

Thomas C. Atkeson



Thomas Clark Atkeson, born in a log house on the banks of the Great Kanawha River near Buffalo, Putnam County, laid the foundation for the growth of the West Virginia University College of Agriculture and implanted a belief in the value of an agricultural education among the farm population of the state. He was a teacher, a journalist, a lawyer.

After several years of editing newspapers in West Virginia and Kentucky and practicing law, he decided to devote his life to the advancement and development of the agriculture resources of his native state. During the period from approximately 1891 until 1910 he was professor of agriculture at West Virginia University and from 1897 until 1910 served as Dean of the College of Agriculture. During this period he established the first Farmers Week at the University which continued for many years. He started short courses in agriculture at the University, and he helped promote and conduct Farmers Institutes throughout the state. It was this program that led to the development of the Extension program.

It was during some of this same period that Mr. Atkeson served as a member of the Board of Regents of West Virginia University and also a member of the State Board of Agriculture. He served on the State Board of Agriculture for 14 years, a good part of the time as president. The State Board of Agriculture was the forerunner of the State Department of Agriculture.

Another segment of his service to agriculture was performed with the Grange. In 1880, Mr. Atkeson helped to reorganize the Little Buffalo Grange No. 54 near his home. At the first session of the State Grange which he attended at Moundsville in 1892 he was elected Assistant Stewart. So rapid was his rise in the order that the next year he was chosen Secretary of the State Grange. In 1884 he was elected Lecturer and was installed as State Master in January 1897. He served as State Master until December 1920. Under his leadership, the number of subordinate Granges in the state increased from 12 to more than 100 by 1905.

Mr. Atkeson served the national Grange as Overseer, on the Executive Committee, and a great many years as a member of the Legislative Committee. He established the National Grange office in Washington, D.C., in 1919, and served as its first legislative representative from 1919 to 1927.

The most significant accomplishments of the West Virginia Grange under Mr. Atkeson's leadership was its legislative activity which led to the enactment of an extensive body of laws beneficial to the farmer during a period when the Mountain State was turning its attention to the extraction of mineral wealth and to manufacturing. Among the important measures for which the West Virginia Grange was chiefly or partly responsible were there: The creation of the State Public Service Commission; the construction of a statewide system of good roads; the improvement of inland waterways; the extension of the rural free delivery; the equalization to a large degree of the burdens of taxation. The Grange also sponsored many regulatory measures in agriculture and soil conservation which were enforced by the State Board of Agriculture and other public agencies.

It has been said of Mr. Atkeson that "no man in his generation did more for the betterment of American agriculture."