THE PATRIARCH OF ABILENE:
CLEYSON L. BROWN AND THE
UNITED EMPIRE, 1898-1935

SONDRA VAN METER MCCOY

CHARLES M. HARGER had been editor of the Abilene Reflector some 30 years when he wrote in 1927 that "Cleyson Brown has done more for Abilene than any one person in it." He was right. Cleyson LeRoy Brown, or C. L. Brown, as many people called him, did not put Abilene on the map in the way that the gun-toting cowboys did in the late 1860's. His more substantial contribution endures today in the billion-dollar corporation known as United Telecommunications, the third largest telephone holding company in the United States; it endures today as a part of the Kansas Power and Light Company; and, finally, it endures in what he might have considered his finest legacy, the Brown Memorial Foundation. This foundation operates a home for the aged and a 240-acre park that serves as a camping ground for several hundred boy scouts and members of church groups.

At the height of his powers, C. L. Brown managed a multimillion dollar empire in telephone and electric utilities in Kansas. Nearly one fourth of Abilene's population depended on Brown's various United companies for employment. Hundreds of other people in Colorado, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey worked as telephone linemen, operators, and managers in companies controlled by Brown.

The great depression of the 1930's temporarily weakened the financial foundations of Brown's utility empire. However, just as damaging were Brown's persistent and fruitless efforts to sustain losing enterprises such as the grocery store chain known as Piggly-Wiggly, Kansas' largest retail grocery chain in the late 1920's and early 1930's. By November, 1935, C. L. Brown, the benevolent patriarch of Abilene, once one of the richest men in Kansas, owed thousands of dollars which he could never repay. He died on November 12, 1935, bankrupt.

THE STORY of Brown between the birth of his empire and his deathbed insolvency is
C. L. Brown, seated at his desk on the right, remodeled his father’s grist mill in 1898 to generate electricity for Abilene street lights. In 1899 he applied to the city council to build a telephone system. With both services the local entrepreneur was soon on his way to establishing his successful career with telephones and electricity. This photograph of the first United Companies’ general office was taken in 1902 when all the accounting was done by one employee. Photograph reproduced from The Voice, November, 1929.

actually the success story of a vigorous, determined man building a utility empire. Brown began life in a small community known as Brown’s Mill in Adams county, Pennsylvania. Born February 3, 1872, he was the eldest of the five children of Jacob and Mary Brown. The family came to Kansas in 1880 with a pietistic sect known as the Church of the Brethren, a group prominent in the settlement of Dickinson county. Father Jacob Brown was a miller by trade, and obtained rights to a grist mill on the Smoky Hill river south of Abilene. There he ground grain and sawed wood for neighboring farmers.²

Young C. L. Brown had limits when it came to manual labor or perhaps he would have become a miller, perhaps a farmer. When Brown was 10 years old, he stood too close to a corn grinder and had his right elbow crushed so badly that the arm had to be amputated. In later years he wore an artificial arm and hand, usually covered by a long-sleeved shirt or coat and a dark gray glove. Sometimes he dispensed with the glove and used the hook on the end of the arm.

C. L. Brown did not settle down to a permanent career with telephones and electricity until age 26. After graduation from Abilene High School, he taught in a country school, attended a two-year business college in Burlington, Iowa, and managed a creamery in Wichita before venturing into utilities. In 1898 the old grist mill his father had bought was remodeled to generate electricity for Abilene street lights. The Browns’ Abilene Electric Light Works expanded first to serve local businesses and residents, then extended into other nearby communities. In 1906 the light works was incorporated as Riverside Power and Gas Company. By 1916 the Brown electrical enterprise increased its capacity to serve some 20 communities. He and his associates added more plants, and in 1924 incorporated as the United Power and Light Company. By the time Brown sold his interest to Kansas Power and Light in 1924, United Power had assets of $17,300,805.46. It was second in size to Kansas Gas and Electric in the state. Over a period of three years, 1926-1929, Brown himself received $920,000 in cash for his equity in United Power.³

The electric utility comprised only part of his fortune. In 1899, one year after installing the first electric plant, Brown applied to the

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Abilene city council to build a telephone system. The local businessmen had been complaining about the poor and expensive service provided by the Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company (later known as Southwestern Bell, a subsidiary of the giant American Telephone and Telegraph). The local entrepreneur was welcomed and encouraged.

