

1886

BROWN &amp; BIGELOW'S

1959

# CHARLES ALLEN WARD

## Shelby Edwards

**P**EOPLE FAMILIAR with the St. Paul-based publishing company Brown & Bigelow (B & B) may recall calendars featuring racy images of pin-ups or idyllic paintings of the Boy Scouts of America. However, B & B's iconic and successful calendar business is only part of the story of the company's transformation from a moderately successful firm into a multimillion-dollar printing behemoth.

Founded in 1896 by St. Paul transplant Herbert H. Bigelow with financial backing from local businessman Hiram D. Brown, B & B started out printing "calendars and advertising novelties," according to a much later article in the *Saturday Evening Post*. The company's home office in St. Paul was comfortably successful in its early years, leading to expansion. A Boston sales office was established in 1902. By 1906 B & B had 44 salesmen whose territories covered the U.S. and parts of Canada. In 1911 Canadian branch offices opened in Ontario and Toronto, but they proved unprofitable early on and were closed in 1913.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this setback, construction on a new, large B & B factory and office building (the company called it Quality Park) at 1286 University Avenue in St. Paul's Midway district

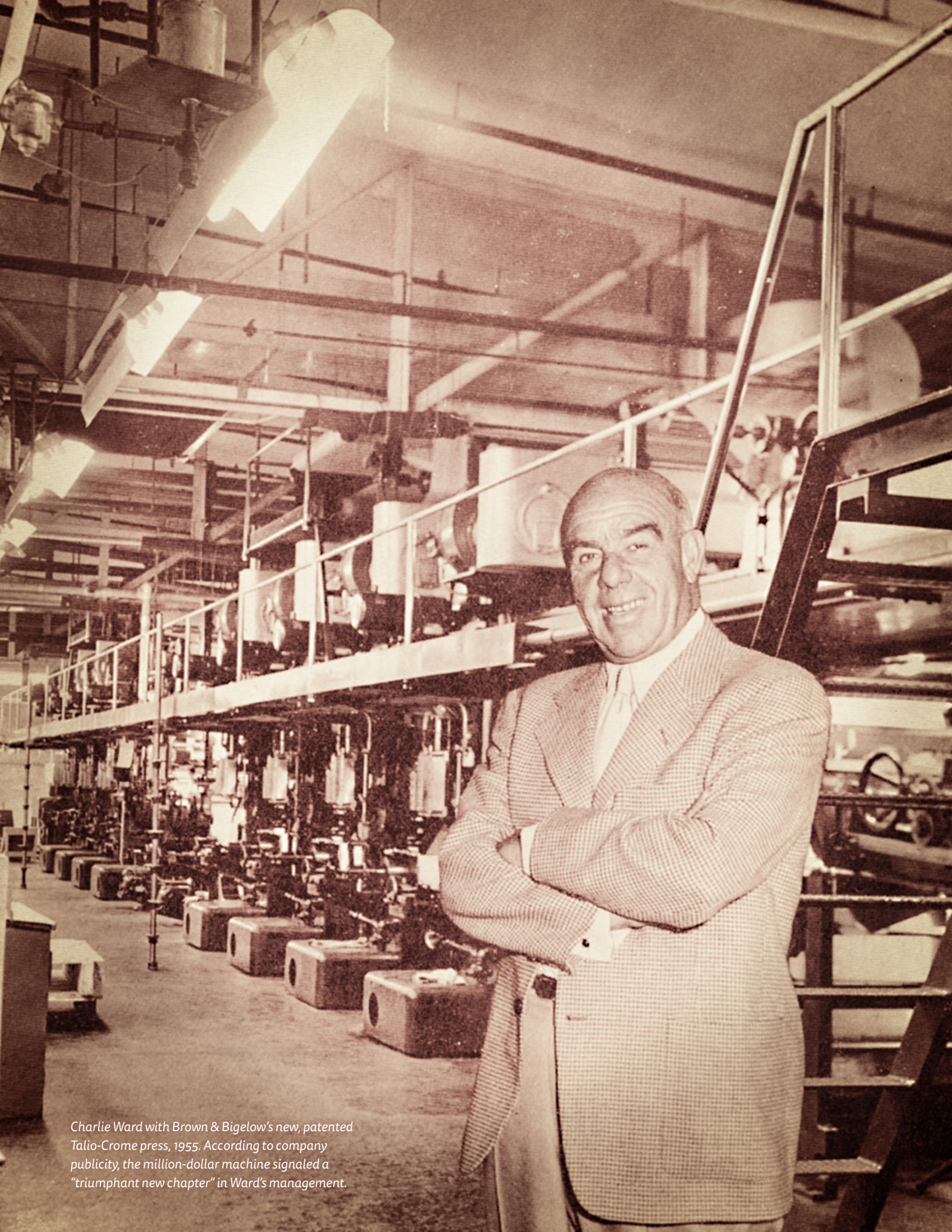
was completed in 1914. The three-story edifice sat on five acres fronting University Avenue and had a nearly equivalent amount of floor space inside. Herbert Bigelow was responsible for several early, questionable acquisitions and expansions like the Canadian fiasco, yet by the end of World War I, B & B had a solid foothold in America's advertising world. The company even installed a nine-hole golf course on the Quality Park campus in 1925. Though accustomed to success, the staff could never have anticipated the events and growth that would result from one fateful spring morning in 1925 when a tough but determined man walked into Brown & Bigelow's office and introduced himself as Charlie Ward.<sup>2</sup>

**C**HARLES "CHARLIE" Allen Ward was born in Seattle in 1886. His exact whereabouts and activities during his late teens to early thirties are not clear in the public record. Ward's official paper trail tapers off

before he left home in about 1903—at 17—and does not definitively start again until his arrest in Colorado in 1919. Beyond the mixed personal stories of those who remember him, a lot of what we know about Charlie Ward's life before B & B comes from newspaper interviews that he granted after becoming a successful executive. Later stories told by colleagues and friends corroborate Ward's accounts of his early years, but it is worth keeping in mind that none of these sources are disinterested. Standing over six-feet tall, the barrel-chested and darkly tanned Ward had a penchant for bright colors and clothing reminiscent of the Wild West. Suffice it say, he was the kind of man who attracted attention and demanded respect. He also engendered great loyalty from the people he helped.<sup>3</sup>

Ward's life before B & B was full of successes and setbacks, but his knack for forming unlikely friendships remained a constant throughout the years. In 1938 Ward was interviewed about his rise to success by reporters from the *Saturday Evening Post* and

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*Charlie Ward with Brown & Bigelow's new, patented Talio-Crome press, 1955. According to company publicity, the million-dollar machine signaled a "triumphant new chapter" in Ward's management.*

the *Minneapolis Star*. The resulting stories spin a tale of Ward's transformation from a poverty-stricken youth into a millionaire many times over.

Already a driven young man when he left home at 17, Ward traveled the West Coast, working odd jobs in saloons and on freighter ships crossing the Pacific. He took up a gig as a dog-team driver in Alaska and later made his way to Nevada for the gold mines—but stayed for the gambling. In Arizona, Ward and a friend operated a small armored-taxi service available for hire to any “man with money from one end of the state to the other at any hour of the day and night,” as he told the *San Antonio Light* in 1950. This business involved modifying “automobile trucks into armored cars,” which soon caught the attention of an officer in the Mexican Revolutionary Army. Sometime between the end of 1911 and 1912, the officer introduced Ward to the rebel general Pancho Villa. Ward convinced Villa to give him a job as one of his civilian quartermasters. Later accounts report that Ward's position during the Mexican Revolution was cattle thief rather than munitions dealer. Regardless of his official duties, Ward acknowledged to the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1938 that the sale of hides from the cattle herds Villa's army confiscated from rich landowners made his work very profitable.<sup>4</sup>

By 1916 Ward had amassed a small fortune and returned to the United States. As he described it for the 1938 *Post* article, his extravagant lifestyle and unsavory associations in the Southwest soon caught the attention of the U.S. federal government. In what he long claimed was a setup, Ward was arrested in 1919 by narcotics agents in Denver for possession of a large amount of cocaine and morphine. Convicted December 15, 1920, on charges of narcotics possession, he was sentenced to one-to-ten years at

## BIGELOW AND WARD HAD A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP AND DID NOT ALWAYS AGREE ON BUSINESS MATTERS.

