Allen’s interest in rural photography was well-timed. He had embarked on his new career just as the print media had acquired the technology to print black-and-white photographs. With the Purdue deal now in place, he began taking images for the university and commercial clients.

Allen’s duties as a Purdue photographer varied. One moment he was taking pictures for the Agricultural Experiment Station researchers and the next, for campus Extension specialists. He also took photographs for the Deeris, which was the Purdue student yearbook, and the Exponent, the student-run campus newspaper. During a career that would last many decades, Allen would take thousands of photographs for Purdue agriculture and campus activities, especially many sporting events. His subjects included famous people, registration, graduation ceremonies, campus buildings, 4-H events, university life, livestock association meetings, classroom lectures, Winter Short Courses, and various state and national conferences.

Most all other subjects were shot to support his ever-expanding personal business. Allen’s straightforward motto was simply, “Have camera, will travel.” While his strongest focus was on rural photography, he also did photo shoots for calendars, weddings, group club photos, events, funerals, and even accident claims for insurance. He also served as the official photographer for the Indiana State Fair from 1914 into the 1960s. His ability to capture life at its most earnest, particularly in rural places, charmed people from all
walks of life. Allen inherently understood which images held eye appeal and which would find wide interest in commercial advertising. Writing for *Hoard's Dairyman* in 1959, Allen shared his business philosophy.

To be successful in photography, you must know what constitutes a good picture and how to select subjects which are best for pictures. . . . Photography, especially of farm livestock and other farm subjects, is and has been my life’s work. . . . These subjects of most of our photos, therefore, are farm people and their work, farm livestock and poultry, farm buildings, crops and fruits. We do some commercial photography for special clients and some assignment work, both of which fit in nicely with the farm illustrating business and give us an opportunity to travel. We have been very careful, however, not to get into the portrait business in our studio.³

When choosing subject matter, Allen had a twofold approach. First, he wanted to capture the adaptations by farmers that made their jobs easier or more efficient. Second, he looked for impromptu photographic opportunities to create unique images. He stated that the “farm community is loaded with photographic possibilities if the photographer has patience and the eye to locate pleasing subject matter.”⁴

As a photographer, Allen saw opportunities throughout the four very distinct seasons of the year.

Personally spring is my favorite season for farm picture hunting. It is then that new life is in abundance; little pigs, colts that before many years will be plodding along doing the heavy farm labor, lambs and calves frisking about the pastures and baby chicks filling every chick brooder house. It is then that every farmer capable of work is in the field with team or tractor plowing, working the seed bed, planting seed. It is then that blossoms of apple, peach, pear and plum trees form beautiful frames for your many farm photographs. During the summer months come the pictures of growing crops, threshing of small grain and haying at its best. Fall brings the harvest and winter either snow or inside scenes showing the farmer milking, repairing tools for another year or around the radio with his family.⁵

Allen had the foresight to adapt to changing times across rural landscapes. The subjects he photographed shifted over time to reflect the advances in farming practices, introduction of new technologies, and implementation of agricultural research. These included:

- field work done by hand and with horses,
- improved efficiency of farm buildings,
- promotion of purebred livestock herds,
- advantages in fence construction,
- adaptations to reduce hand labor inside poultry houses and dairy barns,
- spraying equipment for apple orchards,
- replacement of horses with steel-wheeled tractors,
- use of rubber tires on tractors,
- switch from open-pollinated corn to hybrid corn,
- introduction of self-propelled equipment,
- use of electricity on farms,
- children and young animals,
- nature scenes, and
- flower gardens and individual flowers.
While there were few subjects that Allen would not photograph, one subject is conspicuously absent: the struggle of Depression-era families during the 1920s and 1930s. Despite a demand for photographs documenting the financial and emotional toll during this time period, Allen made a personal decision to avoid such work. Indeed, he was fortunate to be successfully positioned to make decisions with his conscience at a time of great hardship for so many. He had lived through difficulties and poverty as a young man and chose not to make money off those finding themselves unemployed and struggling to make ends meet.
Allen’s grandson, John O. Allen, said his grandfather “watched for the pictures to appear to him,” noting, “I don’t think he tried changing what they were doing as much as he tried going along.” Indeed, John Allen himself explained that “after making farm photographs for almost thirty years I can assure you that one of the prime requisites of a livestock photographer is patience and more patience—patience with the animals, patience with the animal handlers and owners, and patience with would-be helpers who often swarm like bees to honey when a picture is being made.”