As with the electric service, Brown succeeded with his telephones. He filed a charter for the Brown Telephone Company in 1902. The business expanded into the region around Abilene. In 1914 the company, renamed the United Telephone Company in 1911, remained under the management of C. L. Brown. At the time, its valuation was listed as nearly $700,000 and it ranked second in the state to Missouri and Kansas, the Bell subsidiary, whose valuation exceeded $4,500,000. In 1914 Brown and his business associates quietly and officially relinquished their status as an independent telephone company by selling controlling interest of the stock (64.47 percent) to the Missouri and Kansas Telephone Company. The Bell company could provide the United company with capital needed for plant expansion. They agreed to let Brown manage the company until his retirement or death. This business arrangement served both Brown and Bell profitably through the years.

Not satisfied to work solely with Bell, Brown

4. Abilene Weekly Reflector, August 10, November 2, 1899.


In February, 1930, the United Companies' magazine, The Voice, featured pictures and an article on an office building completed in Salina to house a new company in the United group, the United Life Insurance Company. At right is the 10-story building, and below is a view of the insurance company's home office. The insurance business and the Salina office building were yet other enterprises in C.L. Brown's diversified interests which came to include a grocery store chain, gravel and sand companies, hotels, broadcasting station, and an oil company.
Milton S. Eisenhower (1899- ) was with the United Telephone Company's public relations department and for a time was editor of the company magazine, *The Voice*. The late Pres. Dwight D. Eisenhower's youngest brother was to go on to a distinguished career in university administration and government service. Photograph of Eisenhower reproduced from *The Voice*, August, 1924.
acquired small independent phone companies throughout northern and central Kansas. These
small independents came to form the core of
his new company, a holding company named
United Telephone and Electric, which was in-
corporated in Delaware in September, 1925.
Brown organized United Telephone and Elec-
tric to purchase stocks of companies in widely
separated geographical sections. He began
buying part or total interest in small phone
companies in Missouri, Arkansas, Indiana,
Iowa, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. To
accomplish this he borrowed heavily from
lending institutions in Boston, Chicago, St.
Louis, and Kansas City, using telephone com-
panies as collateral.
Brown diversified his interests by buying a
grocery store chain and grocery warehouses;
had a gravel and sand company, hotels,
more power companies, a news service and
broadcast station, and an oil company. Brown’s
private enterprises, that is, those outside of
United Telephone and Electric, included a life
insurance company, a lumber company, a shoe
store, mining developments in Colorado and
an interurban based in Junction City. In all he
came to control 85 known companies. Except
for the grocery chain and several small, obso-
lescent businesses, profits increased steadily
in the 1920’s.

DURING his first 25 years, Brown concen-
trated on making his fortune. Yet, the full
story of United Telephone and Electric and the
multitude of United companies remains in-
complete without consideration given to C. L.
Brown’s determination to build a benevolent
patriarchy in Abilene.
Brown’s conception of himself as a welfare
capitalist evolved almost imperceptibly. It
began with advocacy of thrift and self-disci-
pline. Conservation of money formed part of
Brown’s successful business creed and this he
would impose on his employees. A hint of
what was to come appeared in the March, 1918,
issue of The Voice, the company newsletter:
Eat less, drink less, and smoke less,
and wear your clothes a little longer.
Make it a principle. Make it a religion. Make it a habit.
There is not a human being in the United States

that cannot exist on nine-tenths of
what he does exist on.
Save the other tenth.

“Thrift makes for a better life,” Brown told his
employees, “it builds up confidence and a
comfortable philosophy of living.”

By 1922 employee prodigality worried
Brown. He recalled:

Constantly there came to me reports of men and girls of the
working force who were in debt. . . . Looking into
the financial history of the employees, I found that mostly
they were spending every dollar they earned.
. . . Something ought to be done about it—but what?
Advice was tried and it failed. So after careful consideration and
investigation I determined that if the employee
would not save voluntarily, it was perfectly justifiable, for
his own good, to make him save.

