

from humble beginnings

the apple and the tree

There was little about Charles Walgreen's childhood that would have led you to believe he would become a success story, let alone a multimillionaire who would transform an entire industry. Walgreen never seemed cut out for the pharmacy business—and there was no shortage of pharmacy owners ready to tell him this. They might have been right. Charles never longed to become a pharmacist or a businessman (as confirmed by his checkered career bouncing around at least a half dozen stores in his twenties). But his fastidious attention to detail, coupled with his

engaging personality, commitment to customer service, and surprising willingness to defy conventional wisdom on how to run his business, proved to be an unusually potent combination—a combination to which his son and his grandson have adhered, even as the industry did several flip-flops over the decades.

But the fact is Walgreen was a solid but uninspired student and a positively desultory employee. Another twist: Walgreen did not descend from a line of Walgreens but was the first Walgreen born, by name, a Walgreen. Because Swedes traditionally took the first name of their fathers for their last names (adding the familiar “son” as a suffix, as in Johansson), military units suffered endless confusion with so many people sharing the same surname. In the 1780s, Charles’s great-great-great-grandfather, Sven Olofsson, adopted the surname “Wahlgren” during his military service, a family fact passed down over the generations. When Walgreen’s father, Carl Magnus Olofsson, arrived in America, he decided—for reasons lost to us now—to change the family name to Walgreen. (The original name would resurface years later when Charles Walgreen decided to give his company’s “Pure Norwegian Cod Liver Oil” the fictitious family moniker, “Olafsen’s.”)¹

Carl Magnus Olofsson grew up in Bola, Morlunda, Sweden, in a solidly middle-class family. Nonetheless, Olofsson decided to leave home for the New World in 1859, changing his name to Carl Walgreen when he arrived. He started a family with Anna Louise Cronland, but after bearing two children, she died from complications in childbirth. In 1871 Walgreen married the former Ellen Olson, who grew up in a small town north of Stockholm. Although Olson’s family lived comfortably there, her father, like Olofsson, decided the future lay in America. So he led his wife and nine children on an arduous four-week trip across the Atlantic to find out if he was right. Since the family never returned, we can safely conclude their father’s belief in America’s future was vindicated. Ellen raised Walgreen’s first two children and two more of their own, including Charles, who was born on October 9, 1873.

Walgreen grew up on a farm near Rio, Illinois, 14 miles north of

Galesburg—in other words, in the middle of nowhere. But it made for a safe, contented childhood. When Charles first met his future wife, Myrtle Norton, as she recounted in her autobiography, *Never a Dull Day*, he told her that he had had “a happy home”; and all signs suggest it was true.

Walgreen's parents were typical Swedes—stoic, with an understated sweetness. They spoke Swedish at home—a language Charles spoke and wrote his entire life—“but never in anger,” he said. His father was firm but fair, unquestionably the family patriarch. He might have admired his adopted country's democratic form of government, but he made no pretense of practicing it at home. What Carl said, went. Carl's authoritarian streak—hardly uncommon for the era—might explain why Charles so often bristled years later when taking orders as a store employee.

In the 1870s, the entire “educational system” of Rio, Illinois, consisted of a one-room schoolhouse. But for at least one year, it was lead by a special teacher named Maggie Phillips. Walgreen never forgot her. And as a result, Walgreens' employees never did either. Every day, Miss Phillips would write an inspirational quotation on the blackboard and have the students memorize the phrase.

Her methods worked. Some five decades later, during the Great Depression, Walgreen shared one of Miss Phillips's quotes with his thousands of employees through the company newsletter, *The Pepper Pod*.

True worth is in being, not seeming,
In doing each day that goes by
Some little good—not in dreaming
Of great things to do
By and by.²

It is safe to say that Walgreen, and the vast majority of his employees, took those words to heart. The company has been characterized by an almost religious devotion to substance over style, to this day.

Miss Phillips's tutelage aside, however, Walgreen's father believed his son would need a bigger, better school system to reach his full potential;

4 america's corner store

and he felt he found one 60 miles northeast in Dixon, Illinois. Walgreen's older half brother Edwin was attending classes there at the five-year-old Northern Illinois Normal School and told his father, "This was the place."

When the Walgreens moved there in 1887, Dixon still had muddy roads and wooden sidewalks, but its location on the Rock River guaranteed continued growth. Established in 1830 when John Dixon set up a ferry service there, the spot became known as "Fort Dixon" during the Black Hawk War of 1832, which started when Chief Black Hawk roused the local Potowotami and Winnebago tribes to take back the land. The war drew hundreds of Union troops, including a host of future famous Americans, among them Jefferson Davis and Abraham Lincoln—the presidents involved in the Civil War. The outnumbered and overpowered tribesmen stood little chance; and after just a few months of fighting, they were forced to surrender. "The Rock River was a beautiful country," Chief Black Hawk said. "I loved it and I fought for it. It is now yours. Keep it as we did."³ (Chicagoans honored the warrior a century later when they named their NHL hockey team the Blackhawks.)

The Black Hawk War literally put the tiny settlement of Dixon on the map and, having introduced the soldiers from around the country to the area, served to spread the word about the area's appeal. Lincoln returned to Dixon's Nachusa Hotel, where he had boarded during the war, for business trips and campaign stops decades later. (A century later, another U.S. president, Ronald Reagan, grew up in Dixon, serving as a lifeguard on the Rock River and as a caddy for Charles Walgreen Sr. on the Dixon Country Club golf course, which Charles Sr. saved from bankruptcy in the 1930s by purchasing 100 memberships. Like Lincoln, Reagan returned as an honored guest while campaigning for president, staying at the Walgreen family's Hazelwood estate.)

Dixon looked pretty good to Carl Walgreen, so he sold his two farms in Rio to set up a real estate office in downtown Dixon in 1887, when Charles was 14. The community might not have been much by today's standards, but it must have been exhilarating to young Charles, moving

from miniscule Rio to Dixon, a town with 5,000 people, electric lights, and even, in a few prosperous businesses and homes, telephones, “the lazy man’s friend,” in the words of the *Dixon Evening Telegraph*.

Dixon also had what Carl Walgreen most wanted: a good high school for his son, with a planned, new, state-of-the-art building. Charles did well in his studies, but it was sports, not school, that thrilled him. He played baseball and swam all summer, hunted in the nearby woods each fall, and skated on the frozen Rock River in winter.

Charles thrived on the freedom that came with growing up but chafed under the additional responsibilities. At age 16, at his parents’ urging, he entered Dixon Business College but stayed only a year. “When I asked him how he liked business college,” Myrtle Walgreen wrote in her autobiography, “he just shrugged.”⁴ In his early years, indifference marked Walgreen’s reaction to work in almost any form.

Fortunately, “Accuracy was a kind of passion with him,” Myrtle wrote, so Walgreen was able to find work as a bookkeeper for the I. B. Countryman General Store, Dixon’s largest. He performed passably well, but once he recognized that his daily duties would hardly change before he died an old man, he quit again. “He didn’t think it’d be too good to run a book-keeping operation the rest of his life,” Chuck recalled.⁵

(Walgreen might have ditched the bookkeeping job, but he remembered the lesson: If you don’t give your employees a chance to advance, you’ll lose them. Providing its employees opportunity for growth based on ability, not merely on longevity, has been a pillar of Walgreens’ policy to the current day.)

Leaving the white-collar world for a job at the Henderson Shoe Factory in town, Charles Walgreen soon learned that manual labor also had its downsides, especially in 1889. As he toiled at one of the stitching machines one day, he caught his left middle finger in a sharp steel tool and watched the contraption chop the top joint off. A local doctor named D. H. Law treated the wound and told him he wasn’t even to hold a book until it healed. But Charles was not about to put off his love of sports just

because of a little finger injury. When Law caught him playing baseball with his buddies the very next day, he scolded the young man. He then asked Charles if he would like to work in a drugstore instead of the factory.⁶

"Charles did not care for the idea at all," Myrtle recalled, simply because he preferred playing baseball to any job you could name. But Dr. Law persisted, asking Charles every day he saw him playing outside if he wanted to reconsider his offer. Finally, albeit grudgingly, Charles agreed to take the job that Dr. Law had set up at the biggest of Mr. David Horton's five drugstores, which sold the "finest perfumes, pure drugs, medicines, toilet articles, shoulder braces, homeopathic remedies, cigars, soda water, and lamp goods," according to the ads in the local paper.

Not surprisingly, the work at Horton's didn't appeal much to Charles, but the princely sum of four bucks a week was certainly attractive. More important, however, unlike the factory, the drugstore offered the amiable young man lots of social contact. Although Charles was initially apprehensive about waiting on customers, he quickly discovered he had a knack for it, the one part of the job he actually enjoyed. (Genuinely friendly customer service has also been a Walgreens' hallmark from the start.)

