating the exhaust down pipe, which enabled the motor to be spun 360 degrees. The motor had the mid-section lengthened 6 inches by the factory, because the pontoons and barges had tall 21" mounting transoms. Exhaust was directed out of a drilled plate on the back of the muffler. I can't imagine being a soldier, spinning the motor around 180 degrees and getting a face full of exhaust!

The motor had a ring of tubular pipe bolted to the powerhead to let the motor be steered from any side, along with the normal stubby tiller handle.



1950 Johnson brochure. Last year for the PO-15

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These POs were built to take a hard beating in both consumer and military use. They have hardened lower unit gears, waterproof magneto, forged steel connecting rods, and many more heavy-duty mechanical features to make them last. The last year the PO-15 was produced was 1950. My PO is a very high serial number which makes it one of the last made in Peterborough in 1950. I'm sure the designers at OMC were working for several years developing the new generation of alternate firing big motors, the Johnson 'Sea Horse 25' and the Evinrude 'Big Twin 25'. This new generation of easy-starting full-gear shift motors would change outboard designs for decades.



Images above & below are the World War II Military version of the PO-15.



Ron Stevenson's restored 1950 PO-15. One of the last PO-15's built in Peterborough.

