The Early Life of John C. Allen

In his youth, John Calvin Allen did not aspire to become a photographer, but the twists and turns of life led him there nevertheless. Influences included having a father who was physically unable to work, growing up in an orphanage, developing a genuine interest in livestock, drawing a meager salary as a Purdue University clerk and stenographer, and living through advances in printing technologies that allowed magazines and newspapers to reproduce photographs in print. Collectively, these events changed the personal and professional life of Allen from farmer to photographer.

Even though the American Civil War predated Allen’s birth by decades, its effect on his father, James Thomas Allen (1844–97), would directly impact John’s young life. Twenty years before John was born, his father was a working farmer and practicing harness maker. Like most of his friends, James joined the Union Army, enlisting in June 1862 with the Fifty-Fourth Indiana Infantry Regiment as a private for a three-month stint. By the end of September, eighteen-year-old James returned to farming in Indiana.

Most Northerners expected the southern Confederates to fall quickly to the well-armed Union army, but the war would continue until 1865. By 1864, the high number of casualties had taken a heavy toll on troop numbers for both armies, and each side needed new recruits to replace the tens of thousands of men who had died or been wounded on the battlefield. The United States offered recruits an additional $100 for one year’s service in the Union army. Whether it was patriotism or the money or both, in October 1864 James once again became a soldier.

During this second tour of duty, James and the Thirty-Third Indiana Infantry Regiment were assigned to General William T. Sherman’s army, where they would become accustomed to long marches and hard fighting. As a low-ranking foot soldier, James marched to Nashville, Tennessee, where the Union army engaged and defeated the Confederate forces of General John Bell Hood at the Battle of Nashville in the second week of December 1864. As the year drew to an end, James recalled, “[W]e suffered great exposure in forced marches through swamps and sloughs wading until we went in camp at a little town in Alabama called Courtland about New Year’s Day of 1865.” By the time they arrived, he had marched 130 miles.

During his days in Alabama, James became chronically ill. He was sent from the front lines to a hospital in Chattanooga on January 6, 1865, and soon thereafter to Cumberland Hospital in Nashville, Tennessee. He was diagnosed with hepatitis, rheumatism, and chronic diarrhea. With the Civil War drawing to an end, he was honorably discharged in April 1865.

Returning home, he found work as a clerk in a dry goods store. A railroad accident on December 27, 1877, resulted in his lower right leg being amputated below the knee. Poor in health and now disabled, James went back to making harnesses as well as barrels, buckets, and churns. By 1878, thirty-four-year-old James was no longer physically able to work and earn a living to support his family. In 1893, at age forty-nine, he was admitted to the U.S. National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers—today part of the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs—at Marion, Indiana. He would eventually die of heart failure in 1897 at age fifty-three while visiting his son in Clay City, Indiana.

John Calvin Allen was born near Darwin, Illinois, on September 11, 1881. His father by this time had remarried and, with John’s arrival, now had six children between his first and second marriages. In 1883, tragedy struck the Allen family when John’s mother, Joan (1851–83), died at the age of 32. Years later, he would write, “My mother died when I was 18 months old. Father broke up housekeeping and we . . . children were never together again as a family.” John’s paternal grandmother and an aunt and uncle, Albert and Jennie Lane, took him in to live on an eighty-acre farm roughly eight miles south of Sullivan, Indiana.
The young boy adapted well to his adopted family. He said he loved his uncle like a father and explained:

I had not lived with my father since I could remember. . . . Those were mostly trouble-free, enjoyable days although we were much poorer than most anyone at the present time. I do not remember being very hungry. It seems we had plenty of cornbread and milk. I do remember getting a half-stick of candy in my shoe at Christmas time. If we went to town we drove two farm work-horses [hitched] to the big wagon over dirt roads, often very muddy and sometimes very dusty.

He and the others slept in a one-room log cabin heated by a fireplace to keep them warm during cold winters. Adjacent to the living quarters was an adjoining kitchen, where meals were eaten on a long wooden table. When he was old enough to attend school, he went to a nearby one-room schoolhouse, where the teacher was Jennie Lane's brother, William A. Curtis.

Then the still-young John Allen experienced a life-changing event. He recounted, "During my last year on the farm . . . I was a happy boy on the farm, then 'the roof fell in.' I was almost six years old when my father, who had been a Northern soldier, came and took me to the Indiana Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home near Knightstown, Indiana." Why his father took such a drastic measure may never be known.

The institution cared for orphaned, homeless, or impoverished children of Civil War Union soldiers. By the time John was admitted in 1888, the home had become the guardian of boys and girls whose parents were unable or unwilling to care for their children. John's father wrote on the May 1888 application, "Said applicant [J. C. Allen] is destitute of means of support and education, and the father of said applicant is a permanent cripple having lost his leg by accident since the war." Just a few weeks later, the six-year-old boy was brought to the home, where he told his father good-bye and remained for the next ten years.