Like all of Walgreen's jobs, however, this one would be short-lived, lasting only a year and a half. "One nasty winter day, [Mr. Horton] told me to get the snow and ice off the front sidewalk while he was out to lunch," Charles recalled about 10 years later. "I thought he ought to have a porter for such jobs when we were busy, but I really did intend to shovel the snow." After Walgreen's boss left for lunch, a friend stopped by to chat, which interested Walgreen far more than shoveling snow. The time flew by, and Mr. Horton returned to find the snow and ice still stuck to the sidewalk and his clerk inside with the shovel in his hand, chatting up his friend.

"I caught the look on his face," Walgreen said, "and remembered the ice fast enough to blurt out, 'I've quit!' Mr. Horton said I couldn't quit; I was fired!"⁷

Thus began the single greatest career in the pharmacy business.

sweet home chicago

Having been unceremoniously let go from a decent job by a decent man, another 18-year-old might have felt guilty or dejected, but Charles Walgreen took his untimely dismissal instead as a long-awaited invitation to see the world beyond Dixon, Illinois. He borrowed a \$20 bill from his sister Clementine, who worked as a stenographer in the Dixon Circuit Clerk's office, then hopped on the Chicago and Northwestern railroad line for Chicago.

His timing could not have been better. When he arrived at the Northwestern station in the winter of 1893, the architects and organizers were working furiously to put the final touches on the World's Columbian Exposition just a few blocks away in Jackson Park, on the city's South Side, in time for the May opening.

The stakes were enormous, for both the city and the country. Chicago's 1893 fair followed Paris's incredibly impressive 1889 World's Fair—which introduced the Eiffel Tower, among other attractions—and had to redeem the United States for its embarrassing, half-baked displays in Paris. Chicago also had to wow its countrymen to prove that it was no longer a vulgar, Western outpost fit only for doomed cattle.

It is impossible to talk about the history of Walgreens without discussing the history of Chicago. The two have been intertwined since Chicago's eighty-sixth year and Walgreens' first. Their personalities are very similar. They share a hard-working, no-nonsense mindset, yet both are utterly unafraid of great challenges.

For the company's first 10 years or so, Walgreens was based almost entirely in Chicago, and the values of that city and its people have stamped the company, even as Walgreens has spread across the United States. In a real sense, Walgreens remains a Chicago company that happens to have outposts in 44 states in the country. As former chief executive officer (CEO) Dan Jorndt said in 1981, when Walgreens had a mere 150 stores in Chicagoland (compared to today's 350-plus), "We know Chicago better than anyone. This is our home, where it all started."⁸

Eastern capitals like Boston and New York were already major cities in the seventeenth century, and even “Western” enclaves like New Orleans or St. Louis were established outposts by the early nineteenth century. But Chicago didn’t even exist on any map until well into the nineteenth century. What this utterly forgettable landscape did have, however, was a seemingly minor river running through it—and that made all the difference. Columbus left the Old World to find a passage to the Orient—and failed. Lewis and Clark left the East Coast to find an easy waterway to the Pacific Ocean—and failed. But when French missionary Jacques Marquette and his traveling partner, explorer Louis Joliet, set out on the last leg of their North American journey from the Great Lakes to find the Mississippi River in September 1673, they succeeded. The answer to their riddle was traveling the tiny Chicago River (*Chicago* being a bastardized version of an Indian word for skunkweed, or wild onion, which covered the river banks), followed by a short portage into the Des Plaines River, which runs into the Illinois before joining the Mississippi.

Marquette and Joliet’s discovery went largely ignored for 157 years, however, because it was too impractical to exploit. That changed dramatically in 1830, when government planners working for the 12-year-old state of Illinois decided to dig a canal between the Chicago and Des Plaines rivers, ending the need for the troublesome portage, with two small towns—Ottawa and Chicago—planned for either end of the canal.

In August 1833, settlers signed papers at the rustic—some reporters called it rancid and wretched—Sauganah Hotel, incorporating the village of Chicago as a town, with a standing population of 150 people. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Michigan City, Indiana, had a big head start on the nascent hamlet; but after the pioneers finished cutting the canal between the Chicago and Des Plaines rivers, the clot in the waterway broke, allowing easy travel from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico. There was now at least a reason to travel through this wasteland.

The town’s rapid growth was driven by sheer utility, a place where grain, cattle, and immigrants came in and flour, meat, and migrants went out. But in Chicago’s first decades, it still wasn’t much to look at. An early his-

torian reported the place suffered from “a most woe-begone appearance, even as a frontier town of the lowest classes.”⁹

The townspeople built their homes, businesses, and even corduroy roads out of the acres of virgin forests that Michigan’s lumber barons logged and shipped to Chicago daily. There seemed no end to the raw building materials the Great Lakes state could provide, but that would prove to be a shortsighted solution at best.

On October 7, 1871, George Francis Train, who was “a popular lecturer on moral themes,” according to Donald Miller, gave a speech in a Chicago hall that went unrecorded, except for his final caveat: “This is the last public address that will be delivered within these walls! A terrible calamity is impending over the city of Chicago! More I cannot say; more I dare not utter.”¹⁰

We will never know what Train knew or how he knew it; but 24 hours after delivering those fateful words, he would be proven right beyond anyone’s imagination, perhaps including his own.

On October 8, 1871 (two years before Charles Walgreen was born), at about 9 P.M., Mrs. Patrick O’Leary’s cow knocked over the infamous lamp in her barn on the West Side of the city, igniting some loose hay. By the next morning, over 300 people had been killed, and almost a third of the city’s 300,000 people were suddenly homeless, comprising the greatest single disaster in the United States to that date. One witness said he thought he was witnessing “the burning of the world.”¹¹

The hyperbole was understandable. A modern reader looking at the photos of Chicago that week is reminded of Hiroshima or Dresden, with the landscape covered as far as the eye could see in rubble and smoldering coals, with just a few chimneys and bewildered onlookers left standing. As stunning as the event was, the recovery was even more incredible—and almost as fast—a testament to Chicago’s character.

Instead of feeling defeated, “Chicagoans were convinced they had survived a biblical test,” Miller wrote, “a terrible but purifying act that had cleared the way for a vast regeneration that would transform their ruined city into the master metropolis of America.”¹² By the end of that horrible

week, the resilient Chicagoans had already built 5,000 temporary structures and started 200 permanent ones, which inspired *Chicago Tribune* editor Joseph Medill to write, "In the midst of a calamity without parallel in the world's history, the people of this once beautiful city have resolved that CHICAGO SHALL RISE AGAIN."¹³

And rise it did, perhaps like no other city in the world. In contrast to Tokyo and Berlin, which lost much of their ancient charm during their similarly massive rebuilding projects, Chicago had little of lasting value to lose in the bargain. Chicago happily began to replace its seamier sides in favor of stone buildings, planned streets, and an infrastructure built to last.

This ability to adapt to sudden changes (which gerontologists tell us is one of the most common traits of those who live to be 100 years old) plus the capacity to surmount daunting obstacles and take on great challenges with complete conviction have long been central to Chicago's identity—and, not coincidentally, Walgreens', too. As recent chief executive officer (CEO) Dan Jorndt wrote to his minions, "Don't be afraid to bite off more than you can chew: You'll be amazed how big your mouth can get."¹⁴ It's no accident that Walgreens has drawn its trademark resilience, grit, and understated confidence from the city that gave it birth.

In addition to possessing more than a little moxie, Chicago had all the raw materials it needed to fuel a roaring renaissance after the Great Fire, including Lake Michigan's endless supply of fresh water to the east, Wisconsin's vast acres of lumber to the north, the Midwest's fertile fields to the west and south, and the all-important shipping channels running through it. By the time a young architect named Louis Sullivan took the train from Philadelphia to Chicago in 1873, his new city was home to the largest livestock, lumber, and grain markets in the world, with the biggest rail system to distribute all of it around the country. As Sullivan noticed, *biggest* was the most popular word in the Chicago lexicon. "I thought it all magnificent and wild," Sullivan said of Chicago at the end of the nineteenth century. "A crude extravaganza; an intoxicating rawness."¹⁵

"No large city," Miller wrote, "not even Peter the Great's St. Petersburg,

had grown so fast, and nowhere else could be found such a combination of wealth and squalor, beauty and ugliness, corruption and reform.”¹⁶

Chicago’s population skyrocketed from a mere 150 pioneers in 1833 to over a million people in 1890, vaulting it past Philadelphia as the second-biggest U.S. city. These people all had to live somewhere, of course; and with property values soaring, architects like Sullivan and company decided the only solution was to build higher.

To do so, however, Chicago’s new generation of architects had to figure out ways to build on the region’s notoriously squishy soil and to get people to the top floors comfortably. They solved the first problem by creating their own artificial bedrock—a new technique—and the second by soliciting the help of Elisha Graves Otis. Contrary to popular belief, Otis did not invent the elevator—it had already been around for some time when Chicago started building skyward. But he invented something just as important: the mechanism for halting an elevator in free fall, without which no architect would have dared to build higher. Because the new tall building transcended existing terminology, Chicagoans invented a new word for it: *skyscraper*. The ground floors of skyscrapers would soon become Walgreens’ preferred location for most of its early corner stores.

