

Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Company

Charles Hopkins Conover - 1847-1915

The following is from my book titled "Perfect Triumph".

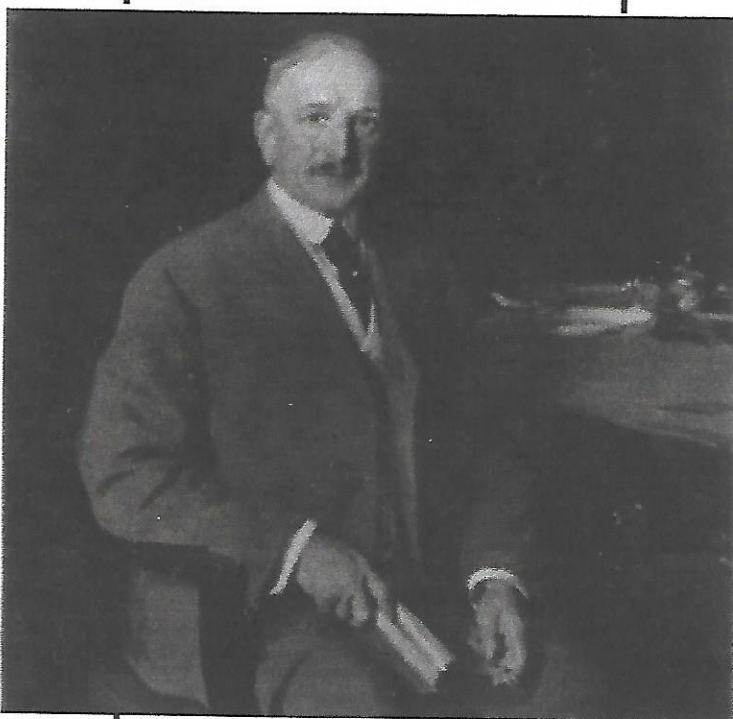
One of the companies Albert E. "Bob" Kinsley contacted during his 1913 trip was Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Company of Chicago. They were a large wholesale hardware firm which served the Middle West of the country. This was a very important contact as they would later sell Triumph traps with the REV-O-NOC stamp. The stamp was to honor Charles Hopkins Conover and was his last name spelled backwards.

Charles was born July 12, 1847 in Easton, Pennsylvania to William and Elizabeth. William died February 1, 1850 and Elizabeth remarried Fayette Rumsey of Buffalo, New York. At the age of twelve, Charles moved there with his mother. He received his early education, in both school and business, while there.

In 1865 at the age of eighteen, Charles worked for the wholesale hardware house of Pratt and Company. He was assigned to the Wisconsin territory where he proved himself a successful salesman. Later, he was brought back to the main office with increased responsibilities.

He lived in Buffalo until 1871 when he moved to Chicago and

was hired by Hibbard and Spencer to assist in purchasing goods – a division of the business to which Hibbard had previously devoted much of his time and energy. Charles became the active head of a newly organized purchasing department. He had been a successful salesman, but was an even better buyer. His natural shrewdness was a conspicuous asset. Almost from his



first day, the goods they handled grew in volume and variety.

He married Della Louise Boardman on December 7, 1881. She was born October 31, 1859 in Marshalltown, Iowa. They had four children – Elinor, Della, Margaret and Henry born in 1885, 1887, 1888, 1892 respectively.

When the corporation of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Company was organized in January, 1882, Charles was one of

the charter members of the first board of directors – then consisting of five stockholders. Upon the death of Spencer in 1890, Charles became the secretary and after the death of Hibbard in 1904, he became the vice-president.

Upon the resignation of Bartlett as president in January, 1914, Charles was elected president. Unfortunately, he did not serve in that capacity very long, he died November 4, 1915. Bartlett made the following comment about Charles. "His work rather than his voice proclaimed the value of his efforts."

Charles was an avid reader with interests in biography and history. For years, he had a standing order, with one Chicago bookstore, to send him any book they thought would interest him. At the age of sixty, he studied Latin. At one time, he was the president of the Chicago Historical Society.

He was an active member of the Illinois State Historical Society and interested in all departments of the Society.

In 1930, Fred C. Kelly, who was the author of "Seventy-Five Years of Hibbard Hardware: The Story of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Co.," said that Charles was "perhaps the most colorful personality that ever dominated the affairs of Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett and Co."

He also called him "the last of the czars." Charles was small in stature and was sensitive to it. His associates usually referred to him with affection and respect as "the little man." They were careful never to do this within his hearing. He had an unwavering sense of justice, even though his manner of administering was often stern and severe.

Kelly thought his small stature had handicapped Charles during the earlier part of his business career because of a secret feeling of inferiority. Kelly believed this may have been the explanation for his later success, it may have been the reason he never quit trying to improve himself. All his life he was a student with a passion for thoroughness. Nothing less than complete mastery of a subject satisfied him.

Charles acquired a broad and long-range view of business and always thought of the future. Falling prices never worried him, one of his favorite statements was "They cannot reduce prices faster than I can buy goods."

In the late 1890's, a price war occurred among nail manufacturers and nails sold as low as \$.50 a keg. Every time prices dropped, Charles bought more nails. After every spare bit of his firm's warehouse space was occupied by nail kegs, he began renting storage space wherever it was cheap. It was said that he had nails in nearly every basement along Lake Street. When the manufacturers finally got together and raised the price of nails to \$1 per keg overnight,

Charles had nearly one million kegs of nails.

A similar example was just before the formation of the Tin Plate Trust. The American Tin Plate Company was formed and it controlled the supply of tin plate bars. A monopoly was created and arbitrarily raised prices to the tariff limit. To maintain the artificially high prices, more than thirty mills were closed. It was impossible for outsiders to obtain either mills or raw materials. Charles had hundreds of train car loads of tin ware stored all over Chicago before this happened.

He was very direct and accurate with cost estimates. A salesman representing one of the largest manufacturers of locks paid him a visit to get an estimate for a new lock set. Charles asked him to leave the lock and come back the next day. When the salesman returned, Charles gave the salesman an estimate that was within one penny of the price the salesman had figured for the lock set

Charles had disassembled the salesman's sample lock and weighed the various little pieces of brass, steel and iron on a jewelry scale he kept in his desk. He knew exactly how much of each kind of material was in each lock, and he precisely estimated what the manufacturing cost along with a decent profit.

After he had ceased to do much buying, Charles continued to buy certain lines of goods just to keep up his contact with old friends who came in to sell.

Scot H. Dahms

Below are four examples of the name REV-O-NOC shown on items sold by Hibbert, Spencer, Bartlett & Co. as per Scot's article.