Leavenworth Federal Prison and entered the penitentiary five days later.<sup>5</sup> But Ward's luck would once again change.

It was in prison a few years later that Ward first learned of the wealthy business owner from St. Paul, Herbert Bigelow. Charged in St. Paul with “conspiracy to violate income tax laws” in July 1924, Bigelow was sentenced to Leavenworth for two years in August of the same year. Like some other businessmen of the time, Bigelow was an outspoken opponent of the 1913 federal income tax law, which he flouted, expecting only to be fined. He was reportedly the first “big name” to be convicted.<sup>6</sup>

Ward's introduction to and later friendship with Bigelow would prove to be one of many transformative associations he made over the coming years. There are differing accounts of why Bigelow and Ward forged a friendship in prison. According to Ward, he and Bigelow became unlikely friends in Leavenworth based on the former's foresight and the latter's fear. Ward already held a place of honor among the inmates when Bigelow arrived in 1924. Charming, cunning, and intelligent, Ward was considered, as he told the *Saturday Evening Post*, “one of the most influential convicts there.” Bigelow, according to both Ward and his longtime friend and fellow Leavenworth inmate Morris “Red” Rudensky, was an immediate target among the prisoners, who ensured that the rich man from up North “got dirty ill-fitting clothing and bad food.” Ward later recalled how he waited for Bigelow

to hit rock bottom before offering friendship and, more important, protection from the other inmates. In exchange, Ward was promised a position at the B & B factory when he was released from prison.<sup>7</sup>



**P**AROLED IN MAY 1925, A FEW months after Bigelow, Ward traveled to St. Paul, where he found Bigelow a changed man. Ward would later recall that Bigelow “was a lamb and now he is wearing a leopard's skin.” After some cajoling, though, Bigelow gave Ward a job in the B & B factory, as promised, where he quickly moved up in status and responsibility. Starting out as a punch-press operator in 1925, Charlie soon became factory superintendent. He was appointed to the board of directors in 1928 and by 1932 was made a vice president of the company.<sup>8</sup>

By all accounts, Bigelow and Ward had a complex relationship and did not always agree on business matters. So, when Bigelow amended his will in the early 1930s, no one would have expected Ward to be made a partial beneficiary of his estate. However, that is exactly what happened shortly before Bigelow, the wife of one of his salesmen, and a guide were drowned while fishing in northern Minnesota in September 1933. Ward, then vice president in charge of manufacturing, inherited approximately \$1 million (about \$18 million in 2015 dollars) from Bigelow's \$3 million estate. He was quickly voted into the presidency by the Brown & Bigelow board. The grandson of one of

Bigelow's sisters later recounted how she had the "garish bouquets" Ward sent to the mausoleum every year on the anniversary of Bigelow's death removed immediately.<sup>9</sup>

B & B had a \$250,000 deficit (about \$4.5 million today) when Ward took the helm. Within five years, despite the poor economy, the company easily cleared \$700,000 (\$12 million) in profits, and Ward himself was estimated to be worth about \$5 million (\$84.6 million). By 1946 B & B sales had ballooned to \$30 million annually (approximately \$370 million)

*Unlikely friends Herbert Bigelow (left) and Charlie Ward, about 1930, probably at what was then Bigelow's Wisconsin property*

and Ward was paid a yearly salary of \$300,000—about \$3.6 million today.<sup>10</sup>

The company's success had a lot to do with Ward's no-nonsense approach to hard work, unique hiring practices, and early adoption of innovative advertising technologies and techniques. He was credited with the runaway success of the product line known as "Remembrance Advertising," but his penchant for forming judicious relationships also contributed to the company's exponential growth and lucrative contracts—such as the job producing advertisements for the War Department during World War II. Original works of art by the likes of Norman Rockwell and items commissioned from Robert L. Ripley's hugely

popular *Believe It Or Not!* franchise are only some of the famous illustrations that appeared on B & B's products over the next decades.<sup>11</sup>