Less than two decades after the Great Fire wiped out a third of Chicago, wrote Erik Larson in *The Devil in the White City*, “They had not merely restored it; they had turned it into the nation’s leader in commerce, manufacturing, and architecture.” But, he added, “all the city’s wealth . . . had failed to shake the widespread perception that Chicago was a secondary city that preferred butchered hogs to Beethoven.”¹⁷

Like most perceptions, this one existed for a reason: It was true. Even the soaring skyscrapers could not cover the coarse character of the frontier town still bustling on the ground below. Near the end of the nineteenth century, fully one-fifth of Chicago’s population depended on the stockyards, either directly or indirectly, for economic survival. John B. Sherman’s monolithic Union Stockyards alone employed 25,000 workers, who slaughtered some 14 million animals a year. (The horrific working conditions and revolting practices of the stockyards were unforgettably

recorded in Upton Sinclair's classic *The Jungle* in 1906. When Sinclair arrived in Chicago to begin his seven-week study of the stockyards, which he called "rivers of death," he was first struck by the city's "elemental odor, raw and crude; it was rich, almost rancid, sensual and strong."¹⁸ While the novel ultimately did little to forward Sinclair's socialist theories, it did prompt President Theodore Roosevelt to create the Food and Drug Administration [FDA], which, among other things, governs the conduct of the pharmaceuticals to this day.)

The stockyards added immeasurably to the misery of Chicago—the smell often wafted across the entire city—but they were far from the only source of unpleasantness. The city burned so much coal that, during winter days, visibility extended just one block. The noise from trolleys, trains, and carriages made leaving windows open during the stultifying summers impossible. Even if the streets were silent, keeping your windows closed would have probably been advisable anyway, just to protect your nose from the pungent smells of open trash, horse manure, and fetid animal corpses rotting on the streets and in the river. It is not surprising that in 1885 one-tenth of the city—about 80,000 people then—died from an outbreak of cholera and typhoid from fouled water. (You can appreciate why so many residents sought succor from their local druggist, the most trusted man on their block, then and now.)

And there was more. Larson wrote:

Anonymous death came early and often. Each of the thousand trains that entered and left the city did so at grade level. You could step from a curb and be killed by the Chicago Limited. Every day on average two people were destroyed at the city's rail crossings. Their injuries were grotesque. Pedestrians retrieved severed heads. There were other hazards. Streetcars fell from drawbridges. Horses bolted and dragged carriages into crowds. Fires took a dozen lives a day. In describing the fire dead, the term the papers most liked to use was "roasted." There was diphtheria, typhus, cholera, influenza. And there was murder. [By the 1890s] the rate at which men and women

killed one another rose sharply throughout the nation but especially in Chicago, where police found themselves without the manpower or expertise to manage the volume. In the first six months of 1892 the city experienced nearly eight hundred violent deaths. Four a day. Most were prosaic, arising from robbery, argument or sexual jealousy. Men shot women, women shot men, and children shot one another by accident.”¹⁹

French editor Octave Uzanne called it, “that Gordian city, so excessive, so satanic.” Rudyard Kipling went one better. “Having seen it, I desire never to see it again,” he said in 1890. “It is inhabited by savages.”²⁰

Chicago was desperate to change its reputation, both in the United States and overseas. The way to do so, it believed, was not by improving inch by inch, but by taking a gigantic leap forward. All agreed that topping Paris, with the world watching, would do the trick. But first, the city of smelly stockyards had to beat out both New York and Washington, D.C., for the bid for the Exposition. If Chicago could win Congress’s eighth ballot, cast on February 24, 1890, it “would dispel at last the Eastern perception that Chicago was nothing more than a greedy, hog-slaughtering backwater; failure would bring humiliation from which the city would not soon recover; given how heartily its leading men had boasted that Chicago would prevail. It was this big talk, not the persistent southwesterly breeze, that had prompted New York editor Charles Anderson Dana to nickname Chicago ‘the Windy City.’”²¹

When a *Tribune* employee posted the final results of the vote, the waiting crowd erupted in joy, literally dancing in the streets; and the city leaders got to work. “Make no little plans,” the legendary architect Daniel Burnham wrote, in a statement that could serve as Walgreens’ official motto. “They have no magic to stir men’s blood.”²²

In little more than two years, Burnham’s band of architects, builders, and organizers created a gorgeous square-mile park from swamp land and erected some 200 buildings on it. The biggest of them, the Manufacturers and Liberal Arts Building, was big enough to house the U.S. Capitol, the

Great Pyramid, Winchester Cathedral, Madison Square Garden, and St. Paul's Cathedral, all at the same time.

The structure that drew the most attention, however, was a colossal contraption created by a young man named George Ferris. The Ferris Wheel became the fair's emblem, "a machine so huge and terrifying," Larson wrote, "that it instantly eclipsed the tower of Alexander Eiffel that had so wounded America's pride."²³ Chicago's Fair also introduced Cracker Jack, Shredded Wheat, and the Pledge of Allegiance (which, as an aside, did not have the words "under God"; they were added in 1954). Of longer-lasting value to the city of Chicago, however, was the use of safe electricity and clean drinking water that the Exposition brought about.

As *Newsweek's* Malcolm Jones said, the Chicago Exposition represented "America's chance to prove that, technologically and culturally, it could sit at the grown-ups' table. The fair's directors gambled everything. And they won, seducing the world with the architecture of Louis Sullivan and the technology of Edison."²⁴

"There is in the life of any great city a moment when it reaches its maximum potential as a center of power and culture and becomes fully conscious of its special place in history," Miller wrote. "For Chicago that moment was 1893."²⁵

The fair's guests included Susan B. Anthony, Archduke Ferdinand, Jane Addams, George Westinghouse, Clarence Darrow, Philip Armour, and Marshall Field. They were joined by 27.5 million others, almost half the entire U.S. population in 1890, including two people who were utterly unknown at the time but who would rank among the city's most prominent figures when the World's Fair returned to Chicago in 1933: Charles Walgreen Sr. and Myrtle Norton.

the state of the profession

Another visitor to the World's Columbian Exposition, a man who went by the name of Dr. Holmes, set up a pharmacy just a few blocks from the

grand event—and not far from the drugstore where Walgreen started working. Dr. Holmes made national headlines two years later when police discovered he had murdered dozens of unsuspecting young women (and a few children) in his specially designed killing chambers located in the basement of his store. Erik Larson turned the horrifying story of Dr. Holmes into a 2002 best seller, *The Devil in the White City*.

While Dr. Holmes's criminal record isn't important for our purposes here, his well-documented dual careers in medicine and pharmacy go a long way toward demonstrating just how rudimentary those fields were when Charles Walgreen Sr. entered the pharmacy profession. Holmes also serves as the perfect foil to Walgreen, the duo representing the two faces of the field as practiced a hundred years ago.

To understand how Walgreens changed the way drugstores operate in our country forever—by providing uncommonly honest advice and efficient service; by finding new ways to educate customers; by insisting on raising the professional standards of the pharmacy profession and, especially, those of its own pharmacists; and by working in close cooperation with doctors instead of at odds with them—you have to understand the environment in which the chain was born, and grew.

Like medicine, pharmacy had a checkered past until the twentieth century, when both disciplines emerged from the shadows of superstition and charlatanism to the clear light of rigorous scientific research and objective professional standards.

People have been mixing concoctions and finding herbal remedies to cure what ails them since the beginning of time, but most historians credit Babylon with the birth of an organized apothecary.²⁶ The ancient Roman Galen (A.D. 131–201) “created a system of pathology and therapy that ruled western medicine for 1,500 years,” according to Edward Kremers and George Urdang's authoritative *History of Pharmacy*, in explaining why his reputation endures to this day.²⁷

The art of pharmacy remained a sketchy matter for centuries, especially as practiced by witch doctors, priest-kings, and alchemists; but bit by bit, societies saw the need for a more structured approach and acted accord-

ingly. As the Dark Ages began to give way to the Renaissance, public pharmacies and universities started spreading across Europe, a movement capped by German Emperor Frederick II's proclamation, delivered about 1240, "that was to be the Magna Carta of the profession of pharmacy," Kremers and Urdang wrote. In it, Frederick established three tenets of pharmacy practice that remain pillars of the field to this day: (1) "the separation of the pharmaceutical profession from the medical profession" (Walgreens would forever rearrange this historically dicey relationship for the good of all health care practitioners after World War II); (2) "official supervision of pharmaceutical practice" (something for which Charles Walgreen Jr. successfully fought during his tenure at the company's helm); and (3) "obligation by oath to prepare drugs reliably, according to skilled art, and in a uniform, suitable quality." In other words, Frederick II sought to replace the sloppy, slapdash work of unregulated locals with the measured, consistent practice of a professional class of pharmacists.²⁸

The Age of Enlightenment may have transformed mathematics, physics, and astronomy, among other sciences; but it was slow to improve medicine and pharmacy. Through Colonial times, anyone could call himself or herself a pharmacist and practice pharmacy in any manner he or she saw fit. In much the same way that blacksmiths often doubled as dentists in preindustrial days, printers often doubled as pharmacists. As odd as it might seem today, their extra downtown floor space lent itself to selling sundries, and printers had the ability to advertise their myriad goods. Ben Franklin was a pharmacist, selling "commodities varied from needles and pins to horses and slaves," plus patent medicines and Seneca snake root, "with directions how to use it in pleurisy," as he advertised in his own *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1730.²⁹

