

ASABE - 100 Years of Innovation

Engineering for a Sustainable Tomorrow

“Engineering of Agriculture”

Since the 1850s, engineers and engineering have played a role in agriculture. “Engineering of agriculture,” even in 1906 or 1907, involved several kinds of engineering. While the era of industrialization prompted the founding of several engineering societies, the diversity of agriculture’s engineering requirements could only be met by a new society that could pull together all the various aspects. A society that could help the engineers develop their professional specialty, aid their own professional life, better serve an industry, and benefit the public. The groundwork for an agricultural engineering society was beginning to evolve.

Founder’s Vision for a Society

In 1905, J. Brownlee Davidson designed the first professional agricultural engineering curriculum at what was then known as Iowa State College. He keenly felt the need for an exchange of views and techniques among others interested in teaching farm mechanics.

During 1906 and 1907, he corresponded and held meetings with colleagues at other colleges. These efforts culminated in a meeting at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in December 1907. Led by Davidson, 18 charter members formed an association they called the American Society of Agricultural Engineers. The members elected 27-year-old Davidson as the Society’s first president. The new

Society’s constitution read: “The object of this Society shall be to promote the art and science of engineering as applied to agriculture.”

At the second ASAE meeting on Dec. 29, 1908, Davidson reviewed the rising importance of engineering to all phases of agriculture, pointing out that most of the agricultural colleges had established courses and even departments for agricultural engineering instruction. Davidson’s address to that 1908 meeting ended with this challenge:

“In conclusion, let me say that I am firmly convinced of the importance and need of our work; then let us devote ourselves with all zeal to promote the interests of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers, to aid our profession in every way possible, and to benefit the world to the greatest degree.”



This picture was taken at the December 1907 organizational meeting of ASAE in Madison, Wis.

Society Growing Pains

From its early beginnings, the Society grew slowly. The ensuing years were a struggle through difficult times. From its founding in 1907 until 1921, the Society was held together by the determination and perseverance of several dedicated volunteers.

The need for technical literature had been discussed when the Society was formed. The first published account of the Society was the 102-page *Transactions* of the 1907 meeting, a written account of the business meetings, papers presented, and discussions. The standards area provided another opportunity to publish technical information. Agricultural engineers had been involved with standards from the beginning of the Society.

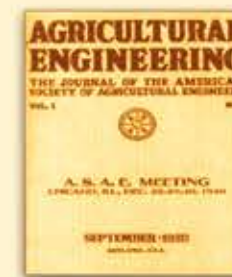
The first Committee on Standardization was formed in 1909 with seven members; three for tractors, three for farm machinery; and Davidson as chairman. From that early standards work came the adoption of the first recommended practice in 1913 titled, *Conventional Signs for Agricultural Engineers*. The published booklet contained 202 signs ranging from “national boundary” to “out house.” That initial publication later led to what is now known as *ASABE Standards, Engineering Practices, and Data*.

By 1917, ASAE had 171 members, *Transactions* contained 261 pages, an ASAE emblem was designed, student branches were authorized, and farm machinery tests and professionalism were hot topics. By 1919, there were student branches at the state universities of Iowa, Nebraska, Mississippi, and Ohio.



Raymond Olney

A monthly journal complete with technical papers and detailed accounts of Society affairs made its debut in 1920 and was named, *Agricultural Engineering, the Journal of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers*.



This 1920 journal was the precursor to Resource magazine.

Former ASAE President Raymond Olney, an editor of *Power Farming* magazine, became editor and publisher of the journal in 1921.

In 1925, Olney became the first full-time secretary, treasurer, and publisher of the Society. Because he resided in St. Joseph, Mich., that was where the ASAE headquarters was established and where it is still located today. The new organization had found a permanent home.

Influences of a Growing Society

During the 1920s, ASAE exerted its influence on education, the farm equipment industry, other engineering societies, and the federal government.

The influence of ASAE on agricultural engineering education gained strength during the 1920s. The College Division, formed in 1920, became the first technical division in the Society. Degree courses in agricultural engineering had also been established at 14 colleges.

In 1924, ASAE President H. B. Walker discussed the cooperation between college agricultural engineers and the farm equipment industry. Deere & Co. offered to take 10 graduates a year and provide summer employment for 20 undergraduates.

Student branches had gained considerable strength by 1925. Agricultural engineering students shared a strong sense of pride on many campuses.

In 1927, incoming president O. B. Zimmerman, an experimental engineer with International Harvester Co., told the American Society of Mechanical Engineers that ASAE was in charge of agricultural mechanization, a bold thing to do at the time. But boldness and achievement outweighed mere survival. By 1927, ASAE was well established, and its members had much to be proud of.

ASAE’s influence extended to the governmental level. Spearheaded by an ASAE delegation, President Herbert Hoover signed a bill in 1931 funding the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering. On that occasion, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Hyde remarked, “Agricultural engineering is one of the younger professions, and its importance is steadily increasing.”

After nearly 25 years in existence, ASAE had accomplished a major triumph in the federal government. The profession had been given increased recognition, opportunity, and responsibilities it had been seeking for more than a decade.



Spearheaded by a delegation of ASAE members, President Herbert Hoover signed a bill funding the Bureau of Agricultural Engineering in 1931. (Photo courtesy of the Library of Congress)

ASAE and the Post-War Era

Following the end of World War I, the Society continued to make progress. A number of standards conferences were held, and efforts were made for a closer cooperation between ASAE and the association representing the farm equipment manufacturers.

Between 1934 and America’s entry into World War II, hundreds of engineering curricula were accredited. The acceptance of the process by engineers gave ASAE’s College Division the criteria needed plus a strong incentive to try to gain accreditation for agricultural engineering.

The end of World War II opened the gates to the Society’s most rapid period of growth and development. Farm machinery was worn out and needed to be replaced, farm buildings were in disrepair, natural resources required preservation, and opportunities for greater utilization of electricity in rural America were vast. Skilled manpower to meet these needs was required, and veterans were eager to utilize GI Bill funds to gain the education necessary to meet those needs. From 1946-1967, the stage was set for ASAE’s most significant expansion.