

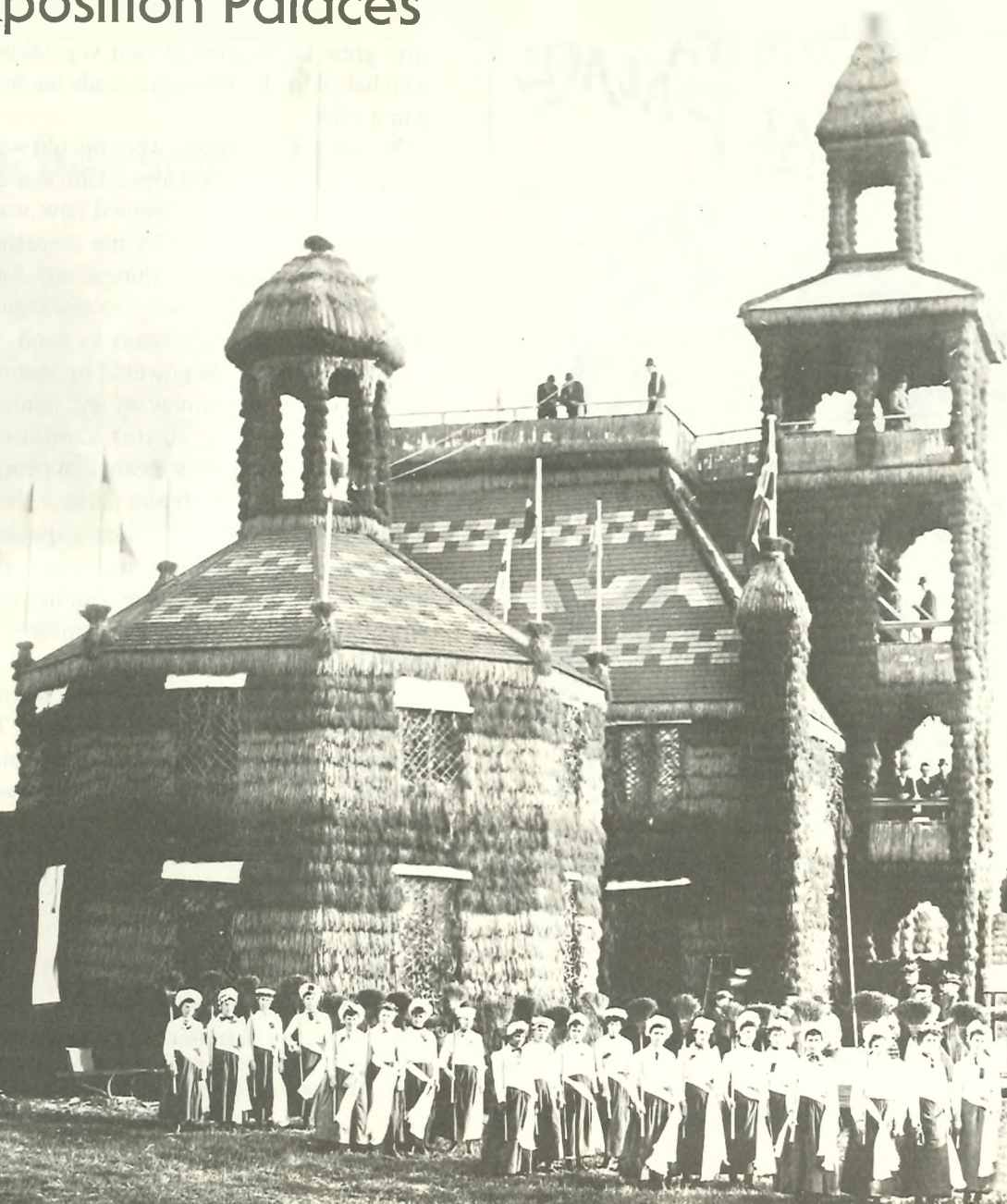
# THE Goldfinch

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October 1984

## Iowa's Incredible Exposition Palaces



# Iowa's Incredible Exposition Palaces

Did you know that a century ago Iowans built beautiful palaces for their kings? Imagine that you are climbing up into the high palace towers. Across the countryside the roads are filled with buggies headed toward the palace. Trains are arriving down at the station. Thousands of visitors are coming to see the kings.

You didn't know that kings lived in Iowa in the late 1880s? They did. And their names were King Corn,

King Coal, King Flax, and King Bluegrass.