Ward himself continued to prosper, too. In 1938 he hired a married 27-year-old interior decorator, Yvette Saunders (nee Borer), to redecorate his 3,000-acre dairy farm on the St. Croix River just outside Hudson, Wisconsin. (He had purchased the property from the Bigelow estate.) He would marry her two years later in Prescott, Arizona, at age 54. They raised three children—two daughters and a son—on the Hudson farm, where Ward kept a herd of buffalo and was regularly pictured in western wear. Widely known for his love of



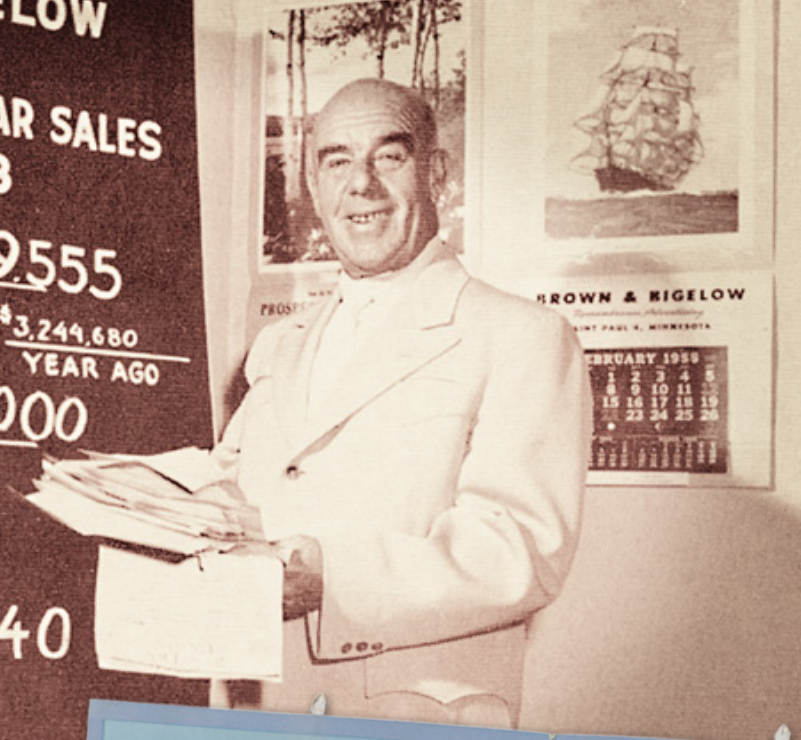
**BROWN & BIGELOW**  
**1954**  
**OPENING DAY CALENDAR SALES**  
**DEC. 1, 1953**

10 A.M. \$3,719,555  
\$3,244,680  
YEAR AGO

9:30 A.M. \$2,876,000

9 A.M. \$1,300,040

8:30 A.M. \$982,410



Booming sales, a hallmark of Ward's presidency, 1954, and promotional calendar (right), aka "Remembrance Advertising," based on an original oil painting by Rolf Armstrong

*Ridin' High*

**BROWN & BIGELOW**  
*Calendars Direct Mail Greetings Playing Cards Leather Novelties*  
**Remembrance Advertising**  
**SAINT PAUL MINNESOTA**

**AUGUST 1943**

| Sun | Mon | Tue | Wed | Thu | Fri | Sat |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 1   | 2   | 3   | 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   |
| 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 12  | 13  | 14  |
| 15  | 16  | 17  | 18  | 19  | 20  | 21  |
| 22  | 23  | 24  | 25  | 26  | 27  | 28  |
| 29  | 30  | 31  |     |     |     |     |

**JULY 1943**

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 4   | 5   | 6   | 7   | 8   | 9   | 10  |
| 11  | 12  | 13  | 14  | 15  | 16  | 17  |
| 18  | 19  | 20  | 21  | 22  | 23  | 24  |
| 25  | 26  | 27  | 28  | 29  | 30  | 31  |

**SEPTEMBER 1943**

| Jan | Feb | Mar | Apr | May | Jun | Jul |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| 8   | 9   | 10  | 11  | 12  | 13  | 14  |
| 15  | 16  | 17  | 18  | 19  | 20  | 21  |
| 22  | 23  | 24  | 25  | 26  | 27  | 28  |
| 29  | 30  |     |     |     |     |     |



One of many photos on the Wards' elaborate, fold-out 1943 Christmas card, signed "Charlie Ward, the Range Boss, and the Hands"

animals, he was rarely photographed on the farm without one of his beloved German shepherds; he reportedly had 14 dogs in 1946.<sup>12</sup>



