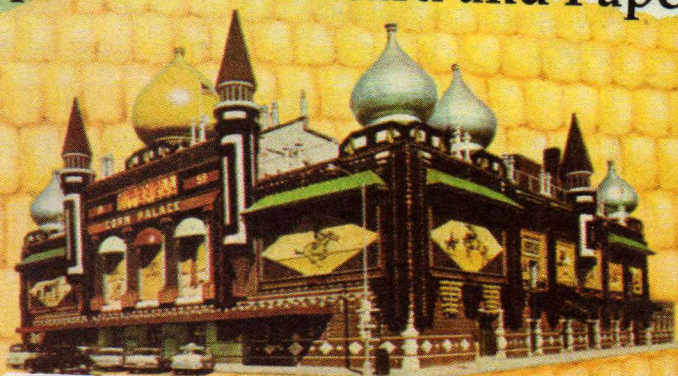


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THE WORLD'S ONLY CORN PALACE



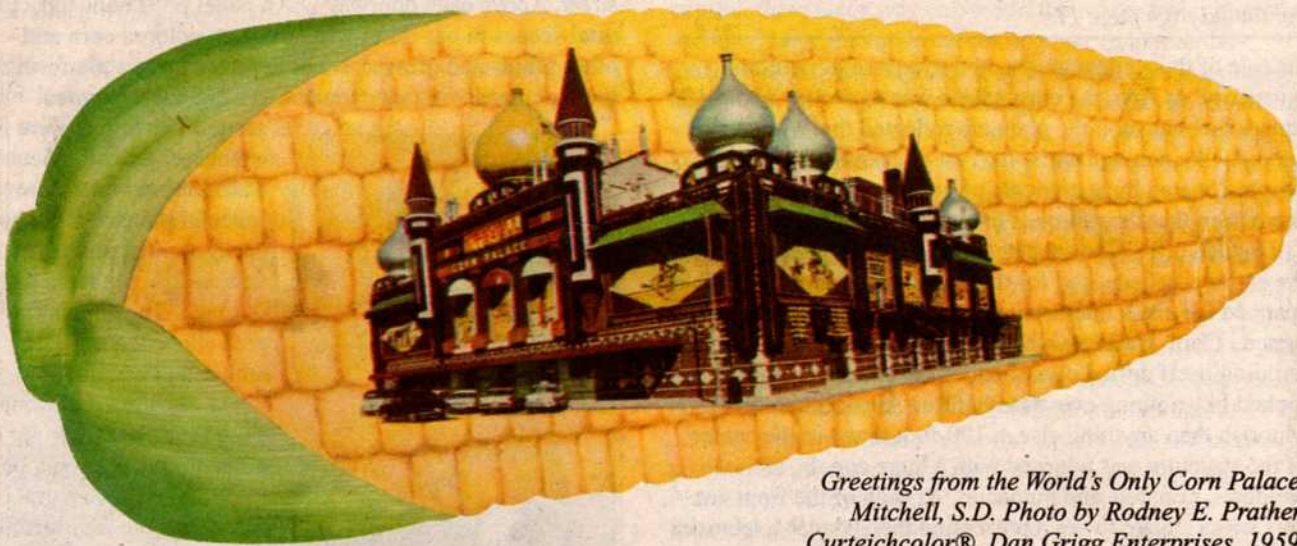
1902 CORN PALACE

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*Greetings from the World's Only Corn Palace,
Mitchell, S.D. Photo by Rodney E. Prather.
Curteichcolor®. Dan Grigg Enterprises, 1959.*

Mitchell, S.D.: Where an amazing homegrown tradition lives on

BY CYNTHIA ELYCE RUBIN

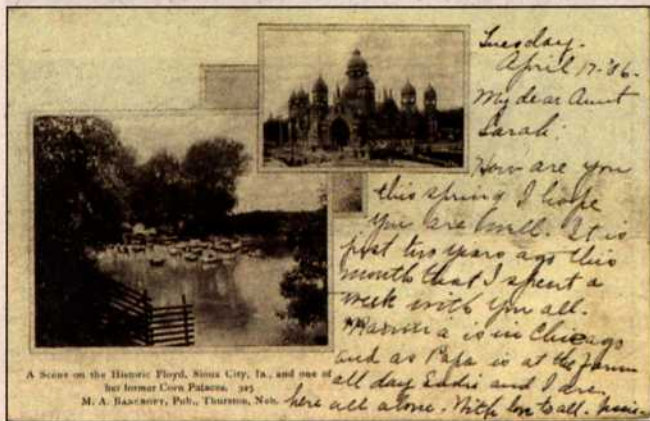
Mitchell, S.D., is home to the Corn Palace, sole survivor of an "amaizing" American folk-art tradition, that began in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1887. At that time, the entire Midwest countryside was suffering from a devastating drought — that is, all except the region of Sioux City, which like an oasis in the midst of a sandy desert, blossomed with green vegetation. As a result, the city fathers wanted to express gratitude for such a blessing. One person suggested a jubilee with heaps of corn along the streets; another proposed to decorate the courthouse with cornstalks. Someone came up with a novel way to both express thanks and to create goodwill for the city. Why not build a palace of corn?