Consequently Brown ordered that every em-
ployee of the United Telephone Company and
associated companies save 10 percent of his
income, starting on July 1, 1922, or seek affilia-
tion with another company. C. L. Brown
added that “employees who did not show thrift
were not good employees. . . . we are
taking this step in the interest of our workers
and for their own good.” No employee was
exempted.

David J. Eisenhower, a man respected for his
conservative, conscientious habits served as
the savings committee secretary. For many
years Eisenhower was the first in line at the
county treasurer’s window to pay his property
taxes for the year. (Eisenhower was the father
of Dwight Eisenhower who was elected
United States President in 1952.) In addition to
Eisenhower the savings department had a
committee composed of “mature men familiar
with business and with securities.”

Each month every employee was given a
blue file card on which to enter the amount of
his debts and the amount of savings taken from
Because conservation of money formed part of C. L. Brown's own successful business creed, he advocated thrift and self discipline for those in his employ. Beginning July 1, 1922, his employees were ordered to save 10 percent of their income or seek affiliation with another company. The pamphlet, left, reproduced from The Voice, February, 1928, explained the company policy and gave advice on approved investments. A monthly report card had to be filed by each employee with the savings committee which was set up to assist workers with their budgets. Card reproduced from The Voice, January, 1928.

the month’s wages and the form in which it was invested. Until the card was filled out properly no paycheck would be issued for the succeeding month. If a person were in debt, the savings committee demanded that a list of the obligations be shown to them and that the 10 percent be applied to the debt until the bill was cleared. The committee approved of a limited number of investments, including government bonds and savings securities, bank savings, municipal bonds, stock in sound companies and utilities such as United Telephone and Electric, building and loan stock, and real estate. Savings for cars, phonographs, and silverware for a young lady’s hope chest were considered totally unacceptable.13

Anyone who tried to circumvent the program could expect a committee investigation. United had a counseling team, Mr. and Mrs. T. O. Jackson, who met with groups to explain budget systems. The Jacksons pursued their mission with evangelistic fervor, reasoning that “because a patron may be arrogant and unappreciative of our effort to serve him,” that, “is no reason why we should forget our duty, not only to him but to our own better self and the interest of the industry which we serve.” They told a young phone operator who needed the $6.00 forced savings to buy clothes to refrain from purchasing “unnecessarily expensive goods.” A wire chief who reviewed the month’s expenditures, discovered he had spent over $16 for soft drinks. “Never again,” he promised. One widow, a night telephone operator with four small children, saved her 10 percent by digging—rather than hiring it done—a 365-foot water line ditch from the water source to her house.14

C. L. Brown dealt personally with some of the spendthrifts. A local clothing store called Brown, telling that a United employee had bought too many fine clothes on credit and had not paid her bill. After discussion with the young woman, Brown notified the store, saying, "she will pay her savings on her debts and

14. Ibid., Kansas City Star, August 12, 1923, pp. 1C-2C.
In addition to making a fortune for himself, C. L. Brown built a benevolent patriarchy in Abilene. His paternal concern for his employees extended to housing for the young female operators of the United Telephone Company. A welfare department which he set up redecorated the stately Victorian Lebold mansion, left, which was operated similarly to a college sorority house for the young women. At right, is one of the living rooms where residents could entertain their guests. Located at First and Vine streets, the mansion is the present residence of Fred and Merle Vahsholtz.

start with a clean slate. . . . Our welfare department discusses with the girls their clothing expenditures and seeks to secure simple and modest garb—though we lay down no rules.” One young man, Dee Adams, claimed that he could not save 10 percent of his $50 monthly summer salary and also attend Kansas University. Brown called him in several times to reprimand him, but he kept him as an employee. As for dictating to an employee, Brown said that “if an employee preferred to work where he may dispose of all his income as he sees fit, it is his privilege. If he works for us, he is subject to our rules. . . .”

At the end of the first year about 50 percent of the employees had put their 10 percent in preferred stock of the utility companies they served; 30 percent placed funds in building and loan accounts, home mortgages, or savings accounts. After five years with the plan, Brown applauded its success. Figures showed that 1,357 employees were saving an average of $14.81 per month, an amount exceeding 10 percent of their salaries. Brown noted that in earlier years his employees had invested in banana plantation stocks and such, and had lost all their funds. Since his savings plan had been in effect, “Not an employee has lost a dollar in investment in securities for five years.”