Allen described the process he used to get his images: “At least my aim has been to turn out completed photographs that appear as though the subject or subjects didn’t realize there was a camera within the state boundaries. However, practically every shot, at least the best ones, were posed to some degree—posed to make them look unposed.”

He went on to say that “taking farm pictures as in making any other type, it isn’t so much the kind of camera you have, though some have their limitations, but it is your ability to use your camera quickly and skillfully.” He explained in an undated and unpublished manuscript how he set up scenes.

Usually when photographing farm animals I prefer to go about my work alone or with the help of my assistant, but now and then the farmer can be of great assistance in herding the livestock if you can make him understand just the goal toward which you are working. As stated before, it is essential to obtain pictures that appear natural, but after selecting your background, correct light angles and possibly a tree to frame the photograph you may need to move the animals across the pasture into the camera’s line of vision...

When you ask permission to make photographs the farmer may want to place himself or part of his family into the picture for they are usually mighty proud of their livestock. Of course you can’t insult the man by saying no, but be sure to keep any individuals to the edge of your picture so that they may be cropped off in turning out your finished print. It isn’t safe to crop them off in making the exposure for they may insist on seeing prints. If the farmer alone wants in the picture and is dressed in his work clothes, you can give him a feed bucket or hay fork and he may add atmosphere to your shot. Don’t let him look at the camera, but insist that he take a position to indicate that he is actually at work...

I would say: learn the mechanical part of your camera first so that all attention may be directed toward the picture at hand, solicit the cooperation of the farm resident so that you will not be charged with trespassing, decide in advance the general composition and best lighting, then work quietly toward this goal being ready at all times to release the shutter when your selected subjects have taken a nature pose that produces a pleasing composition...

Like other types of activities, each photograph of individual livestock has its individual problems. Therefore it is well to know your camera and film thoroughly before attempting livestock pictures so that all thought may be devoted to your subject. Animals don’t understand much about pictures so once you have them set you won’t have an opportunity to work out your exposure and play with the various gadgets that may be incorporated on your camera. They may take a perfect pose for a fleeting moment and it is up to you to be ready to release the shutter when that moment comes.

As soon as Allen received word that Purdue had agreed to his part-time status, he began traveling intensively throughout the Hoosier State and beyond. From 1916 to 1922, his excursions also took him to Illinois, Kentucky, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Ohio, West Virginia, and Wisconsin. He once estimated that he had driven more than 400,000 miles and taken 60,000 photographs by the 1940s. Eventually he traveled to every state within the continental United States for his work.
While traveling across the country in the twenty-first century is common, during the first half of the twentieth century it was a major undertaking that required advanced and detailed planning. There were few hotels, restaurants, and gas stations, so it was necessary to carry extra tires, fuel, oil, provisions, and camping equipment. Allen liked traveling in touring cars such as the Mitchell sedan. It was big enough to get across the larger ruts and spacious enough to carry all of his supplies, such as the hundreds of glass plates needed for lengthy countryside trips.\(^\text{12}\)

Allen remained constantly accessible to magazine editors, who requested photographs to highlight stories, and to advertisers, who requested images showcasing their products. The open dialogue Allen maintained with his customers and availability of images on hand was instrumental to Allen’s success. Editors frequently contacted him by either letter or telegram. Over time, the telephone became his conduit to his customers. By late in his career, he said, “Today approximately 60 percent of the requests come by General Telephone and almost everyone is in a rush.”\(^\text{13}\)