John Allen slowly adapted to life at Knightstown, writing, "At first this was a very bitter experience. I was but a small boy and very homesick among larger boys. Somehow I gradually got over it." The boys were issued military uniforms and marched everywhere they went. Allen noted, "At the Orphans' Home we were divided into groups of about 30 and each group marched most everywhere they went, to breakfast, dinner and supper, to school and to chapel. We wore blue uniforms with knee pants and brass buttons and we lined up two and two with the smaller boys in front and had to keep in step."

The children attended classes, where Allen began learning the three Rs: reading, writing, and arithmetic. He observed, "The first year in school I was at the top of the class. The teacher, Miss Laura Walkstetter, showed me the only affection that I can remember when I handed her my slate with what must have been the correct answer." It seems what the young man needed most in his life were kind words and any signs of affection. He recalled, "One nice spring day it was my job to plow part of the home garden with two fine horses and a breaking plow. I was proud of my job, the soil was turned over beautifully and I tried to see how smooth and even I could make it. I got my reward when the old Dutch gardener told my boss, '[I]t don't take the big boys to do a good job.'"

Allen recounted another story about his stay from 1893:

When I was about 12 years old I had an experience that changed my life. A Mr. and Mrs. John Allen from Illinois visited the orphan's home and because of the same name came to see me. Mrs. Allen especially was a very fine
person and as I remember it was she who gave me Mr. Allen’s own personal Bible. Swearing was a common language among many of the boys, including myself; but gradually I broke the habit. I began going to Christian Endeavor [a non-denominational evangelical society] and took the pledge, a part of which is, “[T]o the best of my ability I will lead a Christian life.”

This promise in 1893 that he made to himself would be a trait that his own children and grandchildren would reiterate—swearing and drinking were never allowed in the Allen home.

The older children were tasked with learning a trade they could use when they left the orphanage. Allen recounted his experience with this:

At the age of 13 each boy or girl was required to learn some kind of a trade by going to school half-day and working half-day. I was either selected or chose (on my own) to work on the dairy farm where in the afternoons I helped feed the dairy herd and I milked two of the cows morning and evening. To stick one’s head into the flank of a good dairy cow on a cold winter day, with a bucket between your knees and milking with both hands helps to develop the wrists and is an excellent experience for a growing boy.

It wasn’t all work at the school. Allen enjoyed recreational activities at the Knightstown school, too, saying:

There were fun and recreation periods at the home. A reservoir or lake nearby often froze over in winter and we had excellent skating. I was a good skater and enjoyed playing cross-tag and shiny [ice hockey]. A very beautiful clear creek with rock bottom, not too far away was where we went swimming when we could. The better swimmers often went to Blue River almost two miles away. It was a beautiful stream in those early days. Both places were “out of bounds” but we somehow managed to get to them. I was not too good at baseball, but at marbles I was one of the best. We played for keeps and I usually had a pocket full of “chalkies” [unglazed clay marbles] to prove it.

Allen enjoyed some time away from the school visiting family members in the summer, recalling, “One pleasant redeeming feature during those ten years was that each summer I spent a two-month vacation either with my sister in Terre Haute or with my uncle and aunt who had moved to a small farm near Shelburn, Indiana.” Based on where he took his vacations, it does seem that father and son had permanently severed their bond. The young boy enjoyed spending time with his uncle’s black rat terrier dog, noting that they were “very close friends.” He also described a ride he took on the Pennsylvania Railroad, saying that “late June showed the woods full of wild roses in bloom.”

Allen did well in school and was a diligent worker on the farm. During his last year at the home, he was able to take a course in business, where he learned typing and shorthand, and became a proficient stenographer. Nearly sixteen years old now, he received his high school diploma in 1897. He shook hands with teachers and told his friends good-bye. As an adult, he would write, “I was in the Orphans’ Home for ten years and although I didn’t realize it at the time, this was without a doubt a very good preparation for later life. I learned at a very early age to depend upon my own efforts.”

He would return in 1929 to take photographs of the dairy herd at the orphanage.

As the teenager left school with a set of new clothes and fifteen dollars in his pocket, he must have wondered what he would do with the rest of his life. He first went to live on his uncle’s farm. After the crops were harvested that fall, he took a job on a crew that built railroads. For his effort, he earned $1.35 a day. He started as a nipper [who worked with the rails as they were being assembled on the track] and water boy, and recounted, “[B]efore I finished I was driving the spikes that hold the rails to the new wooden ties—a man’s job.”
With cold weather halting construction, he went to work in a coal mine, using mules to haul carts through the mine to an area where the coal would be brought to the surface. He recalled, “After one trip, I remember going back and finding a pile of rock on the track big enough to have buried me. I don’t remember being afraid. We just cleaned up the rock and went on hauling coal as usual. The man who had the mine leased failed to make a success of it and I lost my last week’s wages.”

