Charles F. Curtiss, 1863–1946:  
A Brief Biography¹

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The title Dean of Agriculture in our land-grant system has been given to many great men. Some have had the opportunity and innate ability to create. One such leader was Dean Charles F. Curtiss of Iowa State College (ISC). Among his many other monumental contributions, the most important was described by C. L. Burlingham, a student, at the dinner held at the Saddle and Sirloin Club in 1925 when the dean’s portrait was hung. He said, "Dean Curtiss instilled in us the dignity of agriculture. He taught us to spell Agriculture with a capital 'A'."

In his short response, the dean laid bare how he had been able to create such a powerful college of agriculture. His ending sentence was, "The work of the true investigator (agricultural researcher) will outlive the work of the teacher or administrative head." With such praise for the researchers on his faculty, it is small wonder how he built agriculture.

Dean Curtiss was born in 1863 at Nora, IL, but grew up on a farm 10 miles north of the Iowa State Campus. He earned his B.S. from ISC in 1887 and joined the faculty in 1891. He received his M.S. from ISC in 1894, one of three granted before the turn of the century.

In 1891, President Beardshear appointed "Tama Jim" Wilson, a powerful journalist and past congressman from Iowa, who, with "Uncle Henry" Wallace, had brought about reorganization of ISC, to head the new program in agriculture. Wilson and Curtiss made quite a team; both saw ISC as an agricultural college serving the interests of the state. When Curtiss joined the faculty, there was one course and one instructor in agriculture. He formulated a four-year curriculum, which was adopted in 1892. Curtiss was made professor of animal husbandry in 1896 and head in 1898. But in 1897, Wilson accepted the appointment to be the secretary of agriculture, a position he held for 16 years under three presidents. Wilson was given leave and Curtiss ably served as director of the experiment station and acting dean. In 1902, Curtiss was made Dean of Agriculture and Director of the Experiment Station at ISC and remained in the first position until 1932.

Curtiss was third author on a paper published as a bulletin of the Iowa Agricultural Experimental Station titled "Experiments in Feeding for Milk in 1891," the year he went on the staff. This was followed by yearly publications with Wilson. He published on numerous topics, including feeding colts (1893), steer and heifer feeding (1894), calf feeding and cottonseed meal for hogs (1895), crop notes (1896), sugar beets (1898), and pork production and economic production of beef (1900). After this, the several staff members of animal husbandry began publishing. Curtiss published a presentation made to the American Society of

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