Preserving Agricultural History in the Midwest

Selected works by Frederick Whitford
Imagine Indiana’s farms at the turn of the last century. What comes from the land sustains us. Our farms and families depend on it. Having a good or bad year can mean the difference between prosperity and your family going hungry. Farmers knew how to provide. Throughout the 1800s, parents had passed their best knowledge on to their sons and daughters, who in turn taught their children tried-and-true methods for managing a farm—methods that provided consistency in a world of droughts, disease, and fluctuating markets. Before they abandoned a hundred years of proven practices or adopted new technology, they would have to be convinced that it was in their best interest.

Enter county extension agents. Indiana county extension agents took up their posts in 1912 at a crucial juncture in the advancement of agriculture. The systematic introduction of hybrid seed corn, tractors, lime, certified seed, cow-testing associations, farm bureaus, commercial fertilizers, balanced livestock diets, soybeans, and 4-H clubs were all yet to come. Many of the most significant agricultural innovations of the 1900s, which are commonplace today, were still being developed in the laboratories and experimental fields of land-grant colleges like Purdue University.

Compiled from original county agent records discovered in Purdue University Libraries Virginia Kelly Karnes Archives and Special Collections Research Center, *Enriching the Hoosier Farm Family* includes hundreds of rare, never-before-published photographs and anecdotal information about how county agents overcame their constituents’ reluctance to change. They visited farmers on their farms, day after day, year after year. They got to know them personally. They built trust in communities and little by little were able to share new information. Gradually, their practical applications of new methodologies for solving old problems and for managing and increasing productivity introduced farmers and their families to exciting new frontiers of agriculture.
Over 400 pages filled with 900+ images!

John Calvin Allen, professionally known as J. C., worked as a photographer for Purdue University from 1909-1952, and operated his own photography business until his death in 1976. The J. C. Allen photographs represent an historical account of the transition from pioneer practices to scientific methodologies in agriculture and rural communities. During this major transitional period for agriculture—tractors replaced horses, hybrid corn supplanted open-pollinated corn, and soybeans changed from a novelty crop to regular rotation on most farms. During this time, purebred animals with better genetic pedigrees replaced run-of-the-mill livestock, and systematic disease prevention in cattle, swine, and poultry took place.

Allen's photographs also document clothing styles, home furnishings, and the items people thought important as they went about their daily lives. Looking closely at tractors, livestock, wagons, planters, sprayers harvesting equipment, and crops gives one a sense of the changing and fast-paced world of agriculture at that time.

This volume contains over 900 picturesque images—most never before seen—of men, women, and children working on the farm, which remain powerful reminders of life in rural America at the turn of the twentieth century. As old farmhouses and barns fall victim to age, Allen's photographs are all that remain. While those people and times no longer exist today, they do remain “alive” because of the preservation of that history on film. A camera in his hands and an eye for photography allowed J.C. Allen to create indelible visual histories that continue to tell the story of agriculture and rural life from long ago.

Hb, 978-1-55753-866-6 • $49.99 • 12x9 • 408pp
Frederick Whitford and Neal Harmeyer
Virginia Claypool Meredith’s role in directly managing the affairs of a large and prosperous farm in east-central Indiana opened doors that were often closed to women in late nineteenth century America. Her status allowed her to campaign for the education of women, in general, and rural women, in particular. While striving to change society’s expectations for women, she also gave voice to the important role of women in the home. A lifetime of dedication made Virginia Meredith “the most remarkable woman in Indiana” and the “Queen of American Agriculture.”

Meredith was also an integral part of the history of Purdue University. She was the first woman appointed to serve on the university’s board of trustees, had a residence hall named in her honor, and worked with her adopted daughter, Mary L. Matthews, in creating the School of Home Economics at Purdue University.

“I was captivated as I read The Queen of American Agriculture, knowing that I personally benefited from Virginia Claypool Meredith’s life work… Every woman involved in agriculture will enjoy Virginia Claypool Meredith’s engaging story.”