Whether through experience or reputation, editors knew they could depend on Allen to fulfill their needs quickly and professionally. If he didn’t have the specific image in his files that a customer needed, Allen could always find a nearby farm or location to get the images others wanted. In a 2017 interview, John O. Allen indicated that his grandfather “travelled so much and came to know so many people. Grandfather became popular with farmers. When he started out for the day he had an idea where he was going to be and what he was going after.”\(^\text{14}\)
When John Allen moved to take the Purdue position in 1909, he and his family lived at several different places around West Lafayette. In 1925, the Allens bought a nearly six-acre property at 1341 Northwestern Avenue. John Allen Benham, one of Allen’s grandsons, said his grandfather had every intention of remodeling and renovating the home on the property. However, after receiving estimates for remodeling versus rebuilding, the Allens decided to pursue the latter option.

To design his new home, Allen worked with locally prominent architect Walter Scholer, who was well known in the Purdue community as the designer of many campus buildings. In 1930, the Allens moved into their Tudor Revival home.

Surrounded with expansive grounds, flower gardens, walking paths, and a large vegetable garden, it became known to the family as the “house on the hill.”

As long as Allen remained employed by Purdue, he kept his office in the Agricultural Experiment Station. Eventually, he established a studio in his Northwestern Avenue home to store the overflow of materials from the campus office. The complete inventory of photographs and processing equipment were not transferred to his house on the hill until Allen’s retirement from Purdue in 1952.

Allen respected the rights of property owners and did not step onto their property without asking first, explaining: “I make a practice of asking permission before going onto a farm and in my years of travel I can count on the fingers on one hand the times that I have been refused this permission. When refusal was made it was easy to gather that it was due to the farmer’s unpleasant contacts with some other camera carrying person who had taken advantage of him.”

Occasionally farmers would contract with Allen to take photographs of their property, but typically the landowners were not his customers. He noted, “One kind of business we avoid is that of asking to take pictures on farms in the hope of selling to the farm people themselves. If we have good cooperation from farm folks in taking pictures, we usually send them prints free of charge for their picture albums or collections.” Allen gave farmers the free prints in exchange for his right to have unrestricted use of those photographs. Farmers were asked to sign a release so Allen could sell them whenever and to whomever. In a few instances, he sweetened the deal by paying the farmer one dollar for the right to sell the images.
Allen thought that a photographer needed talent, but he also believed a photographer needed “the business ability to market the pictures after they’ve been taken.” From the time he took the risk to set up his own business, he proved to be a capable businessman.

Sometimes, Allen quoted a specific price for a photograph, such as in this 1950 exchange: “We hope one of these pictures [Grand Champion Red Poll Cow at the National Dairy Show] is what you want. You may select from them at $5.00 each for publication in the Breeders’ Gazette or advertising.” At other times, magazine editors offered a flat payment, which Allen had to agree to if he wanted to do business with the publication. But for many would-be customers, he remained quiet when asked about prices. Allen let the person set the price, expecting the offer often to be advantageous to him. If the offer was too low, though, Allen and the customer could negotiate until they agreed on a price.

In the very early years of the business, exclusive rights for using photographs were not as important as they would be in later decades, so Allen would sell a popular photograph multiple times. However, he was savvy enough to make adjustments to suit individual customers, so he often maintained multiple versions of an original—cropped or processed differently—in order to supply similar but slightly different results of the same image.

Allen could even sell photographs of Purdue events, as John Skinner indicated in this 1928 correspondence: “I have the photographs of the Marshall cattle and I appreciate this very much. Undoubtedly some of these will be wanted from time to time for publicity purposes. . . . I would suggest that you do not use the photographs showing picture of myself and Mr. [Henry] Marshall [Purdue trustee and farmer] without my approval. Any of the other pictures can be used wherever you see fit.”