The first Sioux City, Iowa, corn palace in 1887, from the author's collection.

This edifice should be decorated inside and out with the main product of the field, and its halls should ring of music and entertainment while fascinating the public with artistic exhibits. "If St. Paul and Montreal can have their ice palaces," proclaimed the *Sioux City Daily Journal*, then certainly Sioux City should build a "palace of the product of the soil." Meanwhile the entire city caught the spirit. Newspapers published articles explaining the origin of European harvest festivals. Ladies' groups replaced the quilting bee with the corn bee. Women wore corn beads, and men sported corn-husk ties. "Corn is King," the local slogan, was becoming more and more of a reality as the entire region went "corn crazy."

The very idea of a corn palace was inspiring to the city's inhabitants as well as to the thousands in neighboring towns and farms. People felt a keen sense of appreciation for



Although the fifth Sioux City Corn Palace had closed years earlier, its image continued to be depicted on postcards.

Corn palace

Continued from page 11

the role of this yellow gold as the source of agricultural prosperity. At first, the corn palace was to occupy about 100 square feet but soon the planners reflected that a bountiful harvest, like homage to the harvest gods, must be grand. So people donated huge amounts of grains and materials for decoration that the railroads hauled at no charge.

On Oct. 3, 1887, a spectacular monument opened with the entire city bedecked for the occasion. Illuminated arches spanned the city's intersections; stores and houses were decorated. Corn was everywhere in every imaginable way. The building itself defied classification. Architecturally, it looked like nothing ever seen before. Appearing more Moorish than anything else, a 100-foot tower in the center of the structure was adorned with a huge cupola, arched windows, minarets and pinnacles. At each of the front corners was a square tower representing the Dakotas, Nebraska

and Minnesota. Great arched entrances opened onto the street. Above each doorway was a panel portraying agricultural scenes in bas relief wrought from colored corn and other grains and grasses, while depicted upon a platform at the top of each entrance tower was a figural allegorical

scene. The towers were connected by battlement walls, above which rose graceful pinnacles. In the background was a corn-thatched roof, a solid mass of green. The cupola towered above the roof, its arches and panels fashioned like those below, its spire rising to the height of a hundred feet. Flying buttresses swept down gracefully from the four turrets of the cupola to the corn towers, constituting the most conspicuous feature of the design, and together with numerous openings and arches, contributed to an appearance of fantasy quite in keeping with the ornate exterior.



Tourists loved to have their souvenir pictures taken in a mock balloon flight over the 1911 Corn Palace.

Besides the entire exterior surface embellished with corn and other grains, the lines of the superstructure were further enhanced by a maze of detail and color. From spire to foundation every portion was covered with some decoration to please the eye and catch the imagination. Along the upper line of the front ran a shiny border of oats interspersed with the dark seed of the sorghum plant and flaming red corn. The numerous pinnacles were garbed in the rich colors of native grasses and crowned with tufts of millet and streaming banners. Born of the inspiration of a new idea, unique in design, and novel in material, the first corn palace, in every line and detail, seemed to sing the significance of corn to the American Midwest. After a week of street parades, fireworks, dancing and speeches, this corn palace formally closed, but not before more than 130,000 visitors proclaimed its greatness. Even *The New York Times* noted its originality as "really something new under the sun."

Marveling at the success of the first corn palace,



This fascinating montage real photo postcard by O.S. Leeland features a poster for the 1910 Corn Palace festivities advertising the Chicago Lyric Sextet, "Top notch Vaudeville," and Conway's Concert Band, "Highest of all in public favor;" and "Free Street Attractions — the kind you pay 50 cents to see elsewhere" as well as a postcard within a postcard with the message "Hello, Of all my friends I'm said to meet, You are the only kid I give a d— to greet."



Postcard of the world's only corn palace in Mitchell, S.D.

