Charles Clark
From Rags to Riches
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Do you think of Wisconsin when you use a Kleenex® tissue? Do you think of a mayor or a state representative? Do you think of a paper company that’s more than 100 years old?

You should.

Charles Clark served his family, his community, and his country. He helped create the Kimberly-Clark Corporation. This large paper company started in northeast Wisconsin and makes Kleenex® tissues.
Charles Benjamin Clark was born in Theresa, New York, around 1842.* He was sometimes called C.B. Clark. His parents were Luther and Theda Clark. He had black hair and gray eyes. Charles cut wood when he was a boy to earn money for his family.

His father died in 1853. He and his mother moved to Neenah, Wisconsin, to live with Charles’s older brother, Luther. Luther died soon after his family came.

Neenah was once known as “Winnebago Rapids.” The name Neenah is said to have come from the Winnebago word *nina*, which means water. This illustration shows what downtown Neenah looked like in 1856, the year it became a village.

*Charles let reporters use whatever year they wished when writing a story about him. That is why we do not know when he was born, but historians believe it was around 1842.
Charles looked for work at a furniture factory the day he arrived in Wisconsin. The owner had no jobs. Charles persevered. There must be something for him to do. Impressed by Charles, the owner told him to begin the next day. Charles wanted to start that day. The owner agreed.

Charles earned $7 per month there. This money helped buy food and supplies for his mother and him. The money also paid for Charles’s school. That cost $1.50 per year. Theda and her son saved more money than they spent. The two were very close.

**Work and School**

Children did not always have to attend school in Wisconsin. Some children worked to earn money for their families. They would work in factories or shops. Others sold items like newspapers or gum.

The first Wisconsin law requiring children to go to school passed in 1879. Those ages seven to 15 were supposed to go to school at least 12 weeks per year. Laws like this were to help increase the number of children who went to school. A law in 1889 stated those younger than 13 years had to have a permit to work.

Courtesy of the Neenah Historical Society.

The Jacobson children helped in their family’s meat market called Nelson and Jacobson in Neenah, Wisconsin.
The **Civil War** broke out in the United States in 1861. Charles signed up when President Abraham Lincoln asked for more soldiers. He earned $14 per month as a soldier. Charles was to use this money for food and clothing. But he often went without much food and sent the money home to his mother.

Charles went home in June 1865. He found out his mother had saved all that money. Charles used it to become a hardware store owner.
Charles married Caroline Hubbard in 1867. The couple had three children. They were named Theda, Caroline, and Charles.

Charles devoted himself to his family and city. He became a Neenah firefighter in 1869. Charles helped Neenah’s first attempt at forming a public library. He supported building a hospital in Appleton called Prescott Hospital.
When he was about 30 years old, Charles sold his part of the hardware store. He and three other men formed a paper business called Kimberly, Clark and Company. The partners became known as “The Big Four.” The Big Four bought a Neenah flour mill along the Fox River in 1872. They tore it down to build a paper mill. They named it the Globe Mill.

The Big Four were equal members of the company. Charles handled the mills’ daily works.
The Big Four did not pay themselves much to run their company. Why not? They used the money to grow the business. Soon there were more mills in neighboring cities. The area where the mills were located became known as the Paper Valley.

Making one **ton** of paper required 30,000 to 50,000 gallons of water. The Fox River area had the needed water and the river powered the mills.

At first, Kimberly, Clark and Company used rags to make paper. Women separated the rags and cut off any hard objects like buttons. The rags were then shredded, boiled, and made into a pulp. The pulp was then put into a mold and pressed until paper was formed.
Charles also served his city. He was a Neenah City Council member and the city’s mayor. He was elected to the Wisconsin State Legislature in 1884. Charles was then elected to the US House of Representatives in 1886 and 1888.

While in office, Charles fought to protect Oneida Indian land from the land grabs happening across the country. He also voted in favor of women’s rights.

Charles died while visiting his birthplace in September 1891. He was about 49 years old.

Charles worked hard for his family. He served his country as a soldier. He went on to serve his city and state as mayor of Neenah and even in the US House of Representatives. He also founded a company that still exists today.

The next time you pick up a tissue, think of how Charles Clark served his family, community, business, country, and you.
Theda Clark was born February 13, 1871, and was very close to her father, Charles. He taught her the importance of being a philanthropist and caring for others.

On December 23, 1899, Theda invited children from Neenah to her home for a Christmas tree party. She decorated her home and provided food and gifts.

The party was a success, but Theda became upset when a newspaper reporter only told how Theda invited poor and needy children who wore ragged clothing. In reality, Theda invited children rich and poor. Her goal was for all children to enjoy themselves. “I particularly asked him not to mention poor people, and there was not a ragged child among them!” Theda wrote in a letter.

Theda died at age 32, three days after the birth of her daughter. In her will, Theda left a large sum of money to be used for a community project. Her family honored her wishes and built Theda Clark Hospital, which is now known as ThedaCare Regional Medical Center.

Theda Clark attended school in Neenah before going to Wells College, an all-women’s school in New York. Seven women were in her graduating class.

The home Theda’s father built was moved to 583 E Wisconsin Avenue. In its spot, her mother built this home, which is where Theda lived. The house still stands.
Civil War (n): a US war from 1861 to 1865 between the Union, or Northern states, and the Confederacy, or the Southern states

corporation (n): a type of business with partners

devote (v): to give attention, effort, and time to a purpose

land grab (n): the unfair gain of land

persevere (v): to keep trying and not give up

philanthropist (n): a person who helps others by giving time or money to causes or charities

representative (n): a person who is chosen to speak or act for others

US House of Representatives (n): a government group that helps create and regulate US laws and regulations

Wisconsin State Legislature (n): a government group that helps create and regulate Wisconsin’s laws and regulations
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