While convenient, this jack-of-all-trades approach to pharmacy did nothing to enhance the standing of druggists nor to improve the quality of the care they provided. The inherent conflict between pharmacists and doctors was stirred anew when a famous pharmacist named John Morgan gave the keynote speech to inaugurate the medical school at the College of Philadelphia, which Franklin attended. "We must regret," Morgan

stated, “that the very different employment of physician, surgeon, and apothecary should be promiscuously followed by one man: they certainly require different talents.”³⁰

The nineteenth century proved to be the beginning of a new age for the health sciences. In 1820, a physician named Lyman Spalding spearheaded the production of the first *American Pharmacopoeia*—the invaluable reference that listed all known drugs and how to prepare them.³¹ The professionalization of pharmacy accelerated after the Civil War, when pharmaceutical boards, associations, and university programs sprung up all over the eastern half of the continent. Even in their embryonic states, these governing bodies proved helpful in establishing professional standards, forwarding the cause of pharmacy education, and working to keep some of the seedier elements out of the field—including addictive drugs like opiates and narcotics, which were not illegal or even regulated until the twentieth century. A committee of the recently formed American Pharmaceutical Association (APA) concluded, in 1901, that the data they had gathered on addictive drugs and their users was “appalling.” The APA used its influence to help pass the Harrison Narcotic Act of 1914, intended to “bring the opium and coca traffic and addiction problems under control.”³²

Despite the profession’s tangible progress, by the end of the nineteenth century, the “drug business” still presented more questions than answers about the remedies it offered and still had plenty of room for snake oil salesmen, too. A photo taken sometime in the 1890s featured in Urdang’s comprehensive history depicts the popular “Dr. Matthews Medicine Show” as it appeared during a tour of Wisconsin, a sort of “medical midway” that consisted of white canvas tents on the perimeter of the grounds, rows of benches in the middle, acrobats and musicians to attract a crowd, a chest of prepackaged medicines, and a speiler in top hat, presumably the good “Dr. Matthews” himself, on a stage, preparing to make his pitch. The photo caption of “Dr. Matthew’s Medicine Show,” read “Drug shops or stores did not have to be much more than a permanent habitation for such itinerant quackery until, through a publicly defined level of education and

responsibility, a class of 'pharmacists' was created that could be expected to protect the public against it."³³

Even the term "patent medicine" was something of a dodge, as the creators did not patent the *medicine* or its ingredients—which would have revealed how cheap and dangerous the contents often were, not to mention easily copied—but the formula's *name*, since the key to success was marketing, not medicine.³⁴

As a result a true "class of pharmacists" was slow to develop. When both Dr. Holmes and Charles Walgreen Sr. arrived in Chicago, neither the government nor the profession asked much of anyone claiming to be a pharmacist. A brief examination of Dr. Holmes's professional life shows us much about the state of medicine and pharmacy when Walgreen moved to Chicago.

Dr. Holmes was born Herman Mudgett and was raised in New England. (For clarity, he is referred to here only as Dr. Holmes.) He attended the University of Vermont medical school. When Holmes entered medical school, the field was abuzz with the recent discovery of germs and how they functioned. Many had even begun to believe it was a good practice for the surgeon to wash his hands before amputating a patient's leg.

As Erik Larson wrote in *The Devil in the White City*, "In those days a doctor's office could indeed be a fearsome place. All doctors were, in a sense, amateurs. The best of them bought cadavers for study. They paid cash, no questions asked, and preserved particularly interesting bits of diseased viscera in large clear bottles. Skeletons hung in offices for easy anatomical reference." This apparently helped the practitioners to remember that the shinbone is connected to the thighbone.³⁵

Dr. Holmes decided Vermont was too small a school, however; so after one year there he transferred to the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, which could boast "one of the West's leading scientific medical schools," Larson wrote, "noted for its emphasis on the controversial art of dissection."³⁶ It was also home to the nation's first college of pharmacy, opened in 1868 by Dr. Albert Prescott, who had just finished his tour of duty as a military surgeon in the Civil War. Originally organized under

the Literary Department, the college of pharmacy grew out of the medical school and earned both respect and criticism because Dr. Prescott stressed scientific understanding over the more practical vocational approach offered elsewhere, eschewing the need for an apprenticeship as a prerequisite for graduation.³⁷

Michigan's college of pharmacy would graduate Charles Sr.'s son Chuck in 1928 and grandson Cork in 1959 and today features a wing donated by Walgreens. Charles's great-grandson Kevin, today a vice president for the company, also graduated from Michigan. The scientific rigor of Michigan's college of pharmacy would make its mark on the Walgreens and, through them, the entire industry in the years to come.

The shadowy nature of nineteenth-century medical education, however, cannot be ignored—especially as it impacted the field Charles Walgreen Sr. was poised to enter. On Monday, October 11, 1993, a backhoe had just begun excavating the foundation for the University of Michigan's new physics building. As it dug near the foundation of the decades-old West Engineering Building on Michigan's central campus, an odor suddenly arose, one so acrid that everyone nearby turned to cover their noses. Seconds later, the scoop brought up a fragment of a human skull.

What the construction crew had inadvertently discovered was a secret burial ground for cadavers—cadavers illegally obtained and disposed of—and with it, a glimpse into the unsophisticated and unregulated early years of medical education.

Michigan was ahead of most colleges, actually, when it started its own medical school in 1850. It did so simply by co-opting a three-man instructional outfit already up and running in town. Michigan was, indeed, noted for its emphasis on the controversial art of dissection.

One reason it was so controversial was the State of Michigan's ban on the two main methods for obtaining cadavers: buying them or stealing them. Michigan did the only thing it could do to fulfill its annual need for one hundred dead bodies: It broke the law. The "demonstrator of anatomy" authorized his agents to pay \$30 to \$40 per cadaver—enough to

cover a third to a half of a medical school student's expenses. Anyone who has witnessed contemporary college students hauling bags of sticky, smelly beer bottles back to the party store on a hot Sunday morning for the 10-cent bounty each container represents can guess what happened next: The students got into the business of procuring cadavers, packing them in barrels labeled "fresh paint" or "pickles," and disposing of them when they were finished. This dirty little secret apparently wasn't much of a secret at all by the 1870s, when a piece in the yearbook defined "medic" as someone who "preys on both the quick and the dead," "never whistles when 'going through' a graveyard at night," and "is never happier than when he findeth a fellow-man 'in a pickle.'"³⁸

In addition to the ethical questions that such practices should have raised, the medical ones were probably more serious—if less understood. In the cramped medical building, "patients and cadavers . . . co-mingled in the disease-ridden atmosphere," the *Ann Arbor Observer* reported. "The same lecture room and table used for dissections during the week were used for clinical demonstrations of living patients on Saturday mornings."³⁹

The university would not open its new (and newly legalized) Anatomical Laboratory until 1887—three years after Holmes graduated. Given his future deviance, it's not hard to imagine him playing an active role in the bustling cadaver trade during his time at Michigan.

Holmes enrolled at Michigan's school of medicine on September 21, 1882, and impressed his professors as "a scamp"; but he graduated on time, just 21 months after he enrolled, as a Doctor of Medicine. In June 1884, he set out to find some favorable location in which to launch a practice, but he found it harder than expected.

With apparently little or no reservations, Dr. Holmes decided to leave the practice of medicine for pharmacology. What would seem a very strange move today made a lot more sense a century ago. Medicine, at best, was an unstructured, undisciplined field, which relied more on aggressive (and often disastrous) guesswork than on science.

Many doctors killed as many patients as they cured. In his history of the

Coca-Cola company, *For God, Country and Coca-Cola*, Mark Pendergrast describes the state of the profession during the Gilded Age, when Coca-Cola's creator, Dr. John Pemberton, was practicing pharmacy in Atlanta. "Cheap nostrums sometimes provided a safer alternative. Furthermore, there were few doctors in rural areas, forcing the country folk to use patent medicine . . . which were often taken to relieve the symptoms of overeating and poor diet, which went hand-in-hand in that period."⁴⁰

And although pharmacology certainly attracted more than its share of charlatans a century ago—including Dr. Holmes—pharmacists more frequently offered the kind of practical, proven advice that doctors could not. For starters, the practice of pharmacy had been around much longer than the practice of medicine, insofar as the world's first "doctors" were really herbologists and chemists, not surgeons. Pharmacy was more structured and regulated, and there were many more pharmacists than doctors.

After Dr. Holmes bounced around pharmacies in Minneapolis and up-state New York, he settled in Chicago, a town that already had 1,500 pharmacies licensed under the state's new licensing system. Pharmacies seemed to pop up on each street corner the way gourmet coffee shops do today. Reading the various histories of Chicago of the era, it's tempting to conclude that everyone and his cousin were in the pharmacy field, including Daniel Burnham's father, who ran a successful wholesale drug business, and at one point Burnham himself, who started out his professional life not as a promising architect but as a failed druggist.

By the late 1880s, Dr. Holmes was running one of those 1,500 Chicago pharmacies. In fact, it was the visibility and the aura of professional respect that his new pharmacy lent him that allowed Dr. Holmes to lure attractive young women to enter his store, conveniently located a few blocks from the Exposition on Chicago's South Side, as both customers and clerks. To raise extra money, Dr. Holmes also started a mail-order medicine company. "In a parody of Aaron Montgomery Ward's fast-growing empire in central Chicago," Larson wrote, "Holmes had begun selling sham drugs that he guaranteed would cure alcoholism and baldness," the latest crazes.⁴¹

Like Holmes, Walgreen was also lured to the City of Big Shoulders during the Columbian Exposition and to the field of pharmacy. His approach to the profession would be as noble as his competitors' was shameless.

walgreen does chicago

If Holmes represented the darkest possible sides of pharmacology—from his spurious salesmanship, to his exploitation of the intimacy his position offered, to the ultimate betrayal of a professional's trust—Walgreen represented all that people admired about pharmacists: He was a knowledgeable, empathetic, and, most important, honest professional. But it must be said that, like Holmes (and many other young pharmacists, undoubtedly), Walgreen initially showed little passion for hard work, for following orders, or even for pharmacology itself, for that matter.

On that cold Saturday morning in the winter of 1893, when Walgreen took a small bag and the \$20 his sister gave him and hopped on the train headed from Dixon to Chicago, he studied the *Tribune* classified section en route. By the time he got off the train, he already had a job opening targeted, just a few blocks from the station. He walked into Samuel Rosenfeld's drugstore at Quincy and Wells, not far from a block-long Marshall Field's store, and walked out with a clerking job that paid a healthy \$5 a week.

Walgreen decided to celebrate his sudden success by spending the weekend shooting pool with some old buddies from Dixon who had moved to town, burning through the remainder of his \$20. And that was the problem. When he walked through the door of the drugstore that Monday morning for his first day of work, he had to ask his new employer for an advance just to eat that night and get a room at a transient hotel nearby.

"The experience must have made an impression on him," Myrtle wrote, "because after I knew him he certainly kept his books balanced; and I never remember a single time that he took on anything, either in

the line of business or pleasure, that he didn't know ahead of time he could pay for."⁴²

But Walgreen's sense of responsibility wouldn't emerge for a few years. Like most of Walgreen's jobs, that one didn't last long. Despite economic tremors like The Panic of 1893—which forced 192 railroads to fail, including such legendary lines as the Northern Pacific, the Union Pacific, and the Santa Fe—Walgreen never seemed to have any trouble finding a new job in the drugstore business whenever he needed one. With 1,500 drugstores in town, it seems they needed him more than he needed them.

None of Walgreen's stints lasted more than a couple years, and most much less, including tours of duty in a handful of stores on Chicago's North Side. One shop owner there, Max Grieben, liked Walgreen's Aryan looks "and soft-spoken manner but told him he would have to learn German," which he did.⁴³

But after leaving yet another job, Walgreen realized he was squandering his future in piecemeal fashion, with no focus or ambition to direct his search. Sensing that he needed to do something dramatic to wake himself up, he looked over the Chicago River one night, pulled out the remaining pennies in his pocket, and threw them into the water to force him to "cease his dawdling," as Myrtle recalled him telling her.⁴⁴

Walgreen struck out this time for the South Side, which seemed to suit him better. Since the neighborhoods there were still booming with post-Exposition transplants, "he felt the South Side held the greatest possibilities for the future," Myrtle wrote. "He kept looking for a drugstore where he would feel as if he belonged."⁴⁵

When charting Walgreen's peripatetic journey through Chicago's drugstores, you get the impression that the young man stuck with pharmacy not because he had a great passion for it but because it was convenient. It was simple work for him and an easy field in which to find a new job whenever he got the itch. In hindsight, however, Walgreen's "drifting" served him very well. Instead of glomming on to one mentor in one store in one neighborhood for his entire apprenticeship, Walgreen's clerking career exposed him to many methods of running a drugstore, not to mention the

myriad neighborhoods into which he would soon be expanding after he started his own chain. When the time came for him to run his own empire, the lessons learned in these early years would give him a great advantage over his competition.

In 1896, Walgreen eventually settled at William G. Valentine's drugstore on Cottage Grove Avenue and 39th Street. The site was ideally located on the first floor of the Thacker Building, one of hundreds of city structures finished right before the fair, with cable cars stopping on both streets of the intersection. Thanks to his years as a drugstore journeyman, Walgreen's knowledge and skills had improved, earning him a decent \$35 a month. Valentine, however, was in the habit of criticizing him for the smallest infractions, which didn't sit well with the young man who was now putting in almost 80 hours a week and living with two roommates over the store in a bedbug-infested apartment. (It's a testament to living conditions in nineteenth-century Chicago that a four-year-old building could already be infested with bed bugs.) He'd had enough.

While trying to decide just what to do—and having grown weary of bouncing from job to job—Walgreen liked to take his mind off his problems by going to the ballpark and the racetrack with his roommates. One afternoon at the horses, he hauled in some \$70, twice his monthly salary, and was so giddy he played hooky the next day by telling Mr. Valentine he had a “pressing appointment.” He then returned to the track and proceeded to lose all his winnings from the previous day, and then some. A few more trips like that cured Walgreen of betting what he couldn't afford to lose; but for a man with such conservative instincts, his gambler's nerves would prove a great asset when he started his own business.

Seeing no way out of his predicament, Walgreen concluded he had little choice but to quit, yet again. But before he walked out the door once more, a bit of long-dormant pride kicked in, and he decided to reform. Not for its own virtue, mind you. He wanted to become a model employee just long enough to make Valentine regret his leaving.

Walgreen's plan worked—maybe too well. Valentine was so impressed by the suddenly invigorated Walgreen's efforts that he bumped his

monthly salary from \$35 to \$45, and then again a little while later to \$55—pretty good money for a drugstore clerk.

Valentine also began mentoring the young man in earnest, urging him to study the pharmacology bibles—the *U.S. Pharmacopoeia*, the *National Formulary*, and *Remington's*. Walgreen probably surprised both Valentine and himself by taking the bait, poring over those dense tomes well enough to pass the Illinois State Board of Pharmacy examination in 1897 and become a registered pharmacist. This meant that for the first time in his life, Walgreen was free to own and operate his own store, if he ever had the urge and the opportunity.

to live and almost die in cuba

Whatever aspirations Walgreen might have harbored at the time were interrupted in February 1898 when the USS *Maine* exploded in Havana Harbor. To this day, no one knows how or why the ship blew up, but that didn't stop the United States from declaring war on Spain on April 25, 1898. Walgreen signed up with the Illinois National Guard the next day, happily informing Mr. Valentine that he was "giving up the drug business for the army so he would have shorter hours and could sleep later in the morning," Myrtle recalled.⁴⁶ It didn't quite work out that way, of course.

Walgreen might have been a bit apathetic about the daily grind, but he was a passionate patriot, "convinced that a man should contribute to his country's well-being in every way he could," Myrtle wrote.⁴⁷ When Walgreen's company commander asked him to take a day trip across the island of Cuba to map enemy positions, Walgreen hopped right to it. What might have been a tedious task turned into a breezy exercise when he came across an officer in another unit who had already created detailed maps of the Spanish forces and invited Walgreen to copy them.

So, while Teddy Roosevelt was leading the Rough Riders up San Juan Hill, Walgreen calmly traced his new friend's maps and then spent the afternoon swapping stories and smoking fresh Cuban cigars—all to make

sure he killed enough time to make his final results seem plausible. When Walgreen returned to his camp that evening, he was received by his commanding officer as a hero for producing such great maps. It would not be the last time Walgreen would demonstrate the fine art of working smarter, instead of harder—one of his trademarks.

There's an old saw that young generals focus on combat strategy, whereas older ones stress logistics. Walgreen was a whiz at logistics, from an early age. The Army wisely recognized this and put Walgreen to use in the dispensary of the Sibony Hospital. Every bed and hallway was filled with dying men—not from Spanish bullets but from microscopic enemies. The three-month war claimed 5,462 American lives, but only 379 from battle-related wounds. The rest died from malaria, typhoid, and yellow fever, which ran rampant on the tropical island.

Due to doctors' rudimentary knowledge of diseases at the time (they were only beginning to suspect that mosquitoes were the source of yellow fever), their practices frequently resulted in spreading diseases instead of containing them. The medics themselves often came down with one of the deadly bugs, including Walgreen, who contracted yellow fever and malaria simultaneously. He fell into a coma, "so far gone," Myrtle recalled the understated Walgreen telling her, "that the doctors held no hope for his living through the night. He knew this was the verdict, but it seemed like a fact about someone else."⁴⁸

Paul Harvey, the legendary radio talk show storyteller, picked up the narrative from there in one of his classic "The Rest of the Story" segments in 1996. "Charlie was dying. . . . One of the physicians took Charlie's pulse, shook his head. 'Good as dead,' he said. Charlie's name was entered on the casualty list. It would appear in the next day's newspapers as yet another fever victim.

