

Charles Sperry Kirkpatrick (1879-1971)

Much of what we know about Charles Kirkpatrick comes from an interview he gave on December 19, 1952, and several written pieces by an unknown author. Some of the dates and details in these sources are incorrect or exaggerated, which might reflect Charles' unusual personality.

Charles Sperry Kirkpatrick was born on January 6, 1879, in Bloomington, Illinois. He was the fourth of five children of John and Sylvia (Sperry) Kirkpatrick. He had three older sisters (Mary, Ira, and Ora) and a younger brother, Edward. When Charles was born, the family lived at 705 E. Douglas Street in Bloomington.

Charles' father, John, was born in Ohio and was the youngest of eight children. His father, John Sr., moved his family to Illinois after his wife became a widow in 1852. John Jr. worked with the Illinois Central Railroad starting in 1853, when he was just nine years old. Later, he moved to Iowa to farm, where he met Sylvia Sperry, a teacher from New York. They married and lived in Iowa until 1873 when they moved back to McLean County, Illinois, and eventually settled in Bloomington.

John Jr. became a successful auctioneer, selling land and livestock for 50 years. He even became president of the Illinois State Auctioneers Association and the International Auctioneers Association. He also got involved in the furniture business, inspired by his brother Adam, who had ran a furniture store. In 1884, John Jr. opened his own furniture business, which later expanded and became one of the largest stores in Bloomington.

While his father was growing the family business, Charles attended Bloomington public schools, starting at Market Street School. Charles was an active child, playing baseball and football. He was on a local baseball team called "The Unions" and also played for Bloomington High School's football team. However, football caused a lot of injuries, and Charles himself suffered a serious back injury during a game in 1896. He was paralyzed for a while and spent over a year in bed recovering. Despite the injury, he remained a fan of football.

In 1897, Charles' father introduced a proposal to ban football in Bloomington due to Charles' injury, but the City Council rejected it. Charles returned to school in 1898 and graduated from Bloomington High School in 1900. Afterward, he attended Eastman National Business College in New York and graduated in 1901, earning high honors.

After returning home, Charles struggled to find a job, so his father tried to teach him auctioneering. But Charles found the work too physically demanding and decided against it. Instead, he took a job managing credit for the family furniture business. In 1904, he enrolled in law school at Illinois Wesleyan University, thinking the classes would help with his job, but he didn't finish.

In 1908, Charles' father and his business partner decided to close the furniture business due to poor health. The business was reorganized into the Howard-Kirkpatrick House Furnishing Company, with Charles' brother Edward becoming the president and Charles taking on a leadership role as secretary-treasurer.

The business continued to grow, with customers coming to the store from all over Central Illinois. One reason people kept coming back was the large red chair in front of the store, which had been there since 1888. Known as "Kirk's Chair," it was made by James Hughes, a cabinetmaker for the store. Parents would sit their kids in the chair so that later, they could proudly say they had sat in it. The chair was even used in parades and weddings. Local legends say that the heaviest man in the U.S., Leonard "Baby" Bliss from Bloomington, and the tallest

man ever, Robert Wadlow from Alton, Illinois, both sat in it (but not at the same time). Today, the chair is part of the McLean County Museum of History, and visitors can sit in it just like many others did at Howard-Kirkpatrick.

Edward and Charles kept the store successful and introduced new ideas. They were the first in Illinois (outside of Chicago) to offer an installment-payment plan. Charles was also the first person to buy goods from Chicago's Merchandise Mart. Edward made improvements, including installing indirect lighting on the first floor, inspired by a hotel in Chicago. He also set up seven sample rooms on the second floor to help customers imagine how to decorate their homes.

The Kirkpatrick brothers ran the business for almost 30 years. In 1937, they sold it to Leath and Company, a store from Chicago. The name "Kirkpatrick's" was still important in Bloomington, so Leath's advertised itself as the "successors to Kirkpatrick's," even continuing to use Kirk's Chair in ads. The store continued at the same location until 1986 when a fire destroyed it.

Besides his business success, Charles Kirkpatrick was very active in the community. In 1906, he became president of the Bloomington High School Alumni Association, even though he claimed he didn't run for the job. He helped publish a special edition of the BHS alumni magazine and organized a big alumni banquet. In 1917, he also led the entertainment committee for the Bloomington Consistory Club, bringing famous speakers like Admiral Robert Coontz and composer John Philip Sousa.

Throughout his life, Charles supported many organizations and causes. He was involved with the Federal Home Loan Bank Board, the Central Illinois Hospital Association, the Masonic Lodge, and many others. He was known as a community leader because of his hard work and support for local groups, even though he lived with pain throughout his life.

Charles also helped raise money for various charities. He was particularly known for supporting the March of Dimes, which worked to fight polio. In 1934, he helped organize the first "Birthday Ball" to raise funds for polio research, inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who had polio. The event raised a lot of money and continued every year. In 1938, the March of Dimes became its official name, and Charles continued to help organize these events, even helping to fundraise for local polio treatment.

When World War II started, Charles turned his attention to helping with the war effort. He organized Red Cross fundraising campaigns and came up with creative ways to encourage people to donate. For example, he created a "Red Cross Light of Honor" in 1942, where lights showed which towns had met their fundraising goals. In 1944, he even arranged for a six-foot-tall rooster perched on the second floor balcony of the McLean County courthouse (today McLean County Museum of History) to crow to celebrate when towns met their goals.

Charles also helped with other war-related activities, including War Bond parades and fundraising drives. After the war, he kept working on local charity projects, such as raising money for the Pearl Harbor Chapter of the American War Mothers and building a fountain to honor World War II soldiers.

Charles continued his charitable work throughout his life, even donating a statue to the Bloomington Public Library in 1964 and giving \$10,000 to Illinois Wesleyan University in 1963. He died in 1971 at the age of 92. He was remembered as a generous person who made a big impact on his community.

Charles S. Kirkpatrick died on June 20, 1971 at the Mennonite Hospital where he had been a patient for some time. He was 92 years old at the time of his death. He was not only

remembered for his support of dozens of local charities, but his support for local sports too. Upon Kirkpatrick's death, Fred Young, sports columnist for the *Pantagraph*, remembered the "staunch supporter of all manly athletic contests" by saying that "he [Kirkpatrick] felt that sports makes a real contribution to a better community and nation." Kirkpatrick's funeral was held at Metzler Memorial Home with Dr. Robert Youngs officiating, and he was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery.