Introduction

Who among us has not spent hours studying photographs of family and friends or old sections of our town and countryside? Images transport us to another time, another place, another state of being. Photographs of young children playing in the yard, cradling yellow chicks, or starting school stir something deep within us.

Photographs capture events, memories, and even emotions, connecting us to those times, places, and moments. When the spoken or written word is unable to convey depth or significance, a photograph speaks. Photographs evoke wonderment, happiness, inspiration, pain, nostalgia, and loss—facets of the human sense and desire for links to our collective memory.

Images provide the tool to look into the eyes of people long gone and places long abandoned. The photographer documents an exact moment, fixing the person, place, or event within his or her scope. Indeed, though the photographer is not visible in the image, that person is a participant. The photographer perceives the scene and then defines it through the lens. The camera acts as a documentary instrument, with the resulting image serving as a proxy to the camera lens, binding the view of all who reminisce or study over a photograph to a fixed perspective. The photographer is a creator, and the photograph, a creation that is redefined with each new viewer.

John Calvin Allen, an amateur-turned-professional photographer, captured a rich collection of photographs depicting life during much of the twentieth century in Indiana—on the farm, in the cities, and at Purdue University—through his work. As a self-taught but highly successful photographer, his more than 100,000 images span all facets of Hoosier life. However, Allen consistently focused his lens upon farms and rural communities, resulting in a rare glimpse of agriculture and rural life at that time.

The J. C. Allen photographs represent a historical account of the transition from pioneer practices to scientific methodologies in agriculture and rural communities from 1909 until the early 1970s. During this major transitional period for agriculture, tractors replaced horses, hybrid corn supplanted open-pollinated corn, and soybeans changed from a novelty crop to one placed in regular rotation on most farms. It was also a time when purebred animals with better genetic pedigrees replaced run-of-the-mill livestock, and livestock producers adopted practices to promote systematic disease prevention in cattle, swine, and poultry. Looking closely at the tractors, livestock, wagons, planters, sprayers, harvesting equipment, and crops Allen photographed gives us a sense of the changing and fast-paced world of agriculture, captured then but experienced now.

But the reach of the J. C. Allen collection goes well beyond men working in fields, animals grazing on green and lush pastures, and participants who excelled at competitions such as the International Live Stock Exposition in Chicago or the Indiana State Fair in Indianapolis. Allen’s photographs document clothing
Allen had an eye for capturing crowds in action, such as this one gathered to view Hereford cattle on the Van Natta farm at Battle Ground in 1912. In order to capture this perspective, Allen would have ascended to a higher place, such as a grain bin. This vantage point shows that attendees were wearing their Sunday best. It also indicates that the automobile had supplanted the horse and buggy on many farms by this time. (Tippecanoe County)

Family history indicates that Mary Abbie Allen taught her husband basic photography skills. Here, John Allen shows his wife taking a photograph of ducklings swimming in a washtub while Chester stands nearby. This photo-within-a-photo documents many things: an intimate family moment, Abbie as a photographer, and the greater scope of the image captured by her. (N.p., ca. 1912)

Chester feeds a Barred Plymouth Rock hen at his grandmother’s farm near Clay City. (Clay County, ca. 1914)
styles, home furnishings, and the items people thought important as they went about their daily lives. They also record the transformation of the rural landscape and life there. Growing infrastructure would replace muddy and rutted roads with gravel or concrete, making it easier for horses and buggies—and later, automobiles—to travel to and from communities across the state. And the expansion of electric power beyond the city and into the most remote townships of Indiana allowed families to listen to the latest news, sports, and entertainment on their radios, rendering rural isolation a thing of the past.

As part of his work for Purdue University, Allen was able to document and preserve farms and homes, peoples and animals, and machinery and nature for decades to come. Using a heavy wooden camera, he captured the Hoosier and American experience in thousands of images, first on glass-plate negatives and later on film. His earliest images were in black and white but eventually shifted to color by the late 1950s. Little to nothing was off-limits to photograph. His snapshots of rural life depict men, women, and children doing their chores, but they also capture families playing and praying together, celebrating weddings and the birth of children, and honoring deceased loved ones.

Allen recognized that his photographs were more than pretty pictures. He described and documented events and places in detail, storing negatives and prints in specialized sleeves with meticulously typewritten labels. Print
photographs were often labeled with handwritten notes that included individual names, dates, and extra details thought pertinent. A historical photograph without accompanying information may grab one’s attention, but that same photograph accompanied by the who, what, when, where, why, and how provides knowledge and evidence. The latter makes each photograph priceless.

There is no indication that Allen intended for his photographs to carry historic significance while he was taking them, but near the end of his life, he realized his collection had captured agricultural history and rural life like no one individual before or after had done.
**A Photographer’s Record**

John Allen kept meticulous notes on his photographs. He recorded the usual information, such as the date, location, equipment, and name of the person pictured. But as this particular data sheet shows, he often documented additional information, which here included details about how the equipment had been used, the amount and type of fuel required to run it, and even how the owner/operator had paid for it. When taken as a whole, his photographs and detailed records provide a valuable historical account of rural life during the early to mid-twentieth century. (Tazewell County, IL; 1936)

In 1928, Allen took this photograph of Lewis Gardner from Horse Creek, Kentucky, carrying grain to a local mill on the back of mule. (Hart County, KY)

His legacy is forever linked to the tens of thousands of images he amassed during his fifty years of traveling the back roads of Indiana and the Midwest. We, the authors of this work, present these selected images from the eyes, mind, and camera of John Calvin Allen. We hope our readers enjoy this journey to moments long since passed but readily reimagined into existence in all of our minds, hearts, and souls.
John Bullard works hard to get the day’s mail. (Tippecanoe County, 1934)