"It was just at that moment that Charlie felt free. It was as though he were poised at a corner of the ceiling, looking down at his own apparently lifeless body, looking down at the doctors and nurses, watching everything they did, hearing everything they said. But then he was overcome by an inexplicable awareness that if he did not return to that ravaged body, it

would be as though he had failed some sort of an examination. He heaved a sigh. One of the doctors jumped, actually frightened, then called to his colleagues, ‘He’s still alive!’”⁴⁹

Myrtle recalled her future husband telling her that when he was in the coma, “he knew there were things he also wanted terribly to learn. Whatever he glimpsed brought him back. . . . When he was able to talk, he related every move that had been made in that long room while he was supposedly unconscious. After that experience, he knew that immortality was not just a theory and that the soul was not bound to the life of the body.”⁵⁰

Too much can be made of these experiences, but Walgreen was an extraordinarily objective man, not given to exaggeration. There is no doubt this experience made quite an impact on him, allowing him to discard his fear of the future and imbuing him with the urgency to do something special before his time was done.

walgreen returns

Walgreen came home in November 1898, with an \$8-a-month medical pension, some lingering symptoms of his illness, and the strong desire to downshift from Valentine’s busy store. He walked three blocks south on Cottage Grove to the Bowen Avenue intersection, through the doors of a store on the first floor of the Barrett Hotel—which had been built for the Exposition in 1892—and asked the owner there, Isaac W. Blood, if he needed an experienced worker. Good help was still hard to find, so Valentine happily hired the 25-year-old veteran.

It wasn’t much of a store, even by the standards of 1898: just 20 feet by 50 feet, much smaller than Valentine’s. Mr. Blood’s store was dank and dingy, lit by dangerous and shadowy gaslights, with narrow aisles and cracked and dirty tile floors. “The general atmosphere was uninviting,” Herman and Rick Kogan wrote, a sentence that presents a simple contrast to the very effect Walgreen would always seek to achieve.⁵¹

The products on the shelves were of uneven quality, and Walgreen himself could honestly not vouch for all of them. This was the store where Walgreen worked, an almost perfect example of what pharmacy was like at the time, for better or for worse. But it didn't have much to do with the store Walgreen would create. That would be something altogether different. What probably looked like a step backward at the time would prove to be one of Walgreen's smartest career moves.

Bit by bit, Walgreen was getting the feel for what it would be like to actually own and operate a store, taking on larger responsibilities at each stop. Before Isaac Blood went on vacation, he asked Walgreen to sell his (Blood's) second, smaller store if he could. When two men offered \$1,250 for the shop, Walgreen knew Blood would accept the offer. But Walgreen was a shrewder negotiator than his boss and told the men that the offer was too low. They called Walgreen's bluff, asking him to wire his boss their offer in the belief that Blood would happily sell at that price.

Walgreen believed they were right, so he outfoxed them again. He wired Blood their offer but added a kicker the buyers never saw: "If you want to sell store for \$1,250, wire [back that] you won't take a cent less than \$1,500." Blood did as his underling instructed; and sure enough, the buyers blinked first. Blood sold his unwanted second store for \$1,500—20 percent more than what he had asked. Despite Walgreen's key role in the transaction, Isaac Blood didn't give him a cent for his help.

By this point, Walgreen had seen enough pharmacists to know what worked and what didn't. He now believed he could do it as well or better than most, and he was certain he'd much rather work for himself than for someone else. But when he approached Mr. Blood about buying the Cottage Grove store, Blood replied that he wouldn't take a cent less than \$4,000. Obviously, Blood had learned Walgreen's lessons on negotiations too well, presenting Walgreen a seemingly impossible standard to reach.

As always, Walgreen saved his best efforts for any achievement that might grant him more independence. The only way he could ever pay off such a steep loan, he figured, would be to make the store more profitable

so he'd be able to make his monthly payments from the proceeds once he took over.

Once again, Walgreen's strategy worked too well. As Walgreen's extra efforts began to produce extra revenue, Blood realized the store had more potential than he had at first thought. In 1901, when Walgreen's tireless efforts raised just enough capital to buy the store, Blood informed him the price had just gone up to \$6,000—50 percent more than it was when Walgreen asked just two years earlier. Walgreen was floored, but he became even more determined to see it through.

Paradoxically, Blood's hard-to-get strategy might have been just the thing to stir Walgreen to commit fully to becoming a drugstore owner. He decided to drain his life savings; borrow an additional \$2,000 from his father, who had been doing well in the growing Dixon real estate market; and signed a note for the remainder. The name "Blood-Walgreen" would appear in the directory until he had paid off the loan.

Walgreen was in deep—he knew he would not be getting out of debt any time soon. But by buying the modest store at 4134 Cottage Grove Avenue, he had something he valued more than anything, something he'd never had before: his independence. He had become his own boss and was finally in business for himself. The neat, gold-lettered sign above the door said it all: "C. R. Walgreen, R.Ph."

Thus, 2 years before the Wright Brothers launched their biplane at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Henry Ford started his automobile company, and the National League played the upstart American League in the first World's Championship Series; 4 years before Albert Einstein formulated the theory of relativity; 5 years before Willis Carrier invented air-conditioning; 6 years before Leo Hendrik Baekeland invented plastic; 51 years before Sam Walton opened his first Wal-Mart; 54 years before Ray Kroc opened his first McDonald's; and 61 years before Sebastian S. Kresge opened his first Kmart—before all these events, Charles R. Walgreen Sr. opened his first pharmacy.

No, Walgreen's first store didn't provide customers self-service, drive-thru photo processing, or the Intercom computer system. He couldn't offer

his two employees pension plans or profit sharing—just long hours for an honest wage and a pat on the back. And the store itself was small enough to fit comfortably inside the cosmetics section of a modern Walgreens. But that first store was definitely a Walgreens. And a contemporary customer would have no difficulty recognizing or appreciating what Charles Walgreen was offering, including immaculate floors and crystal clear glass counters; straight, honest advice delivered in the customer's best interest; and unequalled customer service, the kind that brings customers back, again and again—whether it's 1901 or 2004.

the most important merger

It used to be said that behind every great man you'll find a great woman. Myrtle Walgreen was in many ways a traditional wife, with little ego to speak of; but no one who knew her would ever say she merely stood behind her husband. Without her support, Walgreen himself would not have dared to be so ambitious; and without her direct contributions—including baking the pies and making the soups and sandwiches that opened the food service division and fueled the chain's early expansion—the Walgreens chain never would have become the business empire it is today.

"The first key to our success," said former CEO Dan Jorndt, "was Mr. Walgreen Sr. hitching up with Myrtle. It's amazing what a team they were. Everyone says he was successful; but really, it's that *they* were successful. She was a Rock of Gibraltar and backed him up any way she could. He never had to check to see if she was with him, and vice versa."⁵² Myrtle was her husband's equal, and no one knew this better than Walgreen himself.

It makes sense that the two got along so well from the start, given their similar backgrounds. Both were raised on Illinois farms by no-nonsense parents who nonetheless weren't afraid to roll the dice and very much valued having fun. Myrtle wrote of her husband, "He had a happy home, too, just as I did."⁵³

She was born Myrtle Norton on July 5, 1879, to a resilient mother and

a hard-working father. When her mother, Nellie, knew she was soon to give birth to Myrtle, she gathered her belongings, plus some fresh flowers, preserves, and handmade aprons for gifts, and traveled by horse-drawn wagon to stay with her mother 40 miles away in Carbondale—then came right home as soon as she could to tend to her husband and farm. “That was mid-America in the late 1870s,” Myrtle wrote, “good neighbors, hospitality, but stand on your own feet.”⁵⁴

Her mother certainly embodied those traits and did so with flair. “Baking was an art at which no one excelled my mother. . . . Things always hummed when she was around.”⁵⁵

Although they were a quintessential farm family, the Nortons had more than a little history and culture. Myrtle’s great-great-grandfather Ichabod Norton was killed by the British for making bullets for the Revolutionary army. Her grandfather Kennedy fought nobly in the Civil War, and her aunts included a professional artist, a piano teacher, and a University of Chicago alum. This might not seem like anything out of the ordinary today; but in the era of Stanley and Livingstone, the Boer War, and the assassination of President Garfield—a half century before the “Walton” years—such a refined background for a rural family was most uncommon.

Myrtle’s favorite memories, however, were simple ones of family life. “In my childhood we had a good time at home,” she wrote. Her father played the violin and would serenade her mother with an eponymous tune, “My Gal Nell.” “Papa’s pride of mother was very forthright,” she said in her book. “What a wonderful atmosphere for a child to grow up in. . . . He always said that the day my mother brought home a daughter was the first time it ever struck him that when a man had a wife, a son, a daughter, and a farm there wasn’t much left to wish for.”⁵⁶

It is not difficult when you read Myrtle’s descriptions of the virtues her parents stressed to see how those morals were passed on to her son Chuck and to subsequent generations of Walgreens, providing the timeless basic values on which the entire company is based to this day.