C. L. Brown’s decision for the savings plan served two purposes: his paternalistic concern for his employees and his business self-interest. He could assume that many employees would invest in the company they worked for, and between one third to one half did so. The employee stock investment program had worked extremely well for American Telephone and Telegraph; Brown expected as much for his companies. During the 1920’s, the profits came in and United’s employees collected their dividends quarterly. The great depression of the early 1930’s forced a reduction in dividends and finally a cessation in 1933.

With no thought of financial return, Brown extended his paternalism to the unfortunate and impoverished. Approximately a year after implementing the savings plan, Brown organized a welfare department to administer to the needs of company employees and community residents. The department was not directly connected with the United companies. Its aim was to help people help themselves through employment and improved household management. For a poor woman who took in washing and ironing for a living, they installed electricity. A woman with eight children and expecting a ninth, reported that her husband had deserted them. The Dickinson county attorney located the errant husband and promised immunity from punishment if he returned to his family. Brown’s welfare department placed him and the family on a 40-acre farm with house, a cow, chickens, and household necessities. By March, 1927, the family was doing nicely and even saving a little money. The welfare department gave shoes and clothing to needy children, and loans to worthy young people who wanted an education. (Scholarships are still awarded to several Abilene High School graduates to attend college.) The blind, bedfast, crippled, and aged indigents were housed in the old T. C. Henry 20-room mansion on North Buckeye street. Another large house provided a home for nearly 30 orphaned children. For the young female operators of the United Telephone Company, Hazel Dell Gamble, supervisor of the welfare department, redecorated the interior of the stately Victorian Lebold mansion. This facility operated similarly to a college sorority house.  

BROWN’S consuming passion in his later years was the Brown Memorial Foundation, incorporated on November 15, 1926, by Brown and his sisters Jennie and Della as a memorial to their parents, Jacob and Mary Brown. “All my wealth is nothing more than for service,” Brown wrote, “and outside enough to care for my family reasonably it all goes into this Foundation.”  

By 1930 the Browns had endowed it with more than $1,000,000 and the income from this was sufficient, at the time, to maintain its numerous activities. When asked why he established the foundation, Brown replied, “Every man tries to accumulate wealth and it’s all to buy six feet of ground. Others enjoy the fruits of his effort and he never can see how much they enjoy it. But I want to see people enjoy mine while I am alive.”

The foundation charter listed several purposes: (1) giving relief and support to old people; (2) assisting, by means of food, clothing, and financial aid, mothers who are supporting minor children where the husband is physically or mentally incapable, and widows and divorced women; (3) aiding “unfortunate” girls and their illegitimate children; (4) assisting deserving young people to secure a Christian education; (5) supporting institutions of learning, hospitals, and other organizations; (6) contributing to missionary work and the advancement of Christian religion.

The Brown Memorial Foundation began with trust property valued at $100,000. Back in 1913 Brown had purchased 226 acres south of the Smoky Hill river. This land was adjacent to his father’s 21 acres and the site of the grist mill and later Riverside Power and Light (United Power and Light). Original plans for the property called for a $500,000 expenditure over a five year period. The firm of Hare and Hare, Kansas City landscape architects, submitted a plan which included landscaping the 226-acre site, construction of a home for the aged and one for children, an executive building, a series of small homes to be used by widows with children, a boys’ camp and a girls’ camp. Because Brown had a son with Down’s syndrome, he expressed the wish to build a home for abnormal children on the grounds. Bridges were built to span Turkey creek, a three-foot high concrete dam crossed the Smoky Hill river, and earth-moving equipment carved out a crescent-shaped lake bed a half mile long.

17. The Voice, v. 9, no. 9 (September, 1926), p. 4: newspaper clipping, November, 1926, Abilene Public Library.


Brown Memorial Home for the Aged, originally scheduled to cost $75,000, cost at least $175,000 upon completion. The large, handsome colonial brick structure with a comfortable, tastefully decorated interior provided room free of charge for 57 men and women. C. L. Brown and others traveled to England to select the furnishings.  