Valynnda K. Slack
First female agriculture and natural resources educator in the Purdue Cooperative Extension Service
The key role that farming plays in the economy of Indiana today owes much to the work of John Harrison Skinner (1874–1942). Skinner was a pioneering educator and administrator who transformed the study of agriculture at Purdue University during the first decades of the twentieth century. From humble origins, occupying one building and 150 acres at the start of his career, the agriculture program grew to spread over ten buildings and 1,000 acres by the end of his tenure as its first dean. A focused, single-minded man, Skinner understood from his own background as a grain and stock farmer that growers could no longer rely on traditional methods in adapting to a rapidly changing technological and economic environment, in which tractors were replacing horses and new crops such as alfalfa and soy were transforming the arable landscape. Farmers needed education, and only by hiring the best and brightest faculty could Purdue give them the competitive edge that they needed. While he excelled as a manager and advocate for Indiana agriculture, Skinner never lost touch with his own farming roots, taking especial interest in animal husbandry. During the course of his career as dean (1907–1939), the number of livestock on Purdue farms increased fourfold, and Skinner showed his knowledge of breeding by winning many times at the International Livestock Exposition. Today, the programs in place in the Purdue University College of Agriculture remain largely as Skinner built them, responsive to Indiana but with its focus always on scientific innovation in the larger world.
Great people lead great universities. Purdue University is fortunate to count its thirteenth faculty member, William Carroll Latta, as one of those people. Certainly, thirteen proved to be a lucky number for Purdue and agriculture in Indiana. This book recounts William Latta’s far-reaching influence on agriculture at the university, throughout Indiana, and on a national level. Recognized as the Father of the School of Agriculture and of Extension at Purdue, Latta was an early and tireless promoter of the university and what it could do for the people of the state. From developing the four-year agriculture program, to conducting practical agricultural research prior to the creation of Purdue’s Agricultural Experiment Station, to leading Purdue’s agricultural outreach efforts to bring the university to the people, Latta’s contributions are still evident in Purdue’s modern-day agricultural programs. Latta’s story traces the history of agriculture at Purdue, showing agriculturists, historians, and the Purdue community where we’ve been and the foundation upon which we continue to build today’s teaching, research, and Extension programs.

Hb, 978-1-55753-395-1 • $29.95 • 6 × 9 • 400pp

Frederick Whitford and Andrew G. Martin

“Latta took on the challenge — almost single-handedly — of creating and implementing the highly respected Extension system that is still an underpinning of Purdue University more than one hundred years later.”

David Petritz
Director of Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service
Today, Purdue Extension delivers practical, research-based information that transforms lives and livelihoods. Tailored to the needs of Indiana, its current programs include Agriculture and Natural Resources, Health and Human Sciences, Economic and Community Development, and 4-H Youth Development. However, today’s success is built on over a century of visionary hard work and outreach. *Scattering the Seeds of Knowledge: The Words and Works of Indiana’s Pioneer County Extension Agents* chronicles the tales of the first county Extension agents, from 1912 to 1939. Their story brings readers back to a day when Extension was little more than words on paper, when county agents traveled the muddy back roads, stopping at each farm, introducing themselves to the farmer and his family. These Extension women and men had great confidence in the research and the best practices they represented, and a commanding knowledge of the inner workings of farms and rural residents. Most importantly, however, they had a knack with people. In many cases they were given the cold shoulder at first by the farmers they were sent to help. However, through old-fashioned, can-do perseverance and a dogged determination to make a difference in the lives of people, these county Extension agents slowly inched the state forward one farmer at a time. Their story is a history lesson on what agriculture was like at the turn of the twentieth century, and a lesson to us all about how patient outreach and dedicated engagement-backed by proven science from university research-reshaped and modernized Indiana agriculture.

*Hb, 978-1-55753-759-1 • $49.95 • 7x10 • 800pp*

*Frederick Whitford*
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