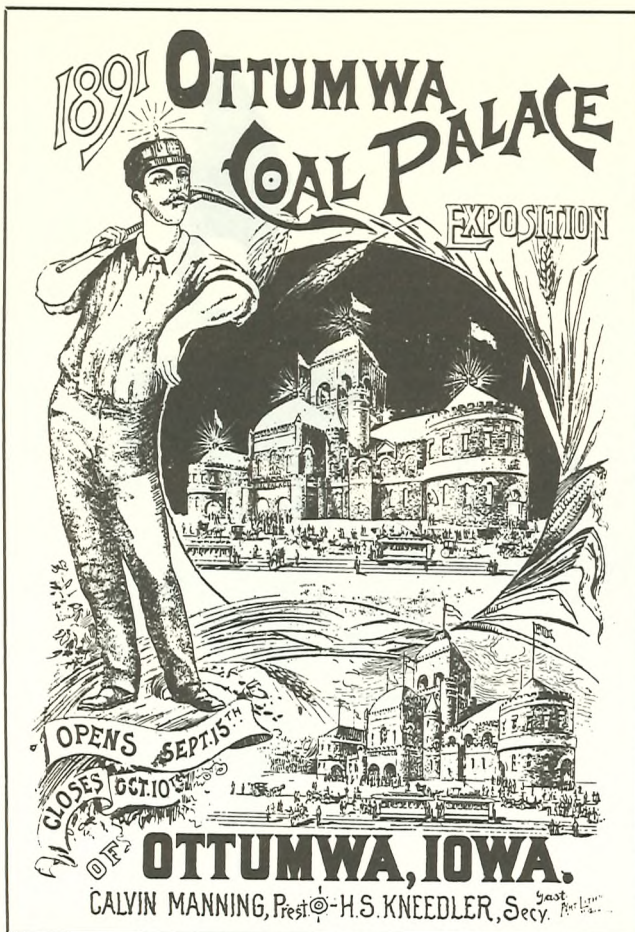
You're right. The kings were crops and resources, not people. But they were so important to Iowa's economy that Iowans called them "kings." Iowans were proud of their rich soil and new businesses. And they needed a way to advertise this to people who didn't live nearby.

They could have used the old, traditional ways of advertising. For centuries, and in all parts of the world, merchants and farmers have gathered at fairs and markets to sell their products. When settlers first came to Iowa and planned their towns, they always included a place for the market. County and state fairs had been common in Iowa since the 1850s. At the fair the person who grew the biggest or best vegetable or animal, or who baked the best bread or made the best quilt, would win a prize.

But fairs and markets were the old ways of showing off hard work and good ideas. Life was changing in the late 1800s, and people wanted new ways of showing those changes. The 1800s are sometimes called the Industrial Revolution in Europe and America. Before this time, the people who worked on farms and in factories did much of the work by hand. Now in the late 1800s huge machines powered by steam did the work. New products were invented and manufactured faster than ever before. Better communication and transportation networks meant that people could travel and do business in different parts of the world.

In Europe and America huge expositions were held to show the new products, machines, and ideas to the public. The expositions were a lot like the world's fairs we might go to today. In America the first big exposition was held in Philadelphia in 1876. Visitors stood in line to see how telegraphs, telephones, sewing machines, and typewriters worked. The American people were proud of their new inventions. Expositions were the new, exciting way to advertise products and celebrate progress.

Around 1890, several cities and towns in Iowa wanted new ways to show their local pride, too. This



This broadside advertises the Coal Palace and Exposition in Ottumwa.

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was the era, or time, of the great exposition palaces in our state. Citizens built large and elaborate wooden buildings. Inside they set up magnificent displays of their crops and products. Thousands of visitors came to see the palaces.

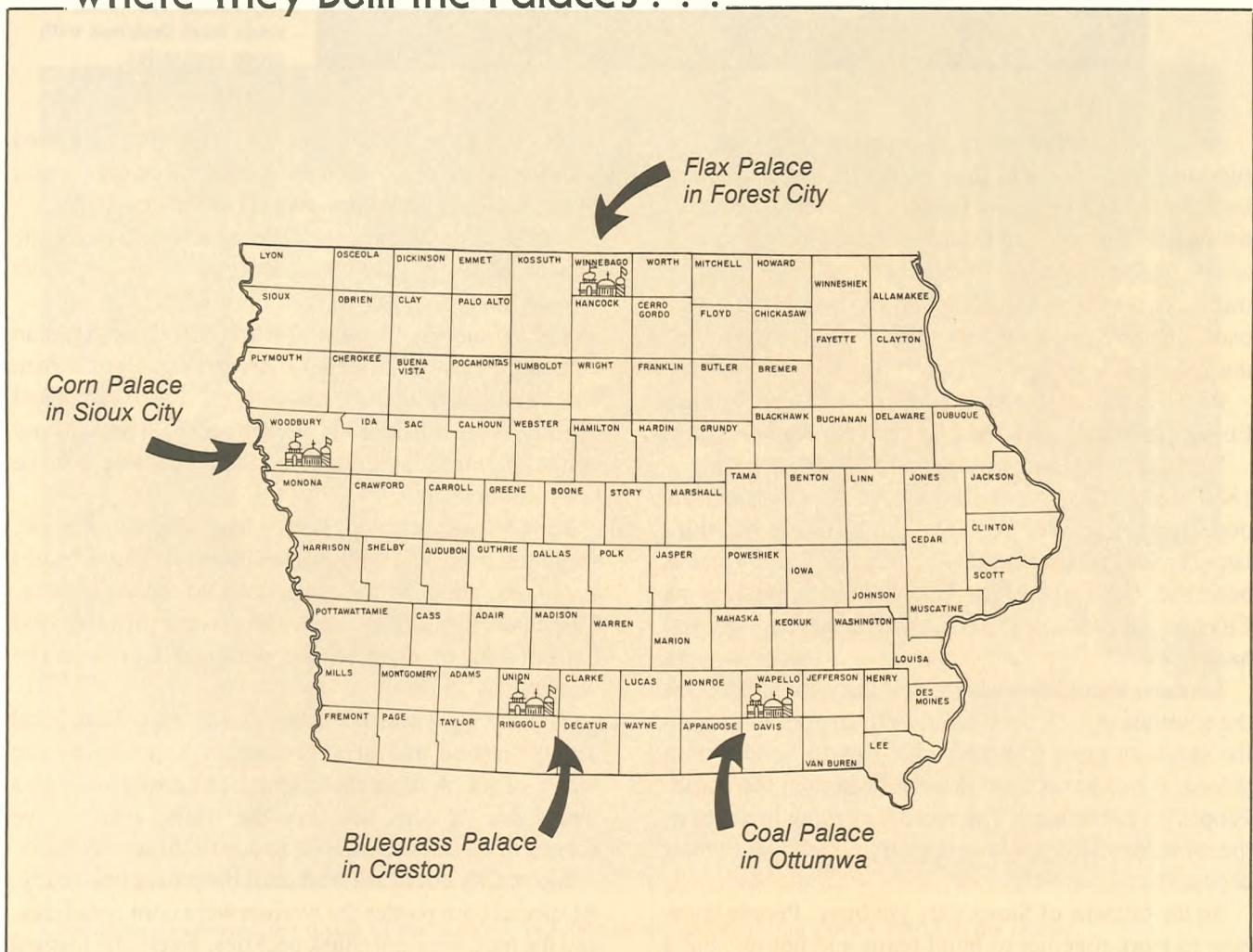
But there was one thing that made the palace buildings really unusual. The outside of each palace was covered with the crops grown and the resources found in that part of the state. Local artists covered the palace walls with grains and grasses and minerals in patterns and designs. Look carefully at the pictures in this *Goldfinch* to see how amazing the palaces really

