The farm magazine that attracted me the most growing up on a small dairy farm in Johnson County, Indiana, in the 1960s was Prairie Farmer. It certainly wasn’t because I had a premonition that I would someday write for that magazine. Instead, I was 100 percent farm boy, and the big, front-page pictures of a farmer plowing or cows in a pasture always said “Indiana agriculture” to me.

Once I began writing for the magazine as a field editor in 1981—working alongside Tom Budd, the editor, and Carl “Indiana Ike” Eiche—I learned that many of those photos I liked so much were taken by a freelance photographer and later by his son. Prairie Farmer and, eventually, Indiana Prairie Farmer purchased many photos from J. C. Allen and Son for magazine covers during the mid- and latter part of the twentieth century.

Little did I know that Allen was a legend in his own right. After I had the chance to view hundreds of his photos, going back into the days of black-and-white photography, I understood why. Based in West Lafayette, Indiana, he traveled farm country with his camera equipment, taking photos of real farm people and real farm scenes. He captured everything from a young boy driving a very early tractor to farmers plowing, disking, combining, and working on equipment.

Many years ago, I served on a judging committee for the American Agricultural Editors’ Association charged with picking out the best photos submitted by agricultural photographers that year. I soon learned that what I considered good photos and what many others caught up in modern journalism thought were good photos were quite different. They were into artsy-type photos. I was looking for genuine photos that tell a story, such as a herd of cows standing under a tree on a hot day or a farmer cultivating corn with an old Massey-Harris 44 tractor and two-row mounted cultivator with a young boy along for the ride.

J. C. Allen and Son captured hundreds of images that were award winning in my book. Taken together as a body of work over decades, they paint the story of U.S. agriculture during a large part of the twentieth century—a story that includes the people who sweated and worked hard to grow crops and raise livestock, and the technological changes they encountered along the way.

My hat is off to the authors who spent time reviewing hundreds of photos and piecing together another story: that of an unsung hero of American agriculture, John C. Allen. He preserved this history in photos as it unfolded before him. Now the authors have preserved it for you. Enjoy every page!

Tom J. Bechman
Editor, Indiana Prairie Farmer
This picture of Chester Allen at approximately four years old holding two pigs was one of John Allen's favorites. (N.p., ca. 1911; courtesy John O. Allen)