

Photos by J. C. Allen & Son

R. L. Reeder

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Photos by J. C. Allen & Son

Abstract

At the 1974 AAACE meeting in Indiana, 93-year-old John Allen showed up and took a bow.



**J. C. Allen with Press Graflex
and Mitchell auto, 1919.**

**“Have Camera, Will Travel”—
and He Did, for**

Photos by J. C. Allen & Son

R. L. Reeder

At the 1974 AAACE meeting in Indiana, 93-year-old John Allen showed up and took a bow. He didn't need the publicity—he and his pictures had been recognized many times—but it was a tie back 35 years to the previous AAACE meeting at Purdue. Then Tom Johnson had asked John to judge the visuals contest and give a talk about taking pictures. John said coming back made him feel good “after all these years to have AAACE members make a fuss over an old photographer.”

Partly as a result of that visit, John and Chester have given the agricultural information department their invaluable collection of negatives that show Purdue during the 40 years they were on campus. Some of the pictures on these pages are from that file, and the others are favorites of John, loaned to ACE for this occasion. Like John, they have an ageless quality about them.

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For 65 years the J. C. Allen & Son mark on a farm life photograph has meant quality. Now at 94 John still keeps office hours and is likely to answer if you dial their number. Occasionally he will get out a camera and shoot again, but most of the pictures are now taken by Chester, who has been taking them since he was old enough to hold a camera. Before that he and his sister were the prime subjects of many of the Allen photographs, often in association with animals.

Asked how he became such a remarkable photographer of subjects hard to take, John says simply, "Poverty. All I had in the beginning was knowledge of agriculture and the necessity to work."

He had one other thing—his wife's camera. He had given her, before they were married, a 4x5 Eastman, a rare machine in those days. After she had learned to use it, she taught John how to take and print his own pictures.

His knowledge of agriculture came from working on a farm for 10 years as a boy in an orphanage near Knightstown, Indiana. Then after a stint of railroading, he came to Purdue as an assistant in the animal husbandry department. There he found that very few good animal pictures were being taken and decided to improve on the situation with a Graflex that the department owned. After that, he found that farm publications would pay for such pictures and augment his meager salary. He was in business.

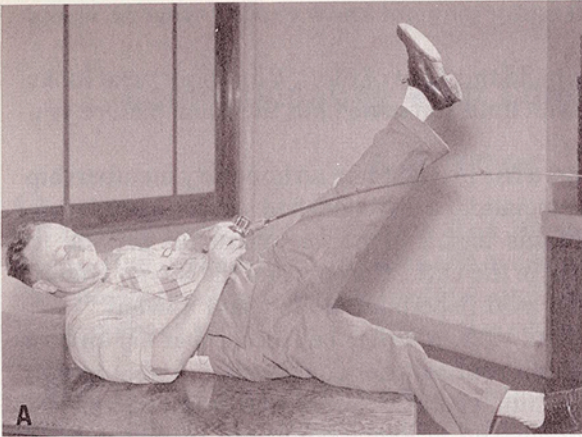
The first J. C. Allen sale was of a calf head to Hoard's Dairyman for 50¢. Then Art Page of Prairie Farmer began to buy some cover pictures and Breeder's Gazette became a good customer. Within a few years his photographs were showing up regularly in other national farm magazines.

One of his early sales was a picture of a small child with a small goat to Country Gentleman. He became most proud of his work with children, where animals and children could be brought together. "A picture needs to be catchy," he says. "It needs human interest of the kind that makes you want to look again."

First you need to love the kids, then find something interesting for them to do, study the light to be sure it's coming from the right direction to make the kind of reproduction you want. That's how John says to do it.

By 1915 John's pictures were becoming known and Ohio State asked him to come over and take 10,000 pictures of Ohio agriculture along with a full-time job as photographer. That caused Agriculture Dean G. I. Christie to ask that he become the official Purdue photographer, a job he held until 1951. He thought he was retiring then at the age of 70.

Since that time the Allens have made a lot of money from assignment photography, but their fortune has been in their files. If they see something "catchy," they grab a camera and take a picture for later use because, as



A. Tom Johnston, long-time Purdue editor, gives a fishing demonstration at the 1939 AAACE meeting.

B. Purdue's great basketball coach, Ward Lambert, giving All-American Johnny Wooden a few pointers in 1930.

C. Earl Butz at his ag econ desk in 1948.

D. Chester as a young model for his Dad.

E. Chester's son, in turn, becomes a model with friends.

F. Young Mary Elizabeth Skinner, whose father was dean of agriculture of Purdue.



Chester says, "even the best editor may not know exactly what he wants until he sees it printed."

Obviously it takes years to build this kind of file. "You shoot what looks good," Chester says, "then wait until someone likes the same picture you did."

Along the way, John's camera has brought him an honorary membership in the Agricultural Editors Association, a distinguished service award from Purdue Ag Alumni, the Kiwanis legion of honor award for service to community and country, travel in the U.S., Europe, and the Soviet Union. In his time off he has been an avid fisherman, golfer, and bowler.

As for Chester, he started out to be a writer but found that his kind of journalism had to sell immediately, but pictures could wait. "A photograph can be taken as the inspiration hits, and be good for five or ten years," he says. "But getting into photography is like getting into other kinds of editorial work. You usually don't jump out of school and become an editor of a magazine. It takes some time, particularly our kind of photography. If you like to take pictures, you will take them when you see them, knowing that the good ones will stay good."

Chester says his best course at Purdue was one in flower arrangement, in which he learned the various kinds of composition. "You imagine what you want to get in your picture, finally see it in front of the camera, and that's the time to push the button."

Like other kinds of business, picture taking goes through phases. A dozen years ago the Allens comment that the fad was for putting filters on everything. If you happened to like getting things in focus, a filter would help get rid of it. Now they get a lot of requests for nude pictures.

"That's one way to avoid the perpetual problem of women's clothes going out of style in the file pictures," they say, "but we can't comply."

John shot in black and white, but now Chester must shoot mostly in color because the magazines and advertising agencies want color even though it is more expensive.

"That means plenty of light," Chester says. "You can shoot color under any kind of condition, but the customer may not remember six months from now what kind of day it was when he insisted on shooting."

Black and whites could be improved usually by some manipulation in the developing, but color has to be "right on the nose."

That seems to be the way to stay in the picture business. Catchy and right on the nose.