were. Thousands of people visited them, and they talked about the palaces for months afterwards.

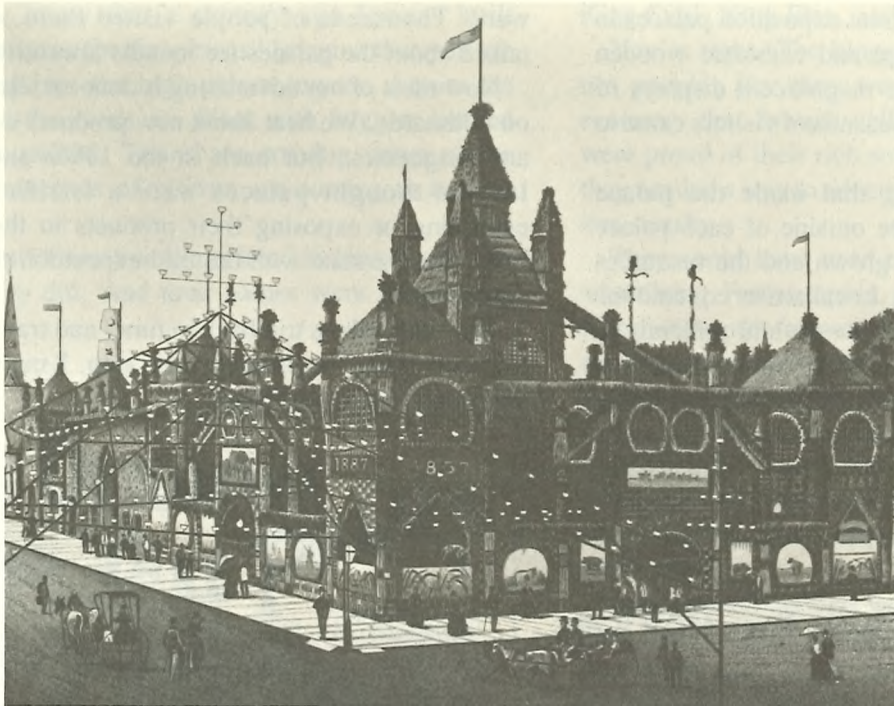
Now most of our advertising is done on television or on billboards. We hear about new products in catalogs and magazines. But back in the 1880s and 1890s, Iowans thought palaces were a terrific way of exhibiting or exposing their products to the public. Iowa was the state with the best exposition palaces in America.

Now let's take a trip back in time, and travel around the state to see the palaces. First stop, King Corn and the Sioux City Corn Palace.

## Where They Built the Palaces . . .



# King Corn in Sioux City



The first corn palace in 1887 covered most of a city block. The tower roofs were thatched with green cornstalks.

About a hundred years ago in the Midwest, the summers were hot and dry. In the 1870s swarms of locusts attacked the grain fields. The insects ate up all the plants. Farmers had trouble making enough money to live. It was expensive to ship their crops to market on trains. It was expensive to borrow money from the banks. But when the farmers sold their crops they were not paid much.

But the farmers around Sioux City were luckier. Enough rain had fallen there to keep the corn growing.

Sioux City had grown tremendously in size, too. In 1880 about 7,000 people lived there, but by 1887 the population was over 30,000. The city was the third largest meat-packing center in America. Some citizens believed the city might become as important as Chicago. They wanted to celebrate their prosperity and hard work.

But how should they celebrate? They could decorate the courthouse with cornstalks, or heap piles of corn on the street corners. The best idea was to build a corn palace. It had never been done anywhere in the world. People loved the idea. The more they thought about it, the more they realized how important corn was in their economy.

So the citizens of Sioux City got busy. People knew how to work together to build barns and houses, but a

palace would be harder. For six days, 46 men sawed and hammered. They built square towers on the corners of the palace, and arches over its entrances.

And next came the corn! The plan was to cover the outside of the palace with the kinds of crops grown around Sioux City.