Even when the Allens took their summer vacations, John managed to mix some business with pleasure, taking photographs along the way. In one account, he explained:

Our son and daughter were now at an age to get the most out of our annual camping trips. We would spend the month traveling, taking pictures of interesting things along the way and fishing. We traveled through Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota and one summer we visited the Yellowstone National Park, camping all the way and taking pictures with which to pay our expenses. Later we made these vacation trips into Canada and spent most of the time fishing.
He astutely determined that others would enjoy—and pay for—photographs of these beautiful vacation landscapes. So in addition to taking photographs of the family campsites and other activities, he took hundreds of photographs of monuments, wildlife, flowers, mountains, and canyons.

Even when conditions for taking photographs weren’t ideal, Allen was resourceful, noting, “One summer, when on vacation, we ran into a very wet rainy week while we were in a log cabin on the Flambeau River in Wisconsin. We spent the week fishing and picking wild red raspberries. I posed a picture of myself sitting on a big rock along the river bank with some very nice walleye pike and a South Bend bait. The picture won first prize of $500 in gold in the South Bend Bait [Company] contest of that year.”

Allen relied on two Kodak-brand cameras for most of his career: a lighter-weight, wooden view camera and a heavier steel Graflex. In 1933, the Purdue Alumnus reported that his scientific approach to photography “enabled him to become an expert and his expanded business forced him to add new types of cameras to his collection and at the present time he has a full battery of view cameras, a Graflex speed camera, and a Cinema outfit.”

While he had many cameras in his photographic arsenal, his trademark was the wooden view camera, which sat on top of a wooden tripod. This camera used George Eastman five-by-seven-inch glass-plate negatives but was eventually converted to film. His grandson would later report, “He continued to use these wood view cameras many years after more modern and smaller cameras became available because of the excellent quality of the pictures the large wooden view cameras made.”

But from the time he began taking pictures, Allen had taken photos with a Graflex, which could use either celluloid or glass negatives.

He once recalled, “I was able to purchase my own 5 x 7 Press Graflex and though I have used many cameras since then, I still have two of these now-out-of-production cameras and still prefer to use them for...”
many types of livestock pictures.” At one time, he even became a spokesperson for the Kodak camera.

In a 1959 interview that appeared in Hoard’s Dairyman, Allen described the progression of equipment he used.

The first professional camera I used was a 5- x 7-inch Press Graflex with a 10- or 12-inch lens, Zeiss Tessar f4.5. This is a very heavy outfit and most people wouldn’t want it for that reason, but I still use it for certain livestock groups where there is action. This camera is focused through a reflector and the subjects can be viewed in the camera until the exposure is made.

Our next professional equipment was a 5- x 7-inch view camera equipped with a Protar lens in units which give various focal lengths. This lens, used on a tripod, gives a very sharp image and the depth of field at a given stop is greater.

For interiors we use 8- x 10-inch view cameras equipped with [a] special wide-angle lens. Our 4- x 5-inch Speed Graphic is very convenient, especially for color where action must be stopped.

We may have the only 5- x 7-inch Naturalists Graflex, which we had made to order for use in photographing individual beef animals where a long focus lens must be used to avoid distortion. The camera will accommodate a 23-inch lens and is focused though a reflector so the animal is seen on ground glass until exposure is made. This is quite an advantage with restless animals, especially in fly time. . . . We, however, prefer the larger cameras because we think the larger negative, when properly done, makes a better print."

By the 1920s, photographers switched to cheaper and lighter-weight film, and glass-plate negatives fell out of favor. Yet Allen preferred the glass plates over celluloid film and continued using them long after most people had changed over to film. In fact, his devotion to glass plates motivated him to purchase as many as he could find. Even though glass was more expensive, Allen thought they made better prints and did not deteriorate like celluloid film.

