

## REVIEWS

### *For the Good of the Farmer: A Biography of John Harrison Skinner, Dean of Purdue Agriculture*

By Frederick Whitford

(West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2013. Pp. xv, 636. Illustrations, notes, bibliography. \$49.95.)

Frederick Whitford has produced an encyclopedic treatment of John Harrison Skinner (1874-1942), an Indiana native who spent his educational career at the state's land-grant institution, Purdue. Skinner worked in many capacities between 1902, when he first joined the faculty, and his retirement in 1939. He shouldered near-absolute responsibility for and authority over agricultural research in Indiana between 1928 and 1939, serving as dean of Purdue's School of Agriculture, director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, and director of the Agricultural Extension Service. His career spanned a period beginning with relative economic prosperity for farmers during the early twentieth century, through the depression of the late 1920s, and into the New Deal era of government relief, recovery, and reform. The book title reflects Skinner's singular purpose. He administered

all aspects of Purdue's agricultural research and education, set and modeled the standards for improved farming, recruited students, hired faculty and agricultural experts, expanded the physical plant, created experimental farms, influenced policy, and advocated for agriculture generally as well as agricultural research and education specifically.

Whitford organizes the book around five eras in Skinner's life, devoting the lengthiest coverage to Skinner's most productive—if not most influential—years as dean of the School of Agriculture (1907-1928). Skinner paid attention to every detail and expected the faculty and students to excel. He communicated with his peers at other land-grant colleges, shipped livestock to and from Purdue for breeding purposes, and competed internationally to ensure the university's visibility. As the administrator

of all three branches of Purdue agricultural education and research (the school, the experiment farm, and the extension service, 1928-1939), he had the power to strategize, plan, and take action.

Whitford relies almost exclusively on evidence drawn from Purdue's archives, producing a rather one-sided perspective on the man, exacerbated by frequent long quotes from Skinner's correspondence. He acknowledges that Skinner did not always comply with protocol nor defer to authority, believing that what he did would be good for farmers. Readers might ask what benefits farmers would have realized if Skinner had cooperated with George Christie, director of the Agricultural Experiment Station, and "moved the agricultural programs forward at a much quicker pace" (p. 445). Historians of cooperative demonstration work, most notably Roy V. Scott (*The Reluctant Farmer*, 1970), indicate that many farmers resisted government intrusion into their operations and that land-grant institutions such as Purdue provided numerous conduits for government influence. Such works could provide broader socio-economic, political, and cultural context for Skinner's career.

Overall, Whitford has produced an exhaustive biography of a man who helped create agricultural reform in Indiana. Skinner's career coincided with the changes that defined modern agricultural practice. He facilitated that change, invested in scientific methods, and cultivated close relationships with politicians. Skinner seems to have been uniformly admired, personal conflicts notwithstanding, and this biography suggests the potential for more detailed studies that would document farmers' perspectives on Skinner's work. The book also invites comparisons among midwestern land-grant institutions. Did agricultural educators at other institutions amass as much administrative authority as Skinner, and to what end? Whitford's biography provides a foundation on which to build more analysis of agricultural education and research in the land-grant model.

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