The Winnebago Indians sold 5,000 bushels of Indian corn to the palace-builders for decorations. Indian corn was blue, purple, red, and white. They also used 15,000 more bushels of yellow corn. The autumn colors and unusual textures of the crops would make beautiful designs.

For 15 days, teams of horses hauled loads of straw, sorghum, corn, and wild grasses and vines. Steam saws sliced and chopped the materials into the right sizes. Carpenters thatched the roof with green cornstalks, and nailed tons of corn to the walls and around the windows.

Still the work was not done. Inside the palace, local artists twisted and arranged nature's products into works of art. A huge spider made of carrots hung on a web made of corn silk. For the walls, artists wove scenes of Indians in canoes and buffalo in meadows.

Sioux City could not wait until the palace was ready. At special corn parties the women wore corn necklaces, and the men wore cornhusk neckties. Everyone learned

the myths of Mondamin, the Indian god of corn, and Ceres, the Greek goddess of harvests. They wrote songs and poems about “King Corn.” Storekeepers filled their windows with pumpkins and harvest scenes, as we do now at Thanksgiving and Halloween. Brightly colored globes covered the gas lights that arched over the streets. There had never been a celebration like this one in Sioux City.

On a crisp fall day in October 1887 the palace and festival opened. Businesses placed their newest products on floats for the industrial parade. On another day covered wagons and groups of Winnebago, Sioux, and Omaha Indians paraded down the streets. At night fireworks boomed overhead. Passenger trains to Sioux City had to add extra cars to carry all the crowds into town.

In Chicago, New York, and London, people opened up their newspapers and magazines, and found stories about the Corn Palace in Iowa. From Boston came 133 vacationers, curious to see it. Wealthy businessmen from the East Coast were impressed with Sioux City and the enthusiasm of its citizens, and they sent money to invest in businesses there. More than 130,000 people

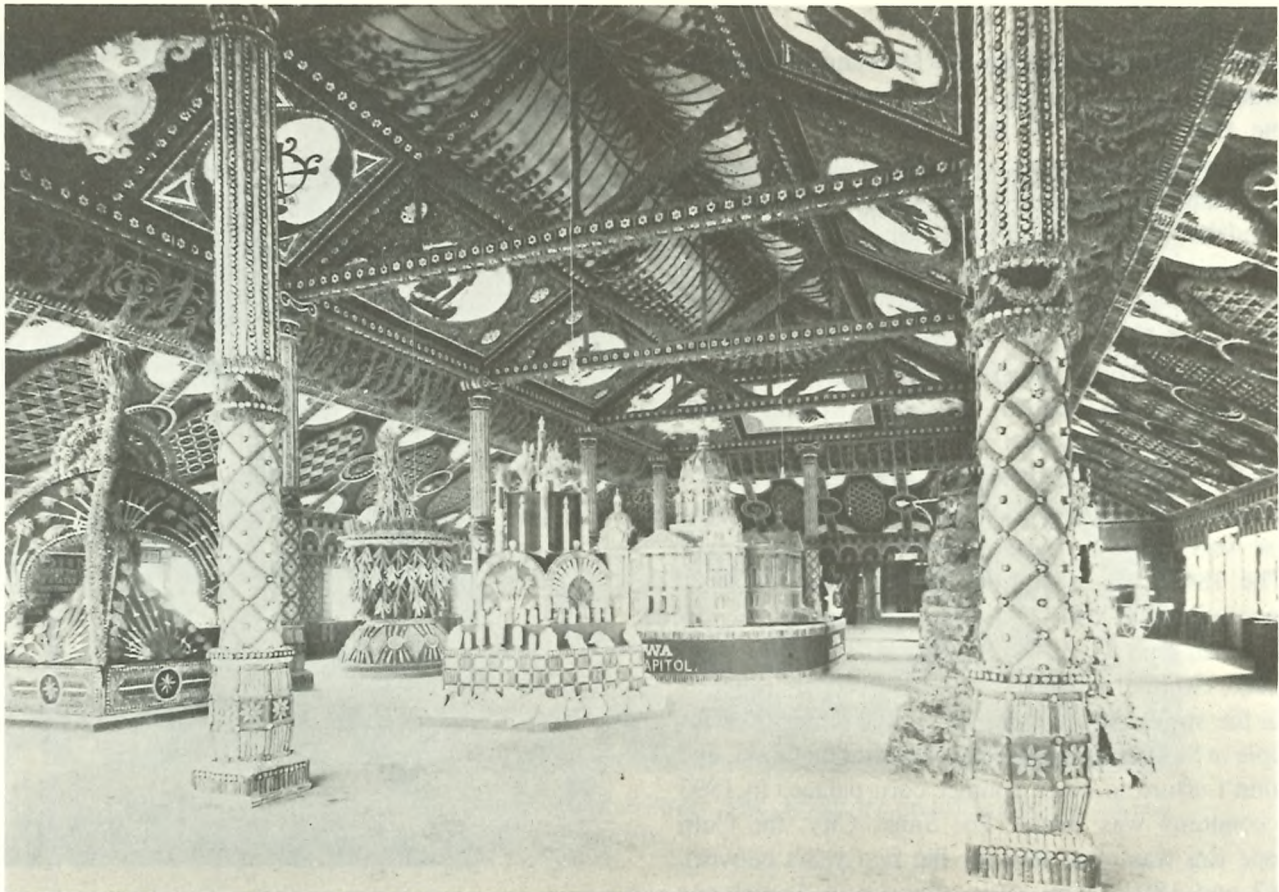
saw the Corn Palace before the festival ended a week later.

