

**Remarks of James B. Milliken**  
**Charles Bessey Hall of Fame Induction Ceremony**  
**Nebraska State Capitol, June 26, 2009**

Good afternoon. It is my privilege to participate in this ceremony honoring one of the brightest lights ever to shine at the University of Nebraska – a national leader of the scientific community, a brilliant and beloved teacher and the father of modern botany, Charles Bessey.

Charles Bessey came to the University in 1884 as dean of the industrial college and remained on the faculty until his untimely death in 1915 at age 69. He played a major role in what has been called the “Golden Era” of the university, and he had a lasting impact on each of our three missions: teaching, research and outreach to the people of Nebraska.

Among his greatest contributions – to the university and to the state – was his dedication to a single public university to serve the people of Nebraska. In many states, the state land-grant university – dedicated to applied sciences, agriculture and engineering – was created as a separate and distinct institution from the state university – which was dedicated to the classics, arts, languages and sciences. At least three times, the Nebraska Legislature attempted to create a separate state university, and each time Bessey vehemently and successfully opposed the proposal.

Bessey insisted that any scientist, engineer or agriculturalist needed a well-rounded education that only a university could provide ... an education that included ancient and modern languages, a solid foundation in the basic sciences and scientific principles, and an understanding of the social sciences and humanities to give context and meaning to scientific discovery.

Once students had this broad foundation, they could apply their discoveries and research to issues in any discipline. Bessey saw learning and application as an integrated process – as captured in his motto, Science with Practice, which was inscribed on the building where he spent most of his career at the University of Nebraska.

At the time Bessey came to the university, the field of botany was largely concerned with identifying and cataloguing wild species of plants and flowers. His idea of also studying cultivated plants, and of expanding the scope of plant studies so that they would have more relevance to agriculture, was unconventional. But Bessey was intent on professionalizing his field, insisting that research must replace “mere observation and collection.” These changes became the foundation of a highly regarded field referred to as “new botany.”

Bessey’s dedication to this expanding field was nationally recognized in his selection as president of the prestigious American Association for the Advancement of Science from 1910-1912, and, in 1895, as president of the Botanical Society of America – an organization that continues to honor his legacy with an annual teaching award in his name.

Bessey served as Acting Chancellor of the University of Nebraska three times and yet was never willing to take on the job full-time. He was a great harmonizer who was called upon to calm the waters and move the university forward during times of uncertainty. As acting chancellor, he initiated the first library at the university, set up the first summer school sessions for teachers, and established the NU Law College.

Yet, he knew himself too well to accept the position of Chancellor full-time. At heart he was a scientist and a teacher, not an administrator. He lamented having to make budget decisions that impacted the research and interests of his faculty colleagues.

In his 1972 dissertation on Bessey, Thomas Walsh cited an occasion when the university nearly lost a large portion of its property because of unscrupulous real estate speculators. State legislators became involved, and when told of the scheme, Bessey replied “I shall not go to the capitol unless I am sent for; I am no lobbyist. But the bill must be defeated.” In the end, legislators did summon Bessey to the capitol and when his side was heard, the bill was defeated. I think he would appreciate the irony of being permanently memorialized in these halls.

Bessey cared deeply about the people of Nebraska. His correspondence in our archives is filled with letters from Nebraska farmers and citizens pleading for Bessey's help in finding solutions to plant diseases that were destroying crops, orchards and gardens.

He was at the forefront of the extension movement and was the author of the "duties of agricultural experiment stations," as enacted by Congress in the 1887 Hatch Act, which still funds agricultural research in every state. His passion for all things botanical and ecological led to the creation of a man-made forest in Halsey, Nebraska, in the Sandhills, for which he is remembered as the father of the Nebraska National Forest.

With Robert Furnas, Nebraska's second governor and first president of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Bessey initiated Farmers Institutes and travelled the state widely, speaking at these workshops and passing on the latest studies and information.

Bessey was well ahead of his time, early noting the diverse climate and conditions in Nebraska and encouraging agricultural research and experiment stations in various regions of the state – an idea that came to fruition a half century after his death. He envisioned these regional stations developing innovative agricultural practices and new crops based on scientific study of local conditions to make the greatest impact for Nebraskans.

But Bessey's greatest impact was on his students. Bessey was a pioneer in encouraging undergraduate students to pursue independent scientific inquiry. At a time when many institutions were for men only, he encouraged male and female students in their endeavors.

He was known as a quaint, kindly gentleman but one who took his science seriously. His lab had a sign that stated, "If you want to see a student upon society, club, social or similar matters, do NOT come in, but STAY OUT." Bessey was even known to lock the door of the classroom when it was time to begin and unlock it when he was finished.

In an age of rote memorization and lectures, Bessey purchased the most modern microscopes and scientific equipment from Germany and instead of locking them away as many institutions did, he opened up his laboratory and equipment for many hours a day and encouraged students to use the equipment to pursue their studies.

Over his 30 years as professor at the University of Nebraska, he inspired hundreds of students in scientific discovery. In his book *Prairie University*, Robert Knoll wrote that “Bessey’s confidence in the scientific spirit shaped a whole generation of men and women, in and out of his laboratory.” Many of these students went on to become renowned in their own right, starting new disciplines such as ecology and parasitology and serving as professors, university presidents, business leaders, agricultural experts, and many other professions. Their love of learning was planted and cultivated by Charles Bessey – and it is an honor to join you in recognizing him today. Thank you.