Her father, Myrtle wrote, “took his responsibilities as trusts, and he had a keen sense of honor about obligations. He made us feel that if we took

on a job of any kind, it was our duty to do it in the best possible way, no matter how tired of it we might become. It is still almost impossible for me to leave any task unfinished, even though I may wish I had never begun.”⁵⁷

When Myrtle was four, the family moved to Chester in Southern Illinois so her father could get a more stable job as a guard in the state penitentiary, overlooking the Mississippi. “A big [jail] break was frustrated by father’s men who refused to join in because he had been so square with them,” she wrote late in her 84-year-long life. “The pride I felt when people spoke about the way Papa’s men saved the day has stayed with me.”⁵⁸

Unfortunately, it was also the prison that gave Myrtle her most painful memory, too, that of her father dying of “lung fever,” brought on by the fine dust from the quarries he guarded while the prisoners crushed rock. He was only 38, his young daughter just 7.

Through Nellie’s strength and warmth, however, the family stuck together. The Nortons retained their sense of fun and adventure, too. “By August, attendance [at the 1893 Chicago Exposition] was averaging two hundred thousand a month,” Myrtle recalled. “Down in our part of the state farmers were mortgaging their farms, teachers taking out their savings, merchants borrowing on their inventories, and some bankers even foreclosing mortgages in order to have the money to ‘take the family to the Fair.’ Mother certainly scraped the bottom of the barrel when she decided that [my brother] Paul and I were to go to Chicago.”⁵⁹

The trio rode on the Ferris Wheel, listened to John Phillip Sousa’s famous band and—most exciting of all—drank ice water. “In those days,” Myrtle explained, “ice was not taken for granted. Mr. Drake, the founder of the Drake Hotel, had honored Columbus by donating a fountain of ice water kept cold by three tons of ice every day. . . . It was a great Fair! What makes a fair great if not the mind stretching of the young and the fun that outlasts the decades.”⁶⁰

After Myrtle graduated from high school in 1898—the same year Walgreen shipped off to Cuba—her brother, Paul, decided he wanted to go to Chicago to become a registered pharmacist. He thought he would be striking out on his own, but Nellie Norton would hear none of it.

"Mother agreed at once. Chicago it would be," Myrtle wrote. "It was years later I realized what an intrepid soul my Mother was. She had many friends in Normal and Bloomington [Illinois]; her life was full, busy, and happy. But she never once spoke of *sending* Paul to school. She was the homemaker as well as the provider, and off we went."⁶¹

Paul enrolled at the Chicago College of Pharmacy, while Myrtle zoomed through her coursework at the Gregg Secretarial School, which allowed students to go as fast as they wanted, once they satisfied the requirements for each level. That's all Myrtle needed to know. She woke up at five each morning to work on the typewriter at home, walked to class, then came home at night to work on her shorthand skills by having Paul read the paper to her aloud. Her single-minded determination would prove essential to Walgreens' early success.

The working world, however, could be a dangerous place for a young woman in Chicago. The environment could be so unsavory for them, in fact, that an officer of the First National Bank felt compelled to run an ad in the help-wanted section of the *Chicago Tribune* to warn female stenographers of "our growing conviction that no thoroughly honorable businessman who is this side of dotage ever advertises for a lady stenographer who is a blonde, is good-looking, is quite alone in the city, or will transmit her photograph. All such advertisements upon their face bear the marks of vulgarity, nor do we regard it safe for any lady to answer such unseemly utterances."⁶²

Miss Norton wasn't in the workforce long before an unscrupulous boss targeted her for such treatment. "Just let me kiss you," he told her one day, after he got her alone in his office. "What's the matter with one kiss?" Myrtle replied resolutely, "If you come an inch nearer, I'll throw this chair through that glass door," and took her boss's momentary pause as her opportunity to escape down the hall. Despite her courage under pressure, when she found her brother Paul, who worked in the same building, she was sobbing, too scared to speak.⁶³ And that marked the end of her stenography career.

About the same time, Myrtle made some changes in her love life, too.

In high school she briefly dated a young man named Earl, the son of (surprise) a pharmacist, of sorts. He was a “dashing fellow who played the banjo,” she wrote, but “his father was known as the medicine man; that is, he went from town to town selling patent medicine. His family had a big fancy wagon which today would be called a trailer. When they let down the back of the wagon and pulled open the curtains they presented the audience with a ready-made stage.” It is not surprising that Myrtle’s upright brother “did not like Earl. . . . Besides, Paul felt that the drugstore was the place to buy medicines.”⁶⁴

Earl didn’t last long, but she did have a “best beau” throughout high school, a popular young man named George. “No party seemed to get under way until George breezed in,” Myrtle wrote. Even after the Nortons moved to Chicago, George kept coming around, all the way from Normal, Illinois. Myrtle, Paul, and Nellie all liked George, but “I was a shade worried when I began to hear that he had been seen with girls who were not the kind we always went around with. Finally certain rumors reached Paul’s ears that George was stepping out a bit too fancily.”⁶⁵

By June 1900, Myrtle had no job or boyfriend, but she seemed content. She was always far more independent than needy in all her relationships, but she was also open to possibilities. “I can’t remember a dull day,” she wrote. “New interests were always popping up and everything I did I went into with my whole heart.”⁶⁶

When Paul, who had become a sales rep for a surgical supply house, went on a Lake Michigan junket paid for by the pharmaceutical companies, she happily went along. The companies gave the guests plenty of promotional trinkets and trash to wear on the boat ride, and as Myrtle said, with disarming directness, “I weighed 165 pounds with 45-inch hips and a generous 38-inch bust; so I must have made one of the larger displays.” Apparently at least one young pharmacist noticed. “That was the day I met Charles Walgreen,” she said. “Later he told me that whenever he heard me laugh [that day] he felt unaccountably like laughing, too.”⁶⁷

But Walgreen let his chance slip away. It would be months before

Myrtle's brother Paul asked her to come along with him to Mr. Blood's drugstore. Myrtle recalled:

While Paul was talking business with Mr. Walgreen, I was walking around the store looking at everything on the counters, and I came upon a box of bath tablets. I had no more idea of buying those bath tablets than I had of buying hair tonic; but just to make conversation, I picked up one of the packages and said, "Mr. Walgreen, are these bath tablets any good?" He walked over to me and said, "Miss Norton, I couldn't recommend them personally because I have never used them, but I sell a great many."

When we went out of the store I said to Paul, "Well, that certainly is an honest druggist. You would have thought he'd say, 'Certainly they're good!' thinking I was going to buy some, but he didn't." That made a real impression on me. I kept thinking how forthright that young Mr. Walgreen was.⁶⁸

Yet Walgreen again let the opportunity slip away. Months later, Paul and Myrtle were planning an August fishing trip to Wisconsin with a dozen or so friends when they happened to visit Mr. Blood's store again. While browsing the selections, Myrtle overheard her brother ask Walgreen, "Do you like to fish?"

"I admit I was hoping this friendly young druggist was going to answer 'Yes,' although I never thought of Paul's suggesting he come on the trip," Myrtle wrote. Walgreen replied, "Sure I like to fish," but failed to take the bait once more. Paul tried to invite him yet again a few weeks later, but again, no definite answer. Finally Myrtle returned for some stamps and told him she had almost completed her fishing outfit, trying to gauge his interest—but maddeningly, no response. Whether Walgreen was dense or merely modest is hard to say, but the communication gap between the Nortons and the young druggist was downright comical to observe.

On a warm Friday night, on the eve of the long-awaited trip, Paul and

Myrtle Norton visited Mr. Blood's drugstore one last time to spell out their invitation in no uncertain terms. "Well, Walgreen," Paul offered with a sigh, almost resigned to his friend's reluctance—or obliviousness—"we leave tomorrow night; and if you decide you want to go, just be down at the Northwestern Station at ten-thirty."⁶⁹

"Mr. Walgreen seemed to be turning the idea over as if he had just taken it in that he could join our camping trip," Myrtle wrote, amused. Sure enough, at the appointed hour, Walgreen walked down the platform at the Northwestern Station—the same spot where he had first arrived in Chicago seven years earlier—ready to go on another life-changing adventure.

Two weeks in the Wisconsin woods put their relationship on a new course. As luck would have it, they were playing partners during the card games on the train ride up north. "My!" Myrtle wrote. "We found it easy to laugh that night."⁷⁰

After a few days in the Great White North, Walgreen noticed that everyone was calling Myrtle "Sis," so he asked if he could, too. She agreed, and replied, "I'll call you Sonny."

"In those days the use of first names marked an advanced friendship," she said. "Women didn't even call their husbands by their first names in public."