The palace was torn down, as planned. But right away the citizens of Sioux City started thinking about building another palace the next year. And every year, for the next four years, a new palace was built—always more magnificent than the one before.

In 1888 the carpenters used so much corn and grain to decorate the outside walls that not a single square inch of wood was left uncovered, except for the flagpoles.

In 1889 the palace towers were higher than nearby church steeples. More industrial and agricultural displays were added. All of the newest products were at the exposition. Bicycles that looked similar to ours today had only been available for about ten years, and they were becoming very popular. Crowds cheered their favorites in the bicycle race. They watched with curiosity as phonograph records were made for the new “talking machines.”

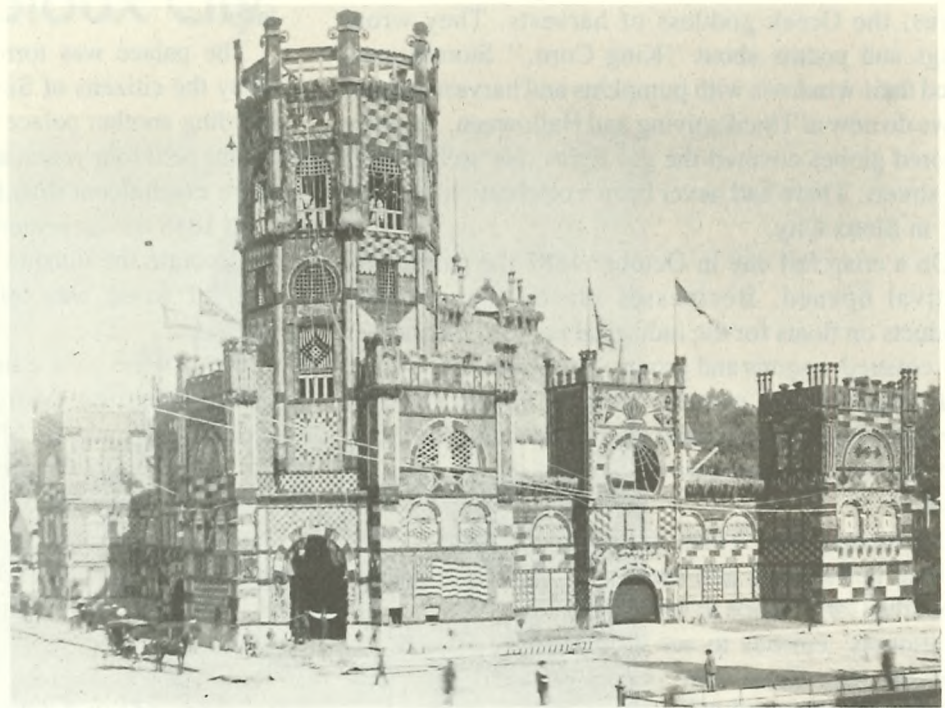
In 1890 a giant globe of the world topped the palace. Each country on the globe was outlined with kernels of corn. Inside the palace the ceiling was an imitation sky



ISHD, Des Moines

Corn mosaics covered the inside of the palaces, too. Notice the model of the State Capitol in the center.

The 1888 palace. Notice the American flag (on the wall to the right of the door) and other patterns made of corn.



at night. Electric lights shone like stars and added to the wonderful nighttime effect. Most towns in Iowa had some electric lights by then, but most Iowa farm families would still have to wait at least 40 years before they would have electricity to light their evenings. The festival that year was as grand as ever, until the last day. Heavy rains ruined the parade, poured in through the palace roof, and drenched the displays.

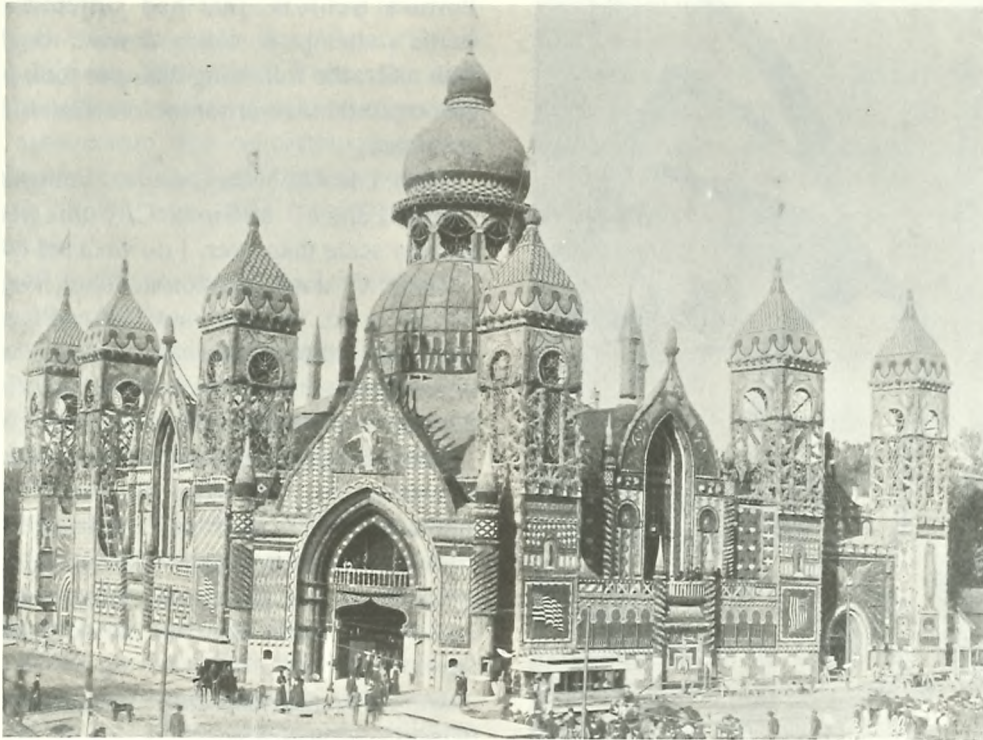
The palace built in 1891 was more than a block long. Visitors hopped on streetcars on Pierce Street, and rode right through the palace. Other states and South America sent exhibits and Mexico sent a band. From Louisiana came live alligators. There was a race between a man on a bicycle and a man on a horse. The horse won the race—but not by much.