Allen spent much of 1898 working near his uncle’s property for a farmer who provided him room and board and thirteen dollars per month in wages. Eventually, his older brother, James Russell Allen, who at the time was practicing dentistry in Clay City, told his younger sibling that he had a spare room in his home and the possibility of a job. John Allen wrote about that opportunity, which was with the Evansville and Indianapolis Railroad, saying:

[I would be] sweeping the floors, handling the freight, carrying the mail to the post office, delivering telegrams, etc. I would be given the opportunity to learn the telegraph and learn other business connected with running the railroad office. There were no trucks in those days and everything that came to Clay City and the surrounding country came in over the railroad. The railroad office was a busy place.

Eventually, he also served as a relief telegraph operator and agent at multiple locations on the line.

By age 20, Allen sought out and took a job as relief telegraph operator with the Baltimore and Ohio Southwestern Railroad in Washington, Indiana. Eventually, he served as a telegraph operator in Oakdale and Rivervale, Indiana, where he assumed additional duties as ticket agent, express manager, and Western Union manager.

Allen distinguished himself at the Baltimore and Ohio Southwestern and by 1902 was made a train dispatcher, which he called “the best telegraph job on the railroad.” He described himself as “probably the youngest dispatcher in the USA” and noted, “There probably is nothing better than a job bigger than you are to help to make a young man develop. You either make good or else, and I wasn’t looking for the ‘else.’”

Allen’s good fortune continued when Mary Abbie Peavey (1881–1980), who was called Abbie, agreed to marry him in 1904. As the then twenty-three-year-old Allen recalled, he had married “the best girl in Clay City, Indiana, and we spent our honeymoon at the St. Louis World’s Fair, much of the time with my bride and her cousin, a red head. I do not recommend this kind of honeymoon.”

At least one account indicates that Allen’s lifelong passion with photography had its origins in his visit to the fair. He had purchased for his wife a four-by-five Eastman Kodak camera, which was not common at the time. After learning how to use it, she would teach him how to use it and print his own photographs. By experimenting with the camera and subjects, “he gradually improved his technique and became an expert at the art,” taking photographs that captured the attention
of those who saw them. Little did he know that this hobby would soon turn into a successful business.

The Allens lived for a short time in Washington, Indiana, where John managed the 3 to 11 P.M. shift as the telegraph operator. He recalled that “things went smoothly for some time. I had a very good salary for those days and passes on the railroad that we often used.” But following the arrival of his son, Chester, in 1907, John wrote, “[It did not take me many years to decide that I didn’t want to work nights all my life seven days a week, and when my father-in-law offered me an opportunity to join with my brother-in-law and operate a 600-acre farm in Eel River bottoms, I decided to try it.”

This farm—which included chickens, pigs, horses, cattle, wheat, hayfields, orchards, and watermelons—would have been one of the larger farms in the state at the time. Chester later wrote that he was surprised about this change, saying, “I don’t know how they did it but Mother’s family talked Dad into leaving his railroad job and taking over the family farm which my Grandmother’s parents had left to her.” But Chester also noted that “Dad loved agriculture and entered the farming project with big hopes.”

Unfortunately for the Allens, poor drainage meant sections of their farm were often underwater when the nearby river flooded, making John’s reentry into farming more or less short-lived. He observed, “The farm was not well tiled, we had a wet season, and as one might guess, the farming arrangement did not work out well.” With no levees or dams to manage the water, fields often flooded.

When a third year of flooding struck the farm and money was hard to come by, John became discouraged and worried about taking care of Chester: “I gave the farm trial credit for getting me out of the train dispatcher’s job. It took something rather unusual to cause me to give up a good interesting and exciting job with a good salary. As a lifetime occupation, it did not have the possibilities that I [had] later on in the photo-illustrating business.”

Allen returned to the railroads, working first for a railroad in Hymera, Indiana, and later in the freight office on the Chicago and Eastern Illinois Railroad at Hoopeston, Illinois. It seemed that he was destined to be a railroad man for the rest of his life.

Two years passed quickly. While he enjoyed the work and the pay that went with it, he hated working evenings. He wrote, “After a few years of railroad work I decided I didn’t want to sit up nights and dispatch trains all my life, so I went to Purdue University as a clerk and secretary in the agricultural experiment station” in 1909.” At twenty-eight years old, Allen missed the outdoors and being on a farm, so he accepted the work in the Animal Husbandry Department at Purdue, saying, “I thought this might give me a chance to learn what others knew about agriculture and farm livestock.” Unbeknownst to him, the twists and turns of life were still pushing him toward photography.
John Hamilton uses a grindstone to sharpen an axe in 1931. At the time of the photograph, he was one of the oldest residents in Bobo, Indiana. (Adams County)