



In 1884 there was a total enrollment of 373 students at the University of Nebraska, and about seven faculty members. The entire campus consisted of one building. The third floor and the attic were used as a men's dormitory. The land on what is now East Campus had been purchased 10 years earlier to establish an Agriculture College. For all practical purposes, though, it existed in name only.

The UNL Industrial College (which taught practical courses) was seeing its shortcomings also. This prompted the university to make a generous salary offer of \$2,500 to make Charles E. Bessey dean of the college. Bessey was an Iowa State University botany professor.

At his inaugural address at the University of Nebraska September 16, 1884, Bessey made a rather radical speech for the day criticizing the Industrial College's teaching method.

Nearly ten years earlier, in 1875, Bessey had introduced the laboratory method of teaching botany to his students at Iowa State University. He had no intention of not introducing the same instruction method at Nebraska.

He first, however, had a several-year struggle to keep the University of Nebraska Industrial College in existence. It was under almost constant attack from various parties, as was the Ag College.

Experiment station

In an effort to develop an experiment station on East Campus, Bessey worked hard to push the Hatch Act of 1887 through Congress. Bessey wrote the part of the act which made \$15,000 annually available to state experiment stations if they published bulletins and filed reports with the United States Department of Agriculture (U.S.D.A.)

This led to Bessey's appointment as the first director of the East Campus experiment station in 1887. Here he began applying scientific experimentation to agriculture.

Bessey was quick to ponder the question of why there were so few trees in Nebraska. He was brought up in Ohio where trees were plentiful. He thought they should be plentiful in Nebraska also.

He kept extensive records of the growth of trees from farmers' observations across the state. He saw the Nebraska Sandhills as an excellent environment for growing pine trees. He noted that other parts of the nation with pine trees did well in sandy areas.

In 1892 he planted a test plot of pine seedlings on the Bruner Ranch in Holt County, near Swan Lake. By 1900 the trees had grown to a height of nearly 20 feet.

They grew so well that in 1902 Bessey persuaded the Roosevelt Administration to establish two national forests in Nebraska. One of them, Halsey National Forest, was to become the largest man-made forest in the world.

Bessey's major contribution was to his students. In his 45 years of teaching he taught 4,000 of them—and 800 are said to have achieved national reputations in the botany field.

Fruitful research

His motto was, "Science with Practice." His students learned for themselves. Bessey added his patience, knowledge, and charming personality in a non-dogmatic fashion, thus making research fruitful for the student.

He organized the Botanical Seminar in 1892 to aid students in their quest of botany knowledge. This group took field trips to western Nebraska to collect botanical data. They concentrated on Pine Creek in Brown and Rock Counties, Hackberry Lake in Cherry County, and the area near Thedford in Thomas County.

Bessey worked hard to foster his method of teaching botany throughout the state and nation. He wrote a series of textbooks on botany for beginners. In 1901 he helped introduce a bill which made Nebraska the first state to

Bessey: scholar, BOTANIST & educator

By Paul Bejot

provide for the teaching of agriculture in rural schools.

Bessey became so well known that people would send their children to the university specifically to take courses under him. He was well known nationwide too, and many colleges made large offers to persuade him to teach at their schools. The reason he stayed at the University of Nebraska was because they permitted him to do more original research than any other school might have.

Dedication

His dedication to education is evidenced by this sign which hung over his desk;

"FOOTBALL occupies the same relation to education that a bull-fight does to farming."

Bessey became the acting chancellor of UNL on three different occasions. Each time he could have become the permanent chancellor, but he chose not to, in spite of the doubled salary that would have come with the job.

In 1915, he died at his home on 1507 R street. There was a fund-raising for his widow because the Besseys had little money. Bessey did not live to see the move into the current Bessey Hall, which would have finally given him roomy quarters.

Part of Bessey still lives on in the building. He designed the lab tables so students working on them would get light from the north windows.

A bronze bust of Bessey reads: "To the memory of Charles Edwin Bessey/scholar-botanist-educator 1845-1915." **3D**

Above: Bessey as acting chancellor, 1900. (Nebraska State Historical Society photo).

Below: Botany Labs, 1914. (University of Nebraska Archives photo).