The 1891 palace might have been the best corn palace yet. It was also the last palace. It was torn down, and a man paid \$1,211 to salvage some of the corn, lumber, cloth, and nails.

In the spring of 1892 the Big Floyd River flooded. People in Sioux City had to clean up after the flood, and couldn't afford to build another corn palace. In 1893 the economy was worse. For Sioux City, the Corn Palace Era was over. But for the five years between 1887 and 1891, thousands of curious Americans traveled there to see why corn was king in Sioux City.



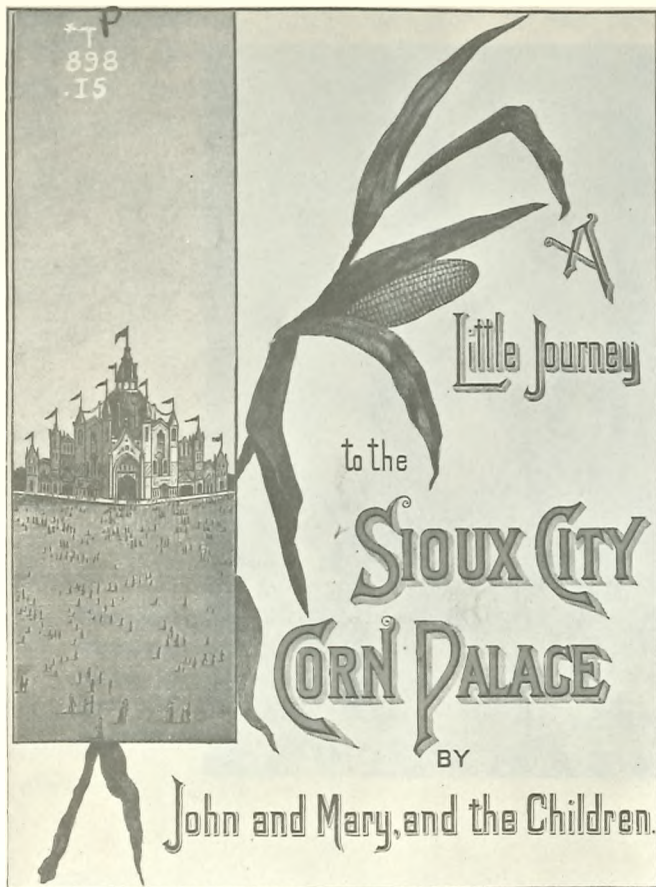
The towers of the 1891 corn palace were taller than nearby church steeples.



The 1890 palace had an exotic, Turkish design.



The last corn palace in 1891 was built over Pierce Street. The crowds are probably gathered around food stands or games of chance under carnival tents.



The cover of the play advertising the Illinois Central Railroad and the Corn Palace.

Railroads were vital to the success of the palaces. Railroad companies set up exhibits from other states to encourage travel and business. They brought tourists, wealthy businessmen, and politicians. And they advertised the palaces—and themselves.

The following play, written in 1890, was such an advertisement. Enjoy the enthusiastic tone of the characters when you act it out. Keep in mind that, as in all advertisements, there is a problem—how to get to the palace. The solution is the product advertised—the Illinois Central Railroad.

An ellipsis (. . .) shows where a part of the 23-page play is not printed here. Can you find any words in the play that were spelled differently in 1890 than they are now?

*Characters:*

- Mary and John Goodman:* Iowa farmers
- Mr. Dunham, Nellie, and Cruise:* neighbors
- Miss McKoy:* the schoolteacher

After the children had retired, and Farmer John Goodman, the head of the family, had taken up his

paper, and his good wife Mary was busy mending Bertie's trousers, that had suffered by reason of Bertie's attempt at sliding down a rough board filled with nails, the following dialogue took place in one of the comfortable rural homes for which Illinois and Iowa are noted:

*John:* I declare! Mary, they are going to have another "Corn Palace" at Sioux City this year, and on a grander scale than ever. I do wish we could go!

*Mary:* O, don't mention it, John! Every year I have wanted to go, but you know we can't, as we have no one to leave the children with; and as to hiring someone to come here and stay with them, you know we would not feel easy a minute while we were gone.

*John:* I know it; but it is too bad. We have both staid at home on this farm and worked hard for twenty years, and it does seem as if there ought to be some way it could be fixed so we can go. The greatest obstacle I see is the cows. It is not an easy thing to find someone to milk twenty cows, night and morning, for three or four days.

*Mary:* I wonder how they ever came to have a "Corn Palace" at Sioux City?