"When we were alone he told me about his family and some of the serious times in his life. We eased our way into a lifelong friendship. From the first we were completely comfortable together."⁷¹

There was, however, the little matter of Walgreen's engagement to a woman back in Dixon. But near the end of the Wisconsin sojourn, he confessed to Myrtle that he was trying to gather the courage to break it off. The connection between Walgreen and his girlfriend wasn't strong, something even Walgreen's fiancée acknowledged when she complained that his letters to her "were like icicles." After meeting Miss Norton, Walgreen concluded he had to break up with his fiancée in person, telling Myrtle before the trip ended, "You may not think much of me [for breaking off my

engagement], but I'm going to try to win you if I'm free. I've fallen in love with you. You're simply the girl I've been looking for."⁷²

Soon enough, the deed was done, and Walgreen was a free man. Now, to win Miss Norton's hand, Walgreen took an aggressive approach that his first fiancée would not have recognized. Every evening, after a 16-hour day working on his feet, Walgreen stopped by the Nortons' apartment and then walked a few more blocks to his place to write the object of his desire a handwritten letter, which he had "special delivered" to Miss Norton the next day. These letters, it is safe to assume, did not remind Miss Norton of icicles or of any other frozen creation. She was as smitten with him as he was with her. The romance moved swiftly, culminating in their wedding on August 18, 1902—just a year after their camping trip.

Not only did the date mark the beginning of a very happy home life, but it would also prove to be the most important decision anyone ever made in the history of the Walgreen Company.

diving in—together

The 1902 wedding of Charles Sr. and Myrtle secured the Walgreens' family life forever. By all accounts, their marriage was a happy one, made stronger by the birth of Charles Jr. (or "Chuck," as he was soon known) in 1906 and Ruth, with bright red hair, in 1910. Despite working long, arduous hours, Charles Sr. would come home and get on all fours to thrill his young children, barking like a dog and bucking like a bronco to make them laugh.

Walgreen's happy family life didn't answer the questions in his professional life, however. Although he had just taken out a heavy loan to become a co-owner of Blood's store about the same time he met Myrtle and was only a year and change into paying off the loan when the two were married, he still appeared far from committed to a lifelong career in pharmacology.

Walgreen's restlessness manifested itself the day after their wedding in Seattle, where Myrtle had family. Walgreen spent their "honeymoon week" scouting the area for potential store sights, settling on one appealing corner—a corner the company would revisit decades later—before finally deciding the time wasn't right.

The Walgreens returned to Chicago, determined to pay off the store loan as soon as possible. Through their frugality, the Walgreens were able to put half his salary toward the loan payment each month. The young couple allotted themselves only \$25 per month for rent. The best place Myrtle could find, however, was a tiny apartment a half mile west of the store for \$27.50; so they had to scrimp elsewhere, with Myrtle doing all their washing, ironing, and cooking. In the early years of their marriage, Myrtle was a truly traditional wife, rarely asking about her husband's business, especially when he came home bone-tired after a 16-hour day.

Though Walgreen was committed to following through on his first store, he still hadn't dedicated himself to the pharmacy business itself. While toiling on Cottage Grove, he dabbled in a Los Angeles wrapping paper company, an Idaho mining outfit, and a Chicago grain commodities firm. He also tried opening new stores with friends in Dixon, Illinois, and Hot Springs, Arkansas; but these expansions proved premature. Instead of strengthening Walgreen's new-born company, these side interests proved a distraction from his core store; so he decided to sell off his holdings to the partners involved.

Since he had tried just about everything to avoid what seemed inevitable, Charles Walgreen Sr. finally concluded that his calling was to be a pharmacist, based in Chicago. Once he committed to this idea, things changed dramatically.

Walgreen didn't waste any time refurbishing Mr. Blood's dark and dusty old store. He replaced the cracked tile floor, converted the dangerous gaslights to electric, widened the aisles, and added a new front awning that said, "Drugs and Surgical Dressings." He was more vigilant about the quality, variety, and value of the products he displayed on his shelves. And he

made certain every customer was cheerfully greeted by him or his sole employee when he or she walked in.

That last improvement might have been the most important—and one of the traits that has separated Walgreens from the rest for over a century: customer service. As with IBM, McDonald's, and FedEx in their heyday, the difference usually isn't the product but the people. Simple professionalism—especially in a field broad enough to accommodate snake oil salesmen like the deadly Dr. Holmes, "Dr. Matthews' Medicine Show," and Myrtle's old boyfriend Earl, who traveled from town to town with his father's vaudevillian "elixir act"—quickly separated Walgreen from the charlatans surrounding him, including many among those running the 1,500 drugstores operating in Chicago at the time.

Remember, this was a time when pharmacists didn't simply order and distribute pills from the manufacturers. They produced most of the customers' prescriptions themselves. So the drugstore customer back then had to put a lot more faith in the pharmacist than we do today.

All these painstaking tasks, however, didn't generate much revenue. Only 2 percent of Walgreens' profits came from the pharmacy department in the company's first decades, whereas two-thirds of the store's intake was from tobacco and soda fountains.

While other proprietors required customers to walk to their stores and wait for the pharmacist to get to them, in due time, Walgreen encouraged his patrons to call their orders in. He developed an impressive routine he called the Two Minute Drill. When a customer called, Walgreen would repeat the customer's name, address, and order as he wrote them down to ensure accuracy; then he quietly pass the slip to his assistant, Caleb Danner.

Walgreen would keep the customer on the line by discussing everything from the climate to the Cubs—who were then the dominant team in baseball—while Danner collected the items, dashed over to the customer's house, and knocked on the door. The customer would tell Walgreen that someone was at the door, find Danner there with their order, and come back to the phone to ask Mr. Walgreen, "Just how did you do that?"

It was a neat trick, one that helped spread the word that Walgreen's store was a cut above the competition. Walgreen's ability to provide such efficient service while forming friendships with his customers quickly established his place as the new standard-bearer in the neighborhood.

As Goethe, the nineteenth-century German philosopher, promised, once Walgreen committed himself, fortune started working on his behalf; and Walgreen took full advantage of the opportunities presented to him. One day, for example, a cooking pan salesman walked in to ask where he could find a good hardware store. It seems that one of his regular customers had just backed out of a 300-pan purchase, and he had to unload them. Walgreen remembered his wife's delight with her aluminum kitchenware, so he figured he might be able to sell them to other women in his drugstore better than the salesman could to the men at the hardware store. They agreed on a price, and Walgreen went to work setting them up on a table in the middle of the store. At 15 cents each, the handsome pans went fast, earning Walgreen a tidy profit and more customers. The successful gambit encouraged him to take more chances in the future to expand his merchandise selection and marketing methods.

The Walgreens were able to make their final payment on the store loan to Mr. Blood in early 1907. Decades later, Myrtle still remembered the night her hard-working husband came home, "late as usual," but this time proudly waving the final check.

"He put it in an envelope addressed to Blood, and the two strolled to the mailbox," the Kogans wrote. "Walgreen pulled down the [mailbox] flap. His smiling wife inserted the envelope, and he kissed her soundly. On the walk home, they talked of what they would do with the extra money now that no more monthly payments needed to be made. 'One of these days,' Charles said, 'I'll buy you a fur coat, Myrtle.'"⁷³

The same year, the Walgreens bought their first store outright. William Valentine, Walgreen's old boss, told him he planned to sell his bigger store at Cottage Grove and 39th—the same store Walgreen left after he returned from Cuba because it was too busy and hectic to accommodate his convalescence—and move back to Terre Haute, Indiana, to buy a com-

pany that made clocks. Valentine asked \$15,000 for the store, 150 percent more than Walgreen paid for his first store. Walgreen protested that he simply didn't have that kind of money.

"Charlie, you were the best clerk I ever had," Valentine replied, no doubt enhancing his memory of Walgreen in light of his recent success. "And I really want you to have that store. Think it over."⁷⁴

Walgreen had finally reached the point of no return. He could continue dabbling in this or that, looking for a quick hit or a way out of the pharmacy business, or he could decide that his future was in pharmacy and make a run of it.

"To make a down payment on a second drugstore," Charles Jr. said, "Dad had to sell a half-interest in his first store. His friends advised against it. 'Chicago has too many drugstores already,' they warned. And Dad said, 'Chicago may have too many drugstores, but it hasn't enough Walgreens drugstores.'"⁷⁵

Walgreen's resolve was firm. "He now realized more firmly than ever that the time had come for him to move ahead in the drugstore business," the Kogans wrote. "He had no wish, as he would say again and again in later years, to drift along with a single store and continue to engage himself in outside business endeavors."⁷⁶

Walgreen signed another loan in 1909 to buy Valentine's store. Because it stretched his finances so far, however, he could only wangle the deal with the help of Arthur C. Thorsen, a former colleague and now a pharmacist at the Armour Company pharmaceutical products plant. Thorsen agreed to buy half of Walgreen's first store. Walgreen took this money, plus some savings, to cover the down payment on Valentine's store. The two partners agreed that Thorsen would manage the first store, which was incorporated under the name "Walgreen-Thorsen," and Walgreen would own and operate the second himself, under the title "C. R. Walgreen & Company."

No one—not even Walgreen himself—could have realized it at the time, but a chain had been born, a chain that would become the greatest in drugstore history.⁷⁷