**H**IS GENEROUS CONTRIBUTIONS to charities earned Ward the nickname "Uncle Charlie," which frequently appeared in press accounts of his work. Though close-lipped about his philanthropy, he was widely reported to have given financial support to the Little Sisters of the Poor, the Salvation Army, and the Shriners Crippled Children's Home. He also threw an annual Christmas Eve bash at the B & B plant in St. Paul for the city's orphaned children. The *St. Paul Dispatch* revealed that he "quietly channeled thousands of dollars into medical foundations and research projects, hospitals, youth projects, educational programs and similar non-profit ventures" and, as chairman of the St. Paul Citizens Committee, worked extensively on developing the zoo at Como Park.<sup>13</sup>

President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially pardoned Ward in Septem-

Brown & Bigelow decorated for Christmas, about 1940

ber of 1935. He received an Army-Navy "E" flag for excellence in war production (1944), was honored by National 4-H Clubs with a citation reserved for exceptional Americans (1950), and was named Citizen of the Year in 1953 by the Unico National organization, a service group promoting charitable works, higher education, and patriotism. Perhaps the most memorable of all his charitable ventures, however, was his insistence that Brown & Bigelow hire convicts—

hundreds of them, eventually—directly out of prison. Some of these men eventually worked their way up to executive positions, just as Ward had done. In 1944 Charlie told his friend Red Rudensky, a former fellow inmate who worked for B & B, that out of all the convicts he had hired, "only five have ever gone sour."<sup>14</sup>

Ward's associations with notable political figures and public officials, including Gov. Floyd B. Olson and former St. Paul police detective John Tierney, are well documented. His friendship with Rudensky is thoroughly chronicled in the latter's autobiography, *The Gonif*, which reinforces the stories of Ward's generosity and willingness to help people down on their luck. Rudensky dedicated his book to "My Patron Saint . . . Charles A. Ward, who gave me a strong arm to lean on when I was weak, who gave me flaming hope when I was lonely, who gave me inspiration when I felt despair . . . a man whose vast reservoir of faith in humanity gave me the will to live."<sup>15</sup>



**C**ELEBRATED FOR HIS GENEROUS nature and gregarious countenance, Ward was also known as a temperamental and decisive boss who could be your best friend one day and fire you without provocation the next.<sup>16</sup> His close but volatile working relationship with Bigelow proved to be only one of many in the years to come.

The library, archival, and museum collections of the Minnesota Historical Society hold numerous B & B publications and products, as well as photos, books, and personal papers that shed light on Ward's career and achievements. A recent donation of letters, photographs, clippings, and related miscellany illustrates another of Ward's unique employee-employer relationships and the traits that he

## WARD WAS ALSO KNOWN AS A TEMPERAMENTAL AND DECISIVE BOSS.

was known for: a shrewd mind for business, a steadfast belief in others, and a kind but tough heart. In this case, Ward's friendship was not with an ex-con or a politician but with the sometimes-employed [Sydney] Richard "Dick" Ricketts. The 1930 federal census shows 20-year-old Sydney Jr. living at home with his parents and two siblings while working as a chauffeur for a private family—Ward, as it turns out. It was while serving in this capacity that he was accidentally shot by Ward while on a hunting trip.<sup>17</sup>

Ricketts held a variety of jobs at Brown & Bigelow in the years following the hunting accident, but a 1938 letter on B & B letterhead addressed to "Mr. Dick Ricketts" shows Ward's tough side: "Enclosed is Mr. Ward's personal check in the amount of \$297.00 which is a full month's salary for September. It is my duty to inform you that you are no longer on the payroll. This is according to instructions from Mr. Ward and any information relative thereto must be taken up with him." Whatever the infraction, in an example of Ward's willingness to give a second chance, Ricketts managed to get back on the B & B payroll by 1940 and thrive . . . for a time, at least. The federal census from that year shows him living in West St. Paul with a wife and two children while employed as a night supervisor for Remembrance Advertising. In 1944 his "good work" was rewarded with a nearly 30 percent salary increase, a trend that continued with an equally generous raise the following year.<sup>18</sup> But in 1951, after being given "every opportunity to correct certain conditions in your private life which have caused the performance of your duties to be unsatisfactory," he was fired again. This time, no matter how apologetic the letters to Ward begging for his job back (and there were several, spanning three years), it seems that he never returned to the employ of B & B.<sup>19</sup>

