After working on the farm and for the railroads, John Allen made a pragmatic choice in 1909 to take the position as a clerk and stenographer in the Agricultural Experiment Station at Purdue University on the West Lafayette campus. In addition to his office work, Allen helped select uniform animals for nutritional studies, but he soon became responsible for weighing the livestock at specific intervals and tracking the data.

At the time, Purdue agricultural programs were divided into three distinct and equal units: the Agricultural Experiment Station, which conducted agricultural research; the Extension Service, which oversaw outreach efforts between the university and the people and communities in Indiana; and the School of Agriculture, which was responsible for academic programs for students. Allen was hired into the first unit under the supervision of John H. Skinner, dean of the School of Agriculture and chief of the Department of Animal Husbandry. Skinner had developed a national reputation for his research on feeding balanced diets to cattle, hogs, and sheep in order to ensure maximum and profitable gain.

To Allen’s credit, Skinner quickly learned that his new hire could be trusted when it came to collecting, analyzing, and summarizing large amounts of livestock research data. Skinner told another livestock researcher, “Mr. Allen is a first-class calculator”—a high compliment on Allen’s research and data-analysis acumen.

While Allen had gained plenty of practical working experience with livestock at the orphanage and on his family’s farm, he lacked an in-depth understanding of agriculture. Allen’s own admission was that he needed to take college classes to increase his fundamental knowledge of livestock.

Allen applied for and was accepted as a special student in the School of Agriculture from September 1911 to June 1912. The thirty-year-old worked his full-time job while taking six college-level classes, including Livestock Judging, Livestock Management, Poultry Housing and Breeding, Advance Livestock Judging, and Animal Nutrition and Principles of Feeding. Allen’s official transcripts from Purdue indicated he earned three As, one B, and two Cs in his coursework.

During this time, Allen’s interest in photography conjoined with his newfound career and education. Fortunately for him, he had access to a Press Graflex camera that had been purchased for the agricultural programs. This camera provided the opportunity for him to hone his photography skills.
He began to explore visually documenting the livestock in experiments as a novel way to complement the numerical data. His photographs immediately and irrefutably demonstrated research outcomes, causing Skinner and other station researchers to take note. Allen began exploring different methods for taking the photographs, changing the distance and angles to ascertain the best approach for documenting research results. As a result, he began developing an eye for what constituted a good photograph.

Allen used the Graflex to capture differences between well-bred and inferior specimens of hogs, horses, sheep, and dairy and beef cattle, with the resulting photographs used for instructing students. Within a few years, he expanded his subjects to include corn, soybeans, strawberries, tomatoes, apples, peaches, and just about anything found in farm fields, barns, and homes. Allen’s photographs began appearing within Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension publications. Researchers saw the value of sending photographs with their articles to newspapers and trade publications, and soon his images began to appear in periodicals such as *Hoard's Dairyman*, *Prairie Farmer*, and *Breeder's Gazette*. The photographs published in state and national publications raised the visibility of Purdue’s agricultural programs. As Allen’s grandson recounted, “Purdue liked the attention that the pictures that were being published in several agricultural magazines brought to Purdue.”

Allen himself also received a fair share of positive press from these published photographs. As his renown expanded beyond Indiana’s borders, Allen’s
images caught the attention of Ohio State University administrators. In 1915 Ohio State offered Allen a twofold opportunity: a contract to photograph 10,000 images of rural life in Ohio and an offer to become a full-time photographer for the university. For Allen, this must have been a dream come true. By this time, Allen knew he had both the talent and interest to make photography a successful and profitable career.

Allen told Purdue administrators about the offer, and Purdue quickly matched the Ohio State proposal, offering Allen a full-time position as the official photographer for the Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension Service. Instead, Allen negotiated to work half-time at Purdue so he could concurrently start his own photography business. Purdue agreed to Allen’s terms, with Skinner writing in a May 1915 letter to his boss in the Agricultural Experiment Station that "Mr. J. C. Allen be employed on the basis of one-half time, with the understanding that he is to devote the other half to his own private business, his services to the university to distributed as follows; Salary to be paid Mr. Allen to be $900.00 per year and to be understood that his personal business is not to interfere with his experiment station duties." The agreement with Purdue also stated that all photography equipment had to be purchased by Allen’s business.

Later in life, when asked about why he became a farm photographer, Allen said, “Probably by necessity and accident. Then with a wife and two children (as with many young people today) the wages were barely enough to meet expenses. So, I had to find some way to supplement my income and I turned to photography. I soon found there was a place for good photographs.”

Indeed, in 1912 the Allen family had welcomed a daughter, Martha Charlene Allen. With a growing family to support, why would Allen decide to forgo a full-time position, cutting a regular paycheck in half if the family had been experiencing financial difficulties? As early as 1910, Allen had perceived an opportunity to generate a second income by selling high-quality photographs to the agricultural press, and by 1915, he had developed a savvy mind for business. Simply put, he believed he could earn much more by selling photographs through his business than by working full-time for Purdue.
Allen specifically pointed to advice he had received from a well-respected agricultural editor. From Art Page, former editor of Orange Judd Farmer and from the Breeder’s Gazette, I discovered that there was some market for good farm pictures, so I decided to try to fill some of that demand. This gradually developed into a photo-illustrating business. Without attempting to do so I had by accident prepared myself during the past years for just such a business. First, my boyhood experiences on the farm gave me some practical knowledge of the farm, the course in livestock judging at Purdue University was particularly valuable for making good livestock photos and my former business training on the railroad helped to fit me for success in this kind of enterprise. It still required determination and plenty of hard work.