When using a camera that required the glass-plate negatives, Allen would load a film holder in the view camera with two plates that were taken from a bag draped over his shoulder. After taking two pictures, he would place the now-used glass-plate negatives in the outside portion of his shoulder bag, and refill the film holder with two new plates from inside the bag. Allen continued putting them in this order until all of the glass plates in the bag were used. Upon finishing, he placed the negatives in a box in the order they were taken. Throughout the process, Allen was a meticulous note taker, writing down information such as the subject’s name, location, date, and anything he considered of importance in a small notebook.

With negatives in a box and details in a notebook, Allen would return to his Purdue campus office on the ground floor of the Agricultural Experiment Station, which is known today as the Agricultural Administration Building. Allen had been placed in charge of a newly established university photographic service located there in 1920. In addition to himself, there were normally two employees on staff, with one paid for by the university and one, by the photography business."

Allen traveled far and wide to obtain images for clients and his stock photo library. Here, he navigates a flooded road as he carries photographic and camping supplies on the running board of his car. (N.p., n.d.; courtesy John O. Allen)
Black-and-white prints were produced in the office. One staff member worked in the darkroom to develop the negatives into prints, while the second sorted the negatives and prints into envelopes. Since the cameras Allen used made five-by-seven-inch prints, enlargements were needed when customers requested bigger sizes, such as eight-by-tens. After the prints were developed, they were washed to remove any leftover chemicals from the darkroom processing. Then, each print was placed on a board and run through a dryer. Color negatives were sent to Kodak for processing.

In the middle of the office was a large wooden table where the prints were sorted. Here, they also received an identification number and an identifying stamp, which read, “Photo By J. C. Allen, W. Lafayette, Ind.” Over time, the wording of the stamp would be changed to “Stock Photograph, J. C. Allen and Son, West Lafayette, Indiana, For One Publication Only, Must Not Be Loaned or Syndicated.” Allen or his staff would then write a brief description in pencil on the back of the print. Occasionally he typed a very detailed description on paper and glued it to the back of the photograph.

Prints were placed in envelopes that had the same number as the print and notes that had been transferred from Allen’s notebook. This photo sleeve also contained the film or glass-plate negative. Some of Allen’s first photographs, which were images from Purdue’s beef cattle experiments dated 1910, were stored in this manner.

As his Purdue and personal work increased, the number of photographs he had to manage also grew, so he needed a way to quickly retrieve specific photographs. How would he find the one photograph amongst the tens of thousands—that needle in the haystack? To solve that problem, he created a filing system with individual subject cards labeled as horses, hay, electricity, and so on. Each subject was further divided into subcategories, then the identification number on the photo sleeve would be written under the appropriate subject and subcategory. As a result, he could look in his card file, retrieve identification numbers, and select the exact image he wanted. It’s been estimated by his grandson that, at one time, the card catalog had 77,000 subject categories that categorized several hundred thousand photographs.

While the employees went about their daily work, Allen could be seen at his rolltop desk. There he maintained the accounting books for his Purdue and personal business, took requests from university
and other clients, and looked through the files to fill orders. Years later, he recounted:

Many of my office hours are spent in assembling a suitable selection of pictures to send in response to telegrams, telephone calls, and mail requests. These selections are made up from our stock prints, which are numbered, cataloged, and filed according to subject matter. We have a stock collection of some 25,000 farm and livestock pictures. As time goes by, some of these may become more valuable as a history of early farming operations.\(^3\)

As Allen’s reputation grew, J. C. Allen Rural Life Photo Service began receiving more requests from around the country. In time, Allen’s son, Chester, began working part time as a photographer while he was a student at Purdue. When he graduated in 1929 with a bachelor’s degree in horticultural science, he became full-time photographer, and the name of the business was officially changed to J. C. Allen and Son Rural Life Photo Service.\(^3\) According to John O. Allen, a grandson to John C. Allen and son of Chester’s, the two had “a friendly competition of who could get out in the field and shoot the most pictures. Sometimes they traveled together, but many times they did not.”\(^7\)