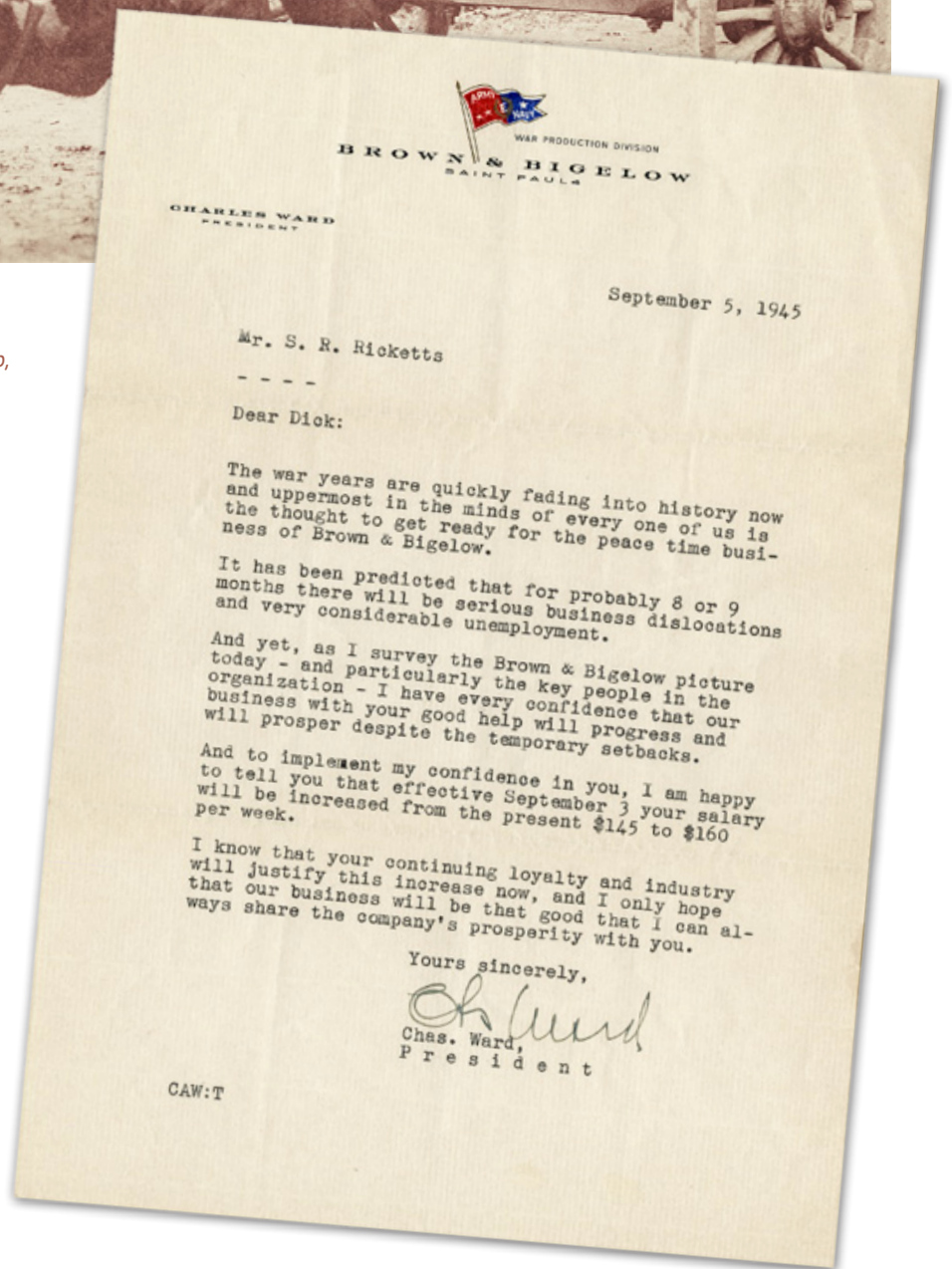


*Morris "Red" Rudensky, Ward's fellow inmate, showing his lock-picking and safe-cracking tools (now in MNHS collections). After his release, he worked as a copy editor for B & B and went on to become a security consultant for 3M.*





ABOVE: Ward (center), one of his beloved German shepherds, and Richard Ricketts (far right) on a trip, probably to Arkansas, about 1933. RIGHT: Ward to Ricketts, 1945—praise and a raise.



