



A close-up portrait of a man with short brown hair and blue eyes, looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. He is wearing a dark blue shirt. The background is dark and out of focus.

THE BROTHERS BOURBON

Prohibition forced Charles Nelson to shut down one of the nation's largest whiskey distilleries in 1909. Now, his great-great-great-grandsons are on a mission to bring it back to life

by claire gibson | photography by andrea behrends



On paper, Charlie and Andy Nelson seem to have a lot in common.

Just two years apart in age, these brothers are both tall, stately, and entirely gregarious. They were born in Los Angeles. Both played basketball. And, together, they've resurrected their great-great-great-grandfather's business creating small-batch whiskey—Green Brier Distillery. Read about them in *Garden and Gun*, where they were recently named runners-up in the “Made in the South” Awards, and you might think they're twins.

But they're not.

Charlie is a big-picture thinker—a twenty-eight year old bearded brunette with a slow drawl and a quick wit. When I ask about his workload, Charlie laughs and says he has nearly a thousand unread emails in his inbox. Andy, on the other hand, is a details man who subscribes to the “inbox zero” philosophy. He has blue eyes and shaggy blonde hair, and towers at a remarkable six-foot-four. But then again, Charlie's six-foot-four, too.

“There's always been an unspoken competition between us,” Charlie says, then pauses. “I mean, he's right-handed, and I'm left-handed.”

But for all their idiosyncrasies and quirks (and oh-so-psychologically important “handedness”), Charlie and Andy will always have one thing in common: lineage. Their family history reaches all the way back to July 4, 1835, when their great-great-great-grandfather, Charles Nelson, was born in Germany.

In 1850, Charles' father, John, sold his soap and candle factory. Wanting to offer his family a better life in America, John made a plan. He converted the family's earthly possessions to gold and had special clothes made so he could wear that gold on his person, because he was fearful that other passengers on the jour-

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ney might turn out to be thieves. On a cold October day, John gathered his wife and six children, including Charles, and together they boarded the Helena Sloman, a vessel bound for New York City.

While at sea, the boat began to rock.

Waves were crashing onto the deck, and the storm was intensely violent. In the confusion and chaos, a few passengers were thrown overboard. John Nelson was one of them.

Weighed down by the family fortune, John sank to the bottom of the Atlantic. His family survived, and his oldest son, Charles became the head of the household at the mere age of fifteen. Charles eventually moved to Nashville, where he started distilling whiskey—six years before Jack Daniels.

But in 1909, Prohibition forced him to shut down his distillery, which operated in both Nashville and in Green brier, Tennessee. At that point, Green Brier was the largest distillery in the United States.

Nearly one-hundred years later, Charles Nelson’s ancestors were standing in front of a rusted-out barrel house, mouths open in shock, in awe of what their great-great-great-grandfather had done.

Charlie explains the day in 2006, when he, Andy, and their father drove out to Greenbrier, Tennessee, to pick up a butchered cow they selected. A rural town (population 6,433) just twenty minutes north of Nashville, Greenbrier has streets with names like “Sunday Silence,” and “Easy Goer.” Driving up the gravel road towards the butcher house, Charlie and Andy had a hard time imagining that a century ago, it was the country’s hub for Tennessee whiskey. When they arrived at the butcher’s home, they asked if he knew anything about the old distillery.

“He said, ‘well look across the street,’” Charlie recalls. We’re standing together in a grassy field, by that same road.

Charlie points to a wood and aluminum edifice—his great-great-great grandfather’s whiskey barrel warehouse. It stands on stilts, and could be the set of

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a horror film, or the raw material for a really great new “farm-to-table” restaurant. Instead, it’s made its way to the historic registry, and stands as a testament to Charlie and Andy’s heritage. Inside, long wooden beams intersect from floor to ceiling, creating a grid where a hundred years ago, Charles Nelson’s whiskey barrels aged.

“It was like I fell in love,” says Charlie.

Seeing the shock on Charlie and Andy’s faces, the helpful butcher directed them toward the Greenbrier Historical Society—a small museum that houses dusty artifacts from this little town’s past. There, Charlie and Andy held a few original (albeit empty) bottles of Greenbrier Whiskey.

“The bottles had my name on them,” Charlie says with an air of reverence. “We just looked at each other and thought, this is our destiny.”

Andy agrees. “This is



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the first thing I've ever felt like I'm *really* meant to do," he says, blue eyes shining, but tired—probably a side effect of many sleepless nights. As it turns out, reviving a hundred-year-old distillery isn't the easiest thing to do.

If only they could have swam to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to find their family's lost fortune. That could have helped speed the process along quite a bit.

"There were many times in the last seven years where it was just too daunting, and we could have just said screw it," Charlie says slowly and thoughtfully. "We didn't have *any* money. All we had was an idea. If we had a lot of money then we would have been up and running a long time ago."

Instead, Charlie and Andy have spent the last six years rounding up a small team of family and friends to invest in the business. They recount stories of eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, ramen noodles, and making phone calls to alcohol distributors who hung up the phone after discovering the brothers were still in their twenties.

By fall 2011, the family finally decided to put up some collateral to secure a

business loan. "If things don't go well, the bank could take my dog." Charlie laughs, "We believe in this so much that we're literally betting the house."

So far, it seems they made a good bet. On March 30, 2012, Andy and Charlie launched the Green Brier Distillery, beginning with their new small-batch Belle Meade Bourbon, based on an original recipe. Since then, the business has expanded to over six states, and has steadily increased sales to several thousand cases per month. Though they don't foresee reopening in the original Greenbrier location, they've begun construction on a Tennessee whiskey distillery and tasting room, to

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open in Marathon Village this year.

But despite all the seemingly "overnight" success, Charlie and Andy understand that they're playing the long game. Charlie's home, which doubles as a makeshift office, is decorated with framed hundred-year-old documents: patents, an original label (made by the



same artist who designed the dollar bill), and lots of old pictures. They serve as a reminder of what they see as their duty.

"It's a real source of pride for us to be able to keep this going," Andy says. "We're captaining this ship."

Let's hope no one falls overboard this time. **N**

**GREEN BRIER
DISTILLERY INFO:**

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Brier Distillery at
greenbrierdistillery.com,
and follow the brothers
on Twitter [@TNWhiskeyCo](https://twitter.com/TNWhiskeyCo).