John C. Allen wrote that Chester “was great help in further developing the photo business I had started. I had put a lot of effort into getting started, but by this time business was going very well and we could spend more of our time in production, hunting new picture material and finding new markets.”\(^7\) He also noted that Chester “was quite good with writing stories to go with the pictures.”\(^7\) The *Purdue Alumnus* became a steady customer of the pair, stating, “More than half of all the photographs which have appeared in the *Alumnus* since the magazine began using illustrations (shortly after World War I) have come from the same source—John and Chester Allen, official photographers for the Purdue Agricultural Experiment Station and for the Purdue Extension Service.”\(^4\)

While John preferred taking images in black and white, Chester converted to color film. John told Purdue agricultural communicator Ralph Reeder that this was “because the magazines and advertising agencies want color even though it is more expensive.”\(^7\)

According to John O. Allen, “Chester Allen entered the business during a time when tractors were rapidly replacing horses for power, and the tractor companies wanted photos of their new models. There was a great demand for truck and tire pictures, since that was the era of change from metal wheels on farm equipment to rubber tires.”\(^7\) Until his death in 1996 at the age of 89,
Chester dedicated his career to photographing rural life, just like his father had done before him.

John C. Allen would eventually live to see yet a third generation join the family business. In 1967, grandson John O. Allen began working with his grandfather and father after receiving a bachelor’s degree in agricultural economics from Purdue. Eventually, Daniel G. Allen, who was John C. Allen’s great-grandson and John O. Allen’s son, would become the fourth-generation photographer with the family business.

John O. Allen explained, “The business went from a company name to a corporation around 1970 in the name of J. C. Allen and Son, Inc. Grandfather was still with us at that time and he was very complimented that we wanted the business to remain permanently with his name starting the title. We would not have had it any other way.” Today, the grandson continues what his grandfather started early in the twentieth century.

John C. Allen remained on staff at Purdue until his official retirement in 1952. He had wanted to retire in 1951, but for unknown reasons, the retirement was delayed for a year, with the Purdue Board of Trustees announcing it in June 1952. After leaving the university, Allen moved his business to his home on Northwestern Avenue, noting, “With opportunity to put our entire time into the illustrating business, it continued to grow.”

Even as Chester took on more duties and responsibilities, the elder Allen continued to be active in his business. One of his last photography trips was in 1969, when the eighty-eight-year-old went on a trip to Alaska, but he was not able to make the trip due to his health.
assignment for *Farm Journal*. Chester carried the larger, heavier cameras, while his father carried a lighter Rollei camera. John captured an image of Hereford cattle looking through the slats of a farm gate, which appeared on the cover of the January 1977 issue of the publication.  

In retirement, John C. Allen continued to receive recognition for his work. In 1963, the Purdue Agricultural Alumni Association honored him with its Certificate of Distinction, which is the highest honor the organization bestows. In 1977, the American Agricultural Editors’ Association named him as an honorary member, summarizing his work by saying, “It’s doubtful that any other name has been so widely recognized in agricultural photography. The J. C. Allen and Son mark has probably appeared with more photographs, in more farm publications, than any in our nation.”

Even at age ninety-four, Allen kept regular office hours, answering the phone and occasionally venturing out to take photographs. His time during the latter years was also spent enjoying gardening, fishing, golf, bowling, bridge, and Purdue football.

On July 21, 1976, John C. Allen died at home at the age of ninety-four. He was laid to rest at Grand View Cemetery in West Lafayette.

Mary Abbie Allen, died on August 19, 1980, at age ninety-eight and was buried next to her husband.

Allen’s work continued to receive accolades following his death. In 1996, his business received the Agricultural Science and Heritage Award from the Indiana State Fair. And in 2012, the Indiana Historical Society gave it a Centennial Business Award for its 100 years in business. On April 14, 2004, a permanent display to honor the legacy of John C. Allen was installed inside Pfendler Hall on the Purdue campus at West Lafayette.