**I**N HIS 1938 INTERVIEW WITH THE *Minneapolis Star*, Ward was asked what he thought of all the publicity and attention his life had attracted. Very astutely, he answered, “They’ve hashed and re-hashed the story of my life and I suppose after I’m dead and buried they’ll still be doing it. Meanwhile I’m going on trying to do my little bit toward making those around me happy. Mine is a full life now.” A wealthy man to the end, Ward continued his “full life” for another 20 years, unexpectedly dying in bed of a heart attack while on a business trip to Los Angeles in 1959. He was 73. In tribute, the entrances to Brown & Bigelow headquarters in St. Paul announced, “Mr. Ward had died . . . quietly . . . peacefully at the end of a busy day. He would have wanted it no other way.”<sup>20</sup> □



## Notes

1. Brown & Bigelow, "Our Story," [www.brownandbigelow.com/experience/our-story](http://www.brownandbigelow.com/experience/our-story); Moira Harris, "Minnesota Calendars: Daily Galleries," *Minnesota History* 58 (Fall 2003): 354–55; Jack Alexander, "The Third Party Gets a Rich Uncle," *Saturday Evening Post*, Sept. 3, 1938, 5; Moccasin Telegraph Staff, *Brown & Bigelow's Life Since 1896* (St. Paul: Brown & Bigelow, 1956), 11, 16, copy in Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) library.
2. *Industrial Traditions as Exemplified by the Organization of Brown & Bigelow, 1896–1930: Remembrance Advertising* (St. Paul [?]: Brown & Bigelow, 1930), n.p., copy in MNHS; Moccasin Telegraph, *Brown & Bigelow's Life*, 19–29; Bruce Rubenstein, *Greed, Rage, and Love Gone Wrong: Murder in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 166; *Thirty Years of Distinguished Leadership: Highlights in the Career of Charles Allen Ward* (St. Paul: Brown & Bigelow, 1955), n.p., copy in MNHS.
3. Mary Ann Ogden, discussion with the author, July 30, 2014; Morris (Red) Rudensky and Don Riley, *The Gonif* (Blue Earth, MN: Piper Co., 1970), 17–19, 25–26; "With Cedric Adams," *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 3, 1938. "Thief" is one translation of the Yiddish *gonif*, a word with many connotations.
4. Alexander, "The Third Party," 5, 57; Norman Katkov, "Success—Against All Odds," *San Antonio Light* (TX), Dec. 10, 1950; Rubenstein, *Greed, Rage, and Love*, 159; P. S. Ruckman Jr., "Quite the Pair: Herbert H. Bigelow and Charlie Ward," *Pardon Power*, May 6, 2011, [www.pardonpower.com/2011/05/quite-pair-herbert-h-bigelow-and.html#more](http://www.pardonpower.com/2011/05/quite-pair-herbert-h-bigelow-and.html#more).
5. Alexander, "The Third Party," 57–58, 5; "Charles A. Ward Dies Suddenly," *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 26, 1959; case file summary, Inmate #15716, Charles Allen Ward, Inmate Case Files, summary, U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, KS, 1895–1931, Record Group 129, National Archives and Records Administration, Kansas City, e-mail to the author, Aug. 12, 2014.
6. Inmate #21677, Herbert Bigelow, inmate case files, summary; Ruckman, "Quite the Pair."
7. Rod Bigelow, "Herbert Huse Bigelow," *Bigelow Society, Inc.*, <http://bigelowsociety.com/rod9/her92371.htm>, on which Bigelow's relatives recount that while in prison, he was extremely generous with fellow inmates and "spent his time and money ameliorating the lot of his fellow prisoners." See also "With Cedric Adams," *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 3, 1938; Rudensky and Riley, *Gonif*, 17–19, 26; Alexander, "The Third Party," 58; John F. Gable, "How 499 out of 503 ex-convicts released on parole made good," typescript (1980s?), 4, copy in MNHS library.