*John:* Why, Iowa, you know, is the great corn State of this Union. We raised, in 1889, 326,000,000 bushels; and that section of country about Sioux City is in the center of the corn belt. Take Cherokee, O'Brien, and Plymouth Counties—they raise the finest corn in the world. . . .

*[Mr. Dunham knocks and enters. He hands a letter to Mary and sits down.]*

*Mary:* O, John! my letter is from Boston, from Aunt Carrie, and she says a party of them from Portland, Salem, and Boston are going to the Sioux City "Corn Palace." . . . She says last year a party of New England editors and capitalists went to Sioux City over the Illinois Central, and were so royally treated, they won't let any of their friends take any other route. . . . How I do wish we could all attend the "Corn Palace!" . . .

*John:* Yes, but who will milk the cows?

*Mr. Dunham:* That is just the point I wanted to bring up. You know the "Palace" opens September 25th and closes October 11th. Now, my proposition is this: It will only take two days and two nights to take it all in—one day at the "Palace" and one day looking about Sioux City, and do our going and coming in the night. While you are gone, we will milk our cows and yours, too; and while we are gone, you shall do the same for us.

*Mary:* Oh, John! we can do it, and that will just fix matters splendidly! But how about the children?

*Mr. Dunham:* Why, take them along. . . . The



Illinois Central is going to make a special feature of this "Palace" for children. . . . This year it has reserved one hundred feet from space in the "Palace" for exhibits from Louisiana, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Kentucky, and these States will send all kinds of grains, fruits, grasses, cane, cotton, rice—everything grown in a semi-tropical country; all kinds of southern woods—pines, magnolia, holly, etc.—and it will make a magnificent exhibit!

*Mary:* But you said there would be something to especially please the children.

*Mr. Dunham:* Yes, I forgot to mention that. The Illinois Central, at its own expense, is having a tank built, about the size of our wind-mill tank, and about four feet high. In this tank it is going to place two large, live alligators, . . .

*John:* . . . I suppose the whole trip will cost us about forty dollars, and so far as the money is concerned, I do not begrudge one cent of it. It will give us and the children something to talk and think about for years to come. Farmers do not get away from home as often as they ought. We work year in and year out, until we get into a rut, and do not care to go, and then the children tire of our stay-at-home-on-the-farm ways, and as soon as they are old enough to earn their living they leave the farm and go to town. If we would go more, and take them with us, the farm life would not seem so dull.

[*Scene 2: Nellie visits Miss McKoy, the schoolteacher.*]

*Miss McKoy:* Good morning, Miss Nellie; you are one of the early birds.

*Nellie:* Yes, I am on important business. This whole

neighborhood want to go to the "Corn Palace," and Saturday night we meet at Mr. Dunham's to plan a way. Can't you meet with us?

*Miss McKoy:* Certainly, I shall be delighted to; but us poor teachers, you know, can not attend such gatherings unless they happen to come during vacation.

*Nellie:* We will see about that, too. I propose asking the directors to allow you to close the school on Friday, and by going Thursday night, it will give you two days at the "Palace" and get home Sunday morning.

*Miss McKoy:* Oh, Nellie, you are a jewel. Wouldn't it be jolly if the school and all could go? . . .

[*Scene 3: Later at Mr. Dunham's.*]

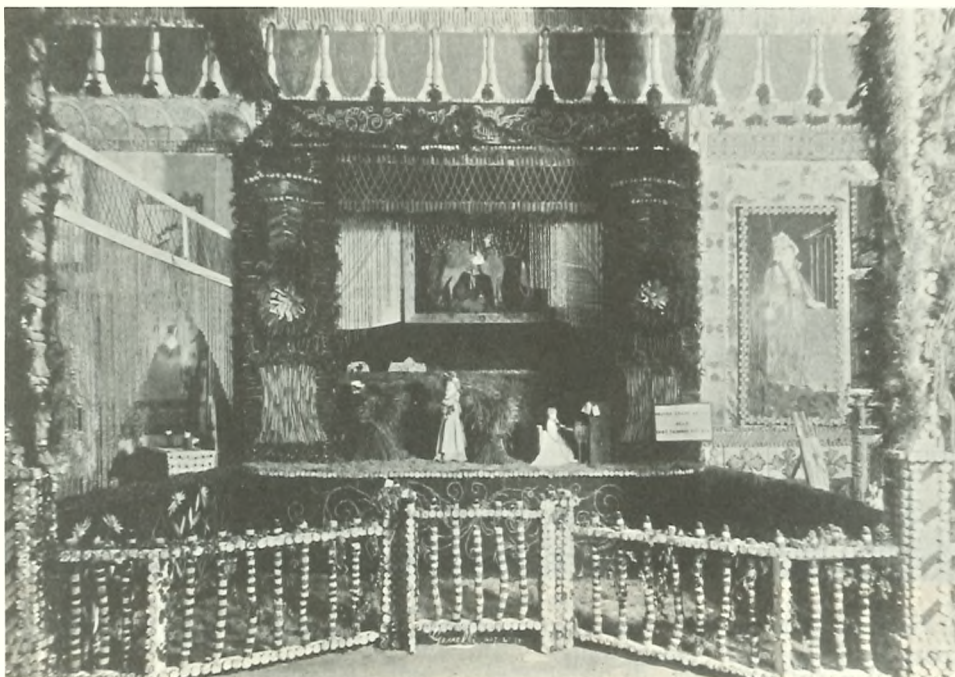
*Miss McKoy:* I declare! Nellie has got those directors together, and I do believe she has persuaded them to close school for a day.