Dedication of the Brown Memorial Home highlighted C. L. Brown's philanthropic work. A crowd of over 5,000 people stood before the new building, listening to United States Sen. Henry J. Allen praise the work of the foundation founders. Also there on July 28, 1929, were Cong. J. G. Strong and Homer Hoch. C. L. Brown, founder as well as overseer of the entire project, spoke: "The best use of wealth . . . is to give comfort to the unfortunate and this foundation is established upon that basis. To give health and happiness to the young and comfort to the aged is my idea of usefulness."  

By the time the home had been completed, the park had become the recreation center for Abilene and north-central Kansas. No admission fee was charged. The 20-acre lake had sand beaches, a diving tower and approximately 40 small boats. The girl scout camp had a stable of 20 horses; the boy scouts could practice nautical skills on the full-sized replica of a New England whaler docked in the park. Others enjoyed the tennis courts, baseball lots, swimming pool, 19-hole golf course, rifle range, picnic and playgrounds. The park drew crowds of nearly 5,000 each weekend during the summer and as many as 15,000 on July 4, more than twice the Abilene population. Two or three times a week during warm weather, the aging and somewhat plump C. L. Brown drove out to the park, took off his coat and down on a park bench to gossip with friends and watch the people play. That is what people needed, he believed, plenty of play.  

The balm of his beloved Memorial Park proved to be a welcome relief from the accumulating financial difficulties Brown faced in the early 1930's. In addition, heart disease drained his strength. Increasing ill health and declining fortunes caused Brown to turn over the administration of the United companies in Abilene to his long-time associate, Ralph Van Trine. C. L. and his wife Maud left for Wilmington, Del., in 1934, to make arrangements to live there. His United Telephone and Electric, a Delaware corporation, was in serious trouble. It had had to withdraw its permit to sell securities in Kansas in 1933, and owed taxes to the Internal Revenue Service amounting to over $100,000. These taxes due the federal government had not been paid in 1932, 1933, and 1934.  

As a diversion during these troubled days, C. L. Brown sailed a small yacht which he called The Cheerio along the coastal waters of Delaware. While aboard The Cheerio, in early November, 1935, Brown became ill and was taken to a Wilmington hospital where he died on November 12, 1935. He was 63 years old. C. L. Brown was returned to Abilene and buried on the grounds of the Memorial Park he had developed.  

LESS THAN two months after his death, the corporate directors of United Telephone and Electric filed for a voluntary corporate reorganization as provided by section 77b of the Bankruptcy act. The company listed its assets as $11,880,503, and its debt as $4,400,00. The company was not insolvent, but rather, unable to meet outstanding demand notes in the principal amount exceeding $1,455,000.  

Between February and November, 1936, court-appointed trustee William C. A. Henry sorted through masses of corporate records. Some 28 individuals and 11 business firms aided in the investigation. By November, 1936, Henry, as trustee for United Telephone and Electric brought suit in equity to recover money, property, and assets which had belonged to United Telephone and Electric. This major document blasted management procedures of the company and its principal stockholder, C. L. Brown, saying that Brown illegally diverted funds to the enrichment of the Brown Memorial Foundation; that Brown

23. Ibid.
C. L. Brown's consuming passion in his later years was the Brown Memorial Foundation, incorporated November 15, 1926, by Brown and his sisters, Jennie and Della, as a memorial to their parents, Jacob and Mary Brown. At right, Brown stands by the cornerstone of the home for the aged, a major project of the foundation. Below are scenes showing scouting activities and recreation facilities at the memorial camp and park built by the foundation. The park, with a 20-acre lake, became the recreation center for Abilene and north-central Kansas. Photographs reproduced from The Voice, July, 1929.
C. L. Brown's welfare department, not directly related to the United Companies, extended his paternalism to the unfortunate and impoverished of the community. A large house, above left, provided a home for nearly 30 orphaned children. Hazel Dell Gamble, above right, welfare department superintendent, holds one of the children. Photographs reproduced from The Voice, October, 1929. Below, the Brown Memorial Home for the Aged, completed at a cost of $175,000, provided housing for 57 men and women. A crowd of more than 5,000 people attended the dedication of the colonial brick structure July 28, 1929. Photograph reproduced from The Voice, August, 1929.
Accumulating financial difficulties and ill health drained C. L. Brown's strength in the early 1930's, and he turned over the administration of the United Companies to Ralph Van Trine, his long-time associate. With his wife, Maud, Brown left Abilene in 1934 for Wilmington, Del., where he made his home until his death November 12, 1935. Photograph of Van Trine reproduced from The Voice, July, 1929.