Allen's son, Chester (left), and daughter, Martha, fish on the Wildcat Creek in 1918. John Allen frequently photographed his children as models for his commercial work. (Tippecanoe County)

It is often said that a photograph is worth a thousand words, but in the case of one of Allen's, it was worth a poem. In 1934, Dean John Skinner of the Purdue University School of Agriculture received the following letter from John Ashton, managing editor of the Texas Grower and Valley Farmer headquartered in Corpus Christi, Texas.

I write you now mainly on account of an Indiana boy whose name I do not know. He is probably a man by now—or pretty near it, and his picture is on the front cover of our magazine, copies of which are going to you under separate cover. Mr. Allen, your photographer, sold me this picture along with others, about 1928 or 1929. Please give Mr. Allen one of the copies I am sending you, and ask him to identify this boy. It is such a striking picture that, after I had decided to use it, I went home one evening with the image of that Indiana boy in my mind and wrote the little poem about him, on page 9, of the February number of The Texas Grower and Valley Farmer, symbolizing him as typical of the American farm boy. Already people are writing me quite enthusiastically about the poem, and the biggest daily newspaper in Texas—The Dallas News—published the poem in its issue of Sunday, Feb. 18, 1934. . . . I wish Mr. Allen would bring this matter to the attention of the parents of the boy in question. . . . I wish to say, also, that Mr. Allen’s skill as a photographer of rural subjects is outstanding and “The Farmer Boy” is one of his very best compositions.

This poem, which Ashton had written after being inspired by Allen’s photograph, became popular in agricultural circles.

The Farmer Boy

He’s just a country urchin, as happy as can be: A child of Mother Nature,—’tis plain enough to see. He’s roamed the fields for miles around, he’s romped on ev’ry hill, And woods and streams have had to yield their secrets to his will. He knows the haunts of coon and fox, he’s watched the eagle soar; He’s trailed the bobcat to its lair, and heard the cougar roar. He’s climbed the tallest poplar tree, and many a bee’s nest found. And once, when seeking arrow-heads, he struck an Indian mound. The names of all the trees he knows, and many weeds can name; And ev’ry season brings its joys to one who knows his game. In fact, like Daniel Boone of old, he loves God’s creatures’ ways. His freckled face and tousled hair, his smile that won’t come off; His ragged jeans and shoeless feet proclaim a lad who’s “tough.” “O, would I were a boy like him!” in fancy comes a wail From pampered weakling, richly clad, whose health’s begun to fail. He’s just a lusty farmer boy, contented as can be; Nor would he change his humble home for palace, no, not he! No city wiles his mind beguile; he’s made of sterner stuff; He’s reared in Nature’s own front yard—a diamond in the rough!

Skinner replied to Ashton, stating, “I have your letter and copy of your magazine and poem on the farm boy. I will be glad to refer this to Mr. John Allen, and I think he can identify the lad for you and for the boy’s parents. I am delighted with the poem. It has a lot of fine sentiment in it.”
Allen described one of his first photographs, saying:

[It was of] a small lamb taken with a borrowed 5 x 7 Press Graflex. This was back in the days when drawings were the chief means of illustrating farm publications. I sold the picture to a leading agricultural publication for the great sum of fifty cents, and, while the fifty cents was never received, my imagination was fired with the possibilities of agricultural illustrations for the farm press. ¹⁷

Allen worked long hours to get his photography business off the ground, knowing that he had to have the photographs and a market for them in order to make money. ¹⁸

He described going out into the countryside during his first years to take photographs of images he thought others would purchase: “All of my off days were spent making photographs with this borrowed [Graflex] camera on farms that lay within walking distance of town, and on occasions I would splurge enough to rent a horse and buggy and make short photographic trips into the country.” ¹⁹ In time, that gamble would pay off.

Allen credited Hoard’s Dairyman as among the first to compensate him for one of his photographs, which showed the head of a dairy calf. Allen noted, “In actual cash, I received 50 cents for the picture, but it was worth dollars to me to see this first picture in print.” ²⁰

An earlier photograph was described in a Purdue Alumnus article: “It all began in 1910, when John Allen, then employed by the Purdue Animal Husbandry department, borrowed a camera from the Purdue Extension Service and took a picture of his Buster Brown-Clad son, Chester, ’29, with a lap full of Purdue prize piglets. A national farm magazine paid the munificent sum of $1.50 for the publication rights.” ²¹

Another photograph taken early in Allen’s career of a child holding a small goat was sold to Country Gentleman.

One of Allen’s trademarks throughout his professional career was taking pictures of children—including his own children and grandchildren—interacting with young animals. He strongly believed that a picture needed to quickly capture the viewer’s attention, and children always worked to make the viewer take a second look. Reflecting back on his career in 1976, Allen said he was “most proud of his work with children, where animals and children could be brought together.” ²²

Ralph Reeder, who worked in agricultural communications at Purdue, noted that soon after Allen’s photographs began appearing in popular magazines such as the Breeder’s Gazette and Prairie Farmer, “his photographs were showing up regularly in other national farm magazines.” ²³ Allen was now a businessman in possession of his own company, which he named J. C. Allen Rural Life Photo Service. His work through that business and for Purdue would eventually earn him a reputation for being one of the country’s best rural life photographers.
Steve Hurley plays marbles near Lafayette. (Tippecanoe County, 1932)