CHARLES CLARK
From Rags to Riches
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When you use a Kleenex® tissue, do you think of Wisconsin? Do you think of a mayor or a state representative? Do you think of a giant paper company?

You should. Charles Clark served his family, his city, and his country. He helped create the Kimberly-Clark Corporation. This large paper company that was founded in Northeast Wisconsin makes products including Kleenex® tissues, Huggies® diapers, and Cottonelle® toilet paper.
Early Years

Charles Benjamin Clark was born in Theresa, New York, around 1842.* To some, he is known as C.B. Clark. His parents were Luther and Theda Clark. Charles cut wood as a child to earn money for his family.

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

Photograph courtesy of the Neenah Public Library.

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.
On the day he arrived, Charles looked for work at a furniture factory. The owner did not have any work for him. Charles stood firm. There must be something he could do. Impressed by Charles, the owner told him to begin the next day. But the black-haired, gray-eyed youth persevered. He wanted to start that day. And he did.

Charles earned $7 per month there. This money helped buy food and other supplies for his mother and him. The money also paid for Charles’s school, which cost $1.50 per year.

Theda and her son saved more money than they spent. The pair found both fiscal and inner strength in each other.

**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.
The Civil War broke out in the United States in 1861. President Abraham Lincoln asked for more soldiers and Charles answered the call. In August 1862, Charles signed up for Wisconsin’s Volunteer Infantry. He earned $14 per month. Soldiers had to buy their own food and clothing. But Charles often went without food and sent the money home to his mother.

In June 1865, Charles went home. He discovered his mother had not spent any of his money but had saved it. Charles used it to become a partner in H.P. Leavens Hardware Store.
Charles married Caroline Hubbard two years after he came home from the Civil War. His mother lived with the young couple.

The Clark family grew. The couple had three children: Theda, Caroline, and Charles. Charles’s mother died shortly after little Theda’s birth in 1871.

Charles devoted himself to his family and his community. He became a Neenah firefighter in 1869. He also helped with Neenah’s first efforts to form a public library. Charles supported building Appleton’s Prescott Hospital. It was the area’s first hospital.
At around age 30, Charles sold his share of the hardware store. He and three other men formed a paper business called Kimberly, Clark and Company. The other men were John Kimberly, Havilah Babcock, and Frank Shattuck.

The four partners were known as “The Big Four.” They purchased a Neenah flour mill along the Fox River in 1872. They tore the mill down to build a two-story paper mill they named the Globe Mill. None of the Big Four knew how to make paper, so they hired an expert named Myron Haynes. He became the company’s foreman.

The Big Four were equal partners in the company. Each taught the others his own special skill so the mills could succeed. Charles served as manager of operations. He ran the mills’ daily works.
The Big Four did not pay themselves much to run the mill. They put the money back into the business instead. This helped Kimberly, Clark and Company to quickly expand. Soon Neenah, Appleton, De Pere, and Kimberly all had paper mills. The company’s success created a nickname for the area: the Paper Valley.

It took 30,000 to 50,000 gallons of water to make one ton of paper. The Fox River area supplied the water. The river also 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 served his community and state, as well as his family and business. He joined the Neenah City Council and served as mayor from 1880 through 1882. Charles was elected as a representative to the Wisconsin State Legislature in 1884 and to the US House of Representatives in 1886 and 1888.

While in office, Charles fought to get aid for Wisconsin flood victims and to protect Oneida Indian land from the land grabs happening across the country. He also voted in favor of women’s rights.

Charles (lower left) traveled between Washington, DC, and Neenah to keep up with his duties to Kimberly, Clark and Company when he was a member of the US House of Representative.
In September 1891 while visiting his hometown, Charles died approximately 55 feet from the spot he was born. Charles was about 49 years old. It is thought he died from Bright’s Disease, which affects the kidneys.

Charles worked hard for his family. He served as a soldier. He went on to serve as mayor of Neenah and in the Wisconsin State Legislature and the US House of Representatives. He also founded a business that still exists today.

The next time you pick up a tissue, think of how Charles Clark gave to his family, city, business, country, and you.
Theda Clark

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.
Glossary

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

ton (n): ..................... 2,000 pounds

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