

Isaac Phillips Roberts

On Route 89 just north of East Varick stands a historic marker for Isaac Phillips Roberts. The wording simply refers to his birthplace and that he was an extraordinary representative farmer. What it doesn't say is that he was the first Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University.



Isaac Phillips Roberts was born July 24, 1833 on the family farm on the west shore of Cayuga Lake just north of East Varick. His parents were Aaron Phillips Roberts and Elizabeth Burroughs Roberts. His grandfather Joseph Burroughs came from Hunterdon County in New Jersey in 1812 and settled in Seneca County on the west bank of Cayuga Lake, at East Varick. Isaac's father Aaron Phillips Roberts was born in Hunterdon County, New Jersey, near Harbortown, on October 24, 1795. When he was about 21, he walked from Harbortown to East Varick, a distance of about 300 miles. The Varick township has been settled almost entirely of emigrants from New Jersey of English, Welsh and Irish extraction.

In 1916, Isaac Roberts published his *Autobiography of a Farm Boy*. In the first part of this book he told about his growing up on the farm in Varick. It is a straightforward narrative of what farm life was like. One comment he made in this book is of special note. Isaac simply stated that male farm workers drank whiskey and that "Hasty beer" was provided for the boys and for those who did not care for the stronger drink. Hasty beer was made from a pail of water, a half gill of cider vinegar, one gill of the best New Orleans molasses, and one to two tablespoons of ginger, "all stirred thoroughly and modified to suit the taste."

In 1862, Isaac Roberts and his wife Margaret Jane Marr settled in LaPorte, in Stilwell Prairie County, Indiana, to set up farming. Esteemed locally as one of the wisest and best farmers "in those parts," it is not surprising that the fledgling Iowa State College became interested in him. Established for only a year, this college's campus and grounds were a laughingstock in 1869. The college asked Roberts to be its Superintendent of Grounds. He soon had the college farm and campus looking fitter, richer, and clean. This was his entrance into the field of agricultural education and agricultural extension, as he was soon appointed professor of agriculture.

Meanwhile, in Ithaca, Ezra Cornell and Andrew Dickson White were struggling to establish an agricultural faculty for their Land Grant College. They had tried lyceum speakers, but as White reports in his memoirs, these speakers were obsessed with "political ambitions." Cornell and White had tried a good native farmer but he was inarticulate. They imported an English agriculturalist, but he was "one who emerged from his suite around ten in the morning and walked around languidly, tapping at plants with

an elegant rattan cane. He did not inspire confidence. He don't know nothing about corn and he don't believe in punkins." Someone mentioned Isaac Phillips Roberts' name and both White and Cornell jumped at the suggestion. They brought Roberts back to his home area in 1874 and made him Dean of the College of Agriculture there. As Gould Colman said in his book *Education and Agriculture: A History of the New York State College of Agriculture at Cornell University*, "Professor Roberts proved to be an ideal choice. This practical farmer turned teacher was familiar with New York agriculture from his youth in Seneca County. He made things go from the day of his arrival." Roberts had a plan for the organization of this ag college and proceeded to implement it. Agriculture College students tended to take the basic college curriculum and then concentrate on agricultural studies in their senior year. Professor Roberts delivered five lectures a week to the senior class throughout the college year. In his book Colman reports that Roberts covered all phases of agriculture—animals, plants, soils, drainage, the use of machinery, buildings, farm accounts, and marketing—as well as personal philosophy, good citizenship, and the matter of selecting a wife. On two afternoons a week Roberts met these students for three-hour practice periods when each tried his hand at field work and the feeding and handling of animals. This curriculum was of little value to turning those without farm experience into farmers, but it was of substantial value for students desiring to specialize in a science related to agriculture. Those who graduated from Cornell's four-year program during the 1870s usually went on to develop agricultural sciences, such as horticulture and animal husbandry at various colleges throughout the United States. Roberts was the college Dean for 21 years and was also the director of the Cornell Experiment Station for 15 years.

Roberts was the author of several important books. These include *Fertility of the Land* (1898), *The Farm Stead* (1890), *The Horse* (1905), and *Autobiography of a Farm Boy* (1916). His writings are filled with many practical ideas and methods. One example of this is his showing farmers how to keep basic accounts and a few pointers on rural law. Roberts noted that "few farmers, or indeed, small dealers or merchants in towns, have ever taken stock or inventoried their belongings," a practice he considered essential for a profitable farming venture.

Roberts died on March 17, 1928, in San Francisco, California. He had made tremendous contributions to the field of agricultural education. That was quite an accomplishment for a man who never went to college and held no degrees.