Corn palace

Continued from page 12

the city made plans for a second, a third, a fourth and the most extravagant fifth corn palace, which vastly surpassed all earlier efforts. Dominated by an awe-inspiring dome over 200 feet high, said to be the largest ever constructed of wood, the fifth corn palace was so well-proportioned and elegant that its mammoth bulk, covering an entire city



1907 Corn Palace - postcard printed in Germany.



For perhaps the first time in the history of South Dakota, three presidential candidates spoke on three successive days at the Corn Palace in 1908: Wm. Jennings Bryan, Wm. Howard Taft and E.H. Chapin. O.S. Leeland featured two portraits on this postcard with the caption, "These Boys can't stay away from the 1908 Corn Palace, How can you? Always room for One More at Mitchell, S.D."



In 1902 the Corn Palace Committee made the exposition a permanent institution by filing articles of incorporation.

block, was deceiving. Somewhat resembling the nation's capitol, this palace was crossed in the center by an immense archway, large enough to accommodate an automobile, above which was a large balcony bordered on each side by stately turrets which were flanked by minarets overlaid with wild sage and white corn, giving the appearance of a chased silver column. But with its closing, the era of the Sioux City Corn Palaces came to an abrupt end. Although the promoters had fully intended an even more grandiose one for the following year, a ravaging flood caused such a considerable loss of life and property that there was no energy or money left for celebration.

Enter a group of entrepreneurs from Mitchell, S.D., who, recognizing an opportunity for profit, announced the opening of the Mitchell Corn Belt Exposition in the fall of 1892, directly patterned after the Sioux City festival and to compete with festivities of a Grain Palace in neighboring Plankinton. At the time, Mitchell was only 12 years old with fewer than 3,000 inhabitants, dirt roads for streets, and wooden sidewalks. According to a brief history written in 1914 by Niles J. Dunham, two Mitchell citizens L.O. Gale, druggist, jeweler and bookseller, and Louis E. Beckwith were instrumental in establishing this "booster for Mitchell." Because, as Dunham noted, "in those days there was never a Dakotan worthy of the name who was not a booster."

Beckwith donated land on Main Street on which a 100 x 66-foot structure with the appearance of an Old World castle majestically appeared in September 1892. Decorations of white, yellow, blue and red corn, together with flax, oats, barley and native grasses, were arranged in dazzling graphic geometric patterns. The palace's interior was attractively decorated with corn products by the women of Mitchell.

The festival's main attraction was Professor Phinney's Iowa State Boys' Band. Other bands furnished music to the throngs of public crowding the streets. Additional live entertainment as well as exhibits of grain and other agricultural products from 16 counties in the state took place inside. Some 195 contributors from the community provided \$5,268 for the project bringing the total raised to about \$13,000. The building itself cost almost \$3,000 with the first celebration even making a profit, a tribute to its success.



Few images of interior panels exist. In this real photo postcard, "One of the many panels made of natural colored grains and grasses that appear in the World's only Corn Palace." Date unknown. Dan Grigg Photo

Corn palace

Continued from page 13

In 1904 when the town was a contender in the race to become South Dakota's state capital, the organizers hired the noted John Philip Sousa band for a widely-publicized appearance to help persuade the legislature that Mitchell should prevail. Pierre won the capital race, but never mind,



1902 Corn Palace - This was to be the third attempt to establish the CORN BELT EXPOSITION as a continuous, annual event. The filing of articles of incorporation plus the enlarging, remodeling and redecorating of the building assured its continuance. ©1998 CPD Distribution.



In 1915 the Corn Palace Committee eliminated fortune tellers from the street attractions and set a "higher" class of entertainment for the free shows.



A patriotic motif was the theme of 1917. This year heralded the first use of colored lights for street decorations.

by 1905 Mitchell's event had grown so successful that a new building had to be constructed, and this building, now called the Corn Palace, soon outgrew the crowds and an even larger building was erected in 1921. This is the building you see today, with architectural additions undertaken in 1937.

Every September the Corn Palace Festival unfolds with entertainment and activities. Through the years, performers, such as Guy Lombardo, the Dorsey Brothers, Patti Page, Red Skelton, Jack Benny and Bob Hope have wowed the audiences. Today the building has multiple community uses, such as a basketball arena and graduation auditorium. In addition, from May to October, an educational exhibit takes over, complete with guides and a large giftshop offering every imaginable corn-related item.

