

Happy 150th Birthday, Kansas State University!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

February 16, 1863 saw the State of Kansas officially organize Kansas State University of Agriculture and Applied Science thereby making it the first university organized as a Land Grant College as allowed by the Morrill Act. The Morrill Act would have a huge impact on the United States and it's a great honor that K-State was the first Land-Grant College.

In 1857, Justin Morrill, of Vermont, introduced legislation to Congress. The bill passed in 1859 and was immediately vetoed by President Buchanan. In 1861 Morrill re-introduced it, it passed in 1862 and President Lincoln signed the legislation. The Morrill Act was designed to fund educational institutions by giving federally controlled lands to the state (land-grant). The state could then sell the land to raise funds or develop the land for the purpose of establishing a college.

A state had to first accept the conditions of the Morrill Act (Iowa was the first state to accept the terms of the Morrill Act) and then establish a college. Kansas State was established on February 16, 1863 and the college officially opened in September 1863. Iowa State University didn't become established until March of 1864.

The language of the Morrill Act was a vast change from traditional higher education. Historically, colleges taught somewhat abstract liberal arts curriculums. The Morrill Act was all about focusing on practical educations in agriculture, science, engineering, even military science. But it also included language that would not preclude these land-grant colleges from teaching traditional or classical studies that might wander over into the realm of the liberal arts. This was a historic change as colleges were frequently private and were where the wealthy and clergy were trained. These public institutions suddenly started to break down the barriers so that the "common folks" could attend college.

It didn't take too many years, though, for the colleges and congress to realize that to stay effective, the land-grant colleges needed to be generating new knowledge. Colleges that were doing well had funds to organize agricultural and other research, but assistance from the federal government was needed to insure that all states would have active research being carried on. The Hatch Act of 1887 established the Agricultural Experiment Stations under the direction of each state's land-grant college. This system, although somewhat modified over the years, is still in place today.

The next big step came with the realization that there were still many people in dire need of the information from these colleges that would never make it to college. So in 1914 the Smith-Lever Act was passed thus establishing and funding the Cooperative Extension Service. The purpose of the Smith-Lever Act was to send "county agents" out across each state into the counties to deliver, through informal education, the information and knowledge that was being generated at the Land-Grant colleges.

The passage of the Smith-Lever Act essentially rounded out the three legged mission of land-grant colleges: to teach, to research and to create outreach to improve the quality of life of all citizens of the state and country. For Kansans, it started 150 years ago with the founding of what we now call Kansas State University. And it continues today with the same mission and goal of better lives for all Kansans. Happy Birthday, K-State!