dealt with the property and assets of each company as though each were his own personal property, completely disregarding the separate corporate entities. Henry accused Brown of committing acts which resulted in diverting corporate assets belonging to United Telephone and Electric to the disadvantage of creditor and stockholder interest. This included paying dividends in excess of earnings or surplus available for dividend payment. Henry said that United Telephone and Electric and other subsidiaries had furnished Brown with merchandise and services totalling $317,959.68, none of which had been repaid. The trustee made additional complaints regarding the operation of the company.28

Despite its current difficulties, United Telephone and Electric had a sound foundation. The losers, such as the Piggly-Wiggly chain, either filed for bankruptcy or were liquidated. The telephone properties were making a recovery in 1936 and continued to improve. The reorganization plan received final approval in late 1937. United Telephone and Electric was dissolved, and its assets placed under the new company, United Utilities, Incorporated.

Much of the credit for the basic soundness of United Telephone and Electric must go to C. L. Brown. Over 30 years he had built a reputation as a competent telephone and utility company manager. In 1932, at the worst of the great depression and with the knowledge that Brown was deeply in debt, A. B. Elias, Southwestern Bell president, was willing to lend him over half a million dollars to invest in telephone properties. Elias, deeply impressed by Brown's charitable work, concluded that such an unselfish man was not likely to "gyp" them.29 It is true that Brown used the holding company, more or less as a private company, transferring funds at will, and hoping all the time that conditions would improve and his company show profits much as they had in the 1920's. Brown scrambled in the 1930's to keep his companies afloat and his stockholders satisfied. All but six of his 85 companies, all battered by hard times, survived and some were showing profits again in 1936. During reorganization a number of companies were merged and later on phased out.

THE BROWN era in Abilene came to a close in 1935. He left behind his major achievements: United Telephone, which soon became a totally owned subsidiary of Southwestern Bell; several independent telephone companies; a major portion of Kansas Power and Light through its purchase of United Power and Light; and the Brown Memorial Foundation. His most important financial legacy was United Telephone and Electric which became United Utilities, Inc. This organization, now known as United Telecommunications, is today a highly successful and increasingly diversified company which ranks as the third largest telephone holding company in the United States.

As for personal assets, Brown died a poor man. Documents in the Dickinson county probate court valued his estate at the time of his


death at $443,264.34, with real estate comprising about half of that figure, and stocks and bonds a third. By the time all the claims had been filed against him, the debts exceeded the estate’s capacity to pay them. His wife could keep the large frame home at 800 North Buckeye, Abilene.

Shortly after Brown’s death, trustees for the Brown Memorial Foundation took legal action to preserve the Home for the Aged and maintain the park. The park had to be closed in 1936; there were no funds to support the recreation center. The lake was filled in, the camps closed. Baseball lots and golf course returned to their natural state. Several years passed before the park could be opened again to scout and church groups.

The Brown Memorial Home for the Aged has lost none of its usefulness nor its simple elegance over the years. The many trees planted in the park that were nothing more than saplings in 1928, have matured and provide the grounds with a stateliness not possible in Brown’s time.

Perhaps we can no longer say, as Harger did in 1927, that Clevson Brown had done more for Abilene than any one person in it. We can, however, say, that C. L. Brown, patriarch of Abilene, can be proud of his legacy to Abilene and to the people of Kansas.

When Kansas territory was created in 1854 school geographies showed the area as part of the "Great American Desert." Despite political turmoil, problems with Indians, and a multitude of physical difficulties, the land was surveyed by about 1877. At that time the area surveyed in Kansas was 51.7 million acres. The map is from S. G. Goodrich's *Comprehensive Geography and History* published in 1854 and reproduced from *Kansas in Maps* by Robert W. Baughman (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1961). The photograph of a surveyor at work on the Kansas prairie was taken about 1916.