8. Alexander, "The Third Party," 59; *Thirty Years of Distinguished Leadership*, n.p.; Moccasin Telegraph, *Brown & Bigelow's Life*, 32.
9. Rudensky and Riley, *Gonif*, 46, 50; Rubenstein, *Greed, Rage, and Love*, 168; Carl Mydans, "Convicts' Champion: Millionaire Charlie Ward, Who Served in Prison Himself, Gives Hope and Jobs to Other Convicts," *Life*, Sept. 30, 1946, clipping, copy in MNHS; "Pardon Sought by Plant Head," *Ogden Standard Examiner* (UT), 7, July 31, 1935; "A Tribute . . . Charles Allen Ward: 1886–1959," *B & B Intercom*, May 27, 1959, copy in Papers pertaining to Charles Ward and Richard Ricketts, MNHS; "Ward Dies Suddenly," *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 26, 1959; Jim Gardner to Rod Bigelow, Mar. 18, 2004, <http://bigelowsociety.com/rod9/her92371.htm>. All dollar conversions, here and below, from Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index inflation calculator. Since it only calculates for amounts of \$10 million or less, conversions for larger numbers involved multiplication.
10. Mydans, "Convicts' Champion"; Alexander, "The Third Party," 5; Henry Ehrlich, "The World's Most Generous Man, Charlie Ward, 'Graduate' of Leavenworth, Gives Away His \$300,000 Income Almost as Fast as He Makes It," *Look*, Sept. 2, 1947, clipping, copy in MNHS.
11. *Thirty Years of Distinguished Leadership*, n.p.
12. "Charles A. Ward, Millionaire Arizona Ranch-Owner, to Wed Social Secretary," *Albuquerque Journal*, Jan. 29, 1940; Katkov, "Success—Against all Odds," *San Antonio Light*, Dec. 10, 1950; "C. A. Ward Dies in West," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 27, 1959, 10; Mydans, "Convicts' Champion."
13. "C. A. Ward Dies in West," *Milwaukee Journal*, May 27, 1959, 10; *Thirty Years of Distinguished Leadership*, n.p.; Alexander, "The Third Party," 6; "Ward Dies Suddenly," *St. Paul Dispatch*, May 26, 1959.
14. Ruckman, "Quite the Pair"; Moccasin Telegraph, *Brown & Bigelow's Life*, 38; "A Tribute" *B & B Intercom*, May 27, 1959; Mydans, "Convicts' Champion"; Rudensky and Riley, *Gonif*, 154.
15. Rudensky and Riley, *Gonif*, 156–57 and dedication page.
16. Rubenstein, *Greed, Rage, and Love*, 168.
17. U.S., Census, 1930, Population, enumeration district [e.d.] 62–68, sheet 24A; "Charles A. Ward Shoots Driver in Hunting Mishap," unlabeled clipping in Papers Pertaining to Charles Ward and Richard Ricketts (the recent donation).
18. Leon L. Schall to Richard Ricketts, Sept. 23, 1938, Ward-Ricketts papers; U.S., Census, 1940, Population, e.d. 19–45, sheet 12A; M. E. Trolen to Richard Ricketts, Mar. 8, 1944, and Chas. Ward to Ricketts, Sept. 5, 1945, Ward-Ricketts papers. On June 14, 1944, Ward wrote, "Keep up the good work and realize that I am following your progress with a great deal of interest."
19. Earl F. Craft to Richard Ricketts, Apr. 5, 1951; Craft to Ricketts, July 7, 1952 (responding to a June 21 letter requesting work); Ward to Ricketts, Jan. 9, 1953, Mar. 9, 1954 (responses to more requests)—all Ward-Ricketts papers. Also in this collection, Jack Alexander to Ricketts, Feb. 26, 1953, refers to Ricketts' "big fall" adding, "I am glad to hear that you are on the rise again, via A.A."
20. "With Cedric Adams," *Minneapolis Star*, Sept. 3, 1938; "A Tribute . . . Charles Allen Ward," May 27, 1959.

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