Starting in July the old corn and grains are removed in preparation for redecorating because the old corn will shatter, and, if not mature, it will shrink after being affixed to the panel. Different subjects are used each year for the panel or mural designs. From 1948 to 2001, the exteri-



1921 Corn Palace: The present Corn Palace was completed at the corner of Sixth and Main. It provided the largest stage and the greatest seating capacity of any building in the state at that time. The 14 panels depicted the worldwide movement toward disarmament. ©1987 The Goin Co.



1937 Corn Palace - The decorations marked a sharp return to the original idea of a corn palace with the addition of number of minarets, turrets and kiosks of Moorish design. The Dust Bowl days had ended. For the first time in four years there was enough corn for all decorations. © The Goin Company.

Corn palace

Continued from page 14



1945 Corn Palace. Allied victory in World War II was less than a month old. The theme of the victory was still painted on the panels but corn and grain provided the decorative trim for the first time in three years. The Goin Co.1981

or corn murals were designed by two artists, Oscar Howe and Cal Shultz, who over the years, illustrated Egyptian temples, hieroglyphics, Dutch windmills, the Statue of Liberty, as well as topical subjects in pioneer and military scenes, such as "Allied Victory" in 1945.

Today Cherie Ramsdell, a high school art teacher and artist, has taken over the task. The panels are drawn to scale on rolls of black roofing paper, and the enlarged scenes are traced by hand. The roofing paper is nailed to the plywood siding at the Corn Palace. Then it's like painting by numbers. The ears of corn are sawed lengthwise or in round wedges by small power saws and nailed to the panels according to the designs of the particular theme for the year. The small grain and decorative weed bundles are stapled on as borders to highlight and emphasize the murals. The artwork takes about three months to complete.

The corn itself, grown locally, represents another major project. Dean Strand, owner of the Rooster Roost Ranch, has developed special varieties, allowing a wide range of colors for use in the corn mosaics. Since the corn can be neither colored nor dyed, it must be of brilliant coloring. It must also be fresh, about 20-26% moisture. Strand explained that when he started he was using three colors of corn, and "Now we're up to 11 and working on green, the twelfth."

The dark brown border material is murdock, a common weed. The long grass on the towers is a wild grass called slough grass, which is found in marshy places. The Corn Palace takes one or two thousand bushels of corn each year and many tons of grains, grasses and sorghum stalks.

Of all the seasonal celebrations, the harvest festival is most closely associated with the bounty of the earth. What symbol of fertility is more representative of the cycle of man's harmony with nature than corn, which the American Indian considers the father of man and a sacred commodity? It is he who took corn from its wild state and gradually converted it into a domesticated grain, incorporating it into his culture and religion. Corn, dominating American agriculture from its very beginning, certainly serves as a symbolically perfect building material for a temple of thanksgiving.



1975 Corn Palace located in Mitchell, S.D. The trim decorations for this year were a composite of some of the Corn Palaces of the early 1900s.

Much difficulty in obtaining corn was experienced due to a severe drought. The decorations were completed on the first day of the festival in September. ©The Goin Co.

And it is the postcard that has documented this phenomenon of American folk architecture beginning with the early Sioux City models. Although there are fewer Sioux City Corn Palace postcards than Mitchell examples, for the collector, there are countless early 1900s color, black and white printed and real photo images by pioneer photographers, such as O.S. Leeland and L.E. Stair as well as later photographers, Harry Hersey, Clyde Goin and Dan Grigg.

Current postcards available in shops include both reproduction chrome cards of earlier Corn Palaces as well as each recent individual year's Corn Palace with its special theme. No historical artifact documents the decades of the Corn Palace better than the postcard. As a folk-art historian, I am writing a book about O.S. Leeland, Mitchell's pioneer postcard photographer. I love to visit the Corn Palace.

For more information on the world's only corn palace, call toll free 866-273-2676, www.cornpalace.com, for a free visitors guide. It is open September and October 8 a.m.-5 p.m. daily. The Corn Palace Festival, Sept.1-6. Additional Mitchell Attractions include the Prehistoric Indian Village, Middle Border Museum & Oscar Howe Art Center and Enchanted World Doll Museum.



2004 postcard: Eight years before the turn of the century, the World's Only Corn Palace was built on Mitchell's Main Street. During its 100 year existence, it has become known world wide and now attracts a half million visitors annually. Thousand of bushels of corn, grain and grasses are used to redecorate the Corn Palace each year. Cherie Ramsdell designed the panels with the theme Lewis and Clark. Photos by Rich Stedman. ©2003 CPD Distribution. Note: The onion towers were restored and are back on the building but not before this photo was taken for the postcard.