

The woman
behind the **WHISKEY**

Words **Ann Walczak**

Touring the Nelson's Green Brier Distillery on Clinton Street is a wondrous experience. The history is palpable, with gorgeous vintage bottles, fascinating documents, and rich, heart-tugging stories. But what struck me most was the woman looking out upon the whole operation, from her large portrait painted on the production floor wall.

There's an old saying, 'behind every great man is a great woman.' In the case of Nelson's Green Brier Distillery, that woman is Louisa Nelson. Louisa was the wife of Charles Nelson, founder of the distillery in 1870, and an often-overlooked part of the distillery's story.

Charles Nelson came to America on a steamship with this mother, father, and younger siblings from Germany in 1850. However, in a tragic turn of events, their father didn't make it and the family found themselves at the entrance to their new world, devastated and with literally nothing but the clothes on their backs. As the new head of the household, Charles parlayed his knowledge from the old family soap and candle factory into learning how to butcher and, finally, how to produce and sell whiskey.

If you live in Nashville, you've probably heard of Andy and Charlie Nelson by now. They are the brothers behind the resurrection of the Distillery in 2014 and, most notably, Belle Meade Bourbon-the





Brothers, Charlie (left) and Andy Nelson at their distillery

The original Tennessee Whiskey isn't from Lynchburg. It's from Greenbrier. Nelson's Greenbrier Tennessee Whiskey was known as 'Old Number 5', as it was the 5th registered distillery in Tennessee before prohibition, out of roughly 1,000 in the state. At it's peak, Nelson's Greenbrier produced 16 times the amount that Jack Daniels did. And now, this beautiful whiskey is made in Nashville and ready for everyone to taste for the first time since 1909. Made as an exact replica of the original sour mash recipe from 1860, it not only tastes incredible, but truly honors its history and the masterful hands that first created it. "This is our product, but it's not only our product," muses Andy. "This started over 150 years ago; this is their product too. It's our family, (and) a very important thing to us is to make sure we don't forget that that's why we're here now."

first product in a line of liquor designed to honor their family legacy spanning back four generations. Though the amount that Charles accomplished was indeed great, upon his premature death at the age of 56, Louisa was left to run the distillery on her own. Which she did—for 18 years—right up until prohibition. "One of the things you have to remember," says Andy, "is at that time, women didn't have the right to vote. They were essentially second-class citizens, and here she was building up this empire. She was a very strong-willed person and able to take the torch and keep it going (despite great odds against her). We're very proud of her. "It was this strength and iron-clad character that not only took on the distillery but grew the operation. As Charlie describes, "she was running a business. And not just any business - a whiskey business. And not just a whiskey business, one of the largest whiskey businesses in the country. "She was truly a remarkable woman, full of

gumption, and fueled by a fire that refused to be put out. But unfortunately, most of that went unacknowledged. "Her obituary doesn't tell much about her. It's much more about her husband's accomplishments," Andy remarks.

So, the brothers go out of their way to honor their great great great grandmother Louisa and her legacy. Their beautiful copper still is lovingly named Louisa and displayed front and center in the distillery. Then there are the Louisa Nelson Awards - an annual celebration of the achievement, vision, and inspiration of three female leaders in the Nashville community. And don't forget Louisa's Liqueur, a tasty, versatile, and not-too-sweet coffee caramel pecan spirit—perfectly sip-able neat or on the rocks, poured into coffee or a cocktail (a delightful way to perk up your old fashioned), used in recipes, or simply drizzled over ice cream.