*Mr. Dunham:* Mr. Goodman has a word to say that will interest you all.

*John Goodman:* I simply wanted to say that inasmuch as the "Corn Palace" will give both old and young an opportunity for study, and will give us a better idea of the products of our country and its wonderful resources, the directors have voted unanimously that the school shall close Friday during one week of the "Corn Palace," and I hope that not only our faithful teacher will attend, but that as many of the children as possible will take advantage of this opportunity. . . .

*Cruise:* I propose three cheers for the "Corn Palace."

*Goodman:* And three more for the Illinois Central Railroad. Hip, hip, hurrah!



An exhibit inside a corn palace. Notice how chunks of light and dark ears of corn were strung together to make the gate. The picture of the horse in the back is probably made of grasses attached to cloth. Two dolls model the styles of the day.

# The Ottumwa Coal Palace

Coal mining was a thriving business in south central Iowa during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A group of businessmen from Ottumwa thought that their city should be the place for the world's first coal palace. At a public meeting to raise money, \$30,000 was promised by people who liked the idea. The palace would be built near the Sunken Park in Ottumwa. The park was the old riverbed of the Des Moines River, before the railroad changed where the stream flowed.

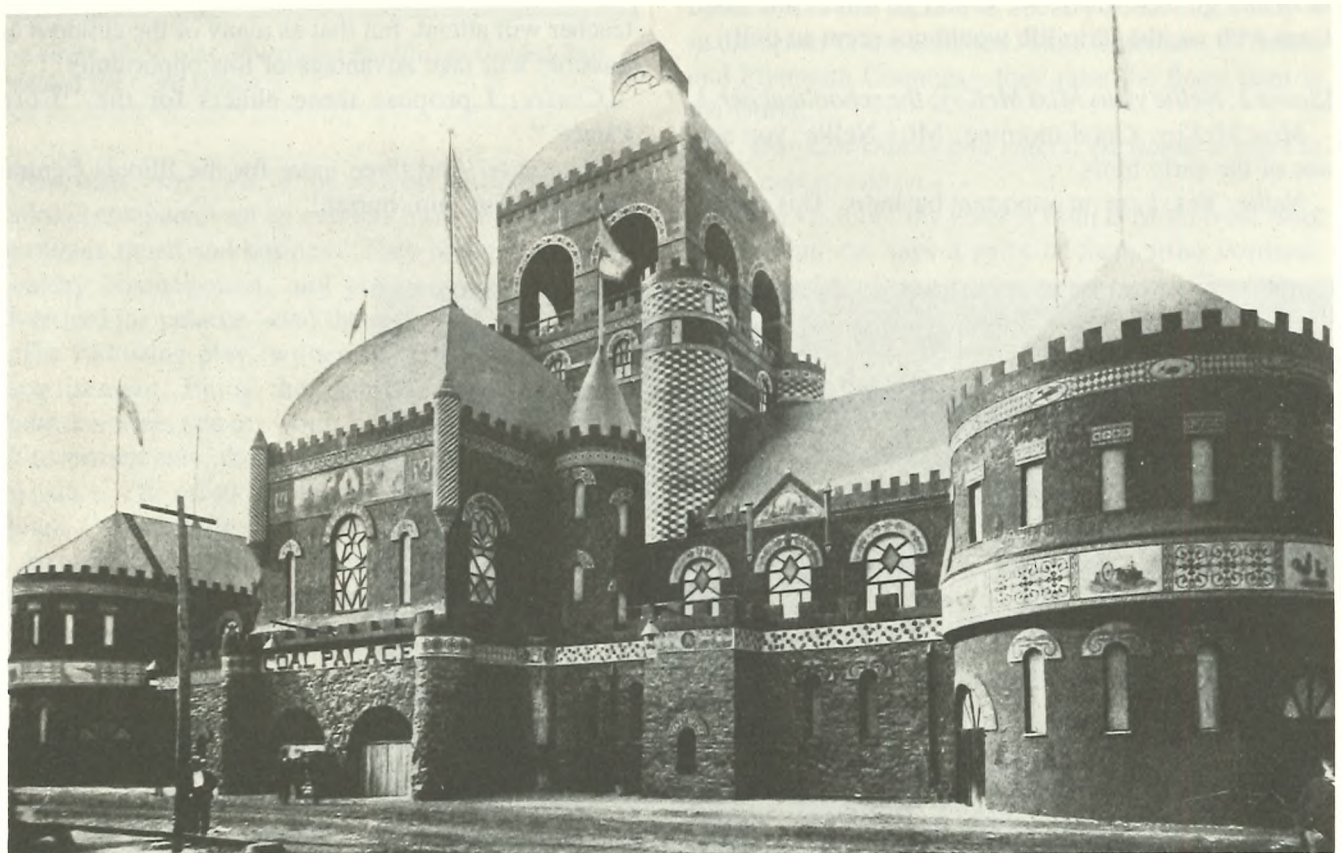
Work began in the spring of 1890, and by September 19 the building was finished. It looked like a huge, medieval fortress with towers and turrets and tall, narrow windows. The outside was covered with shiny, black coal that glistened in the sunlight. The roof was painted bright red. Scenes from coal mines and Ottumwa industries decorated the walls. Exhibits like a 15-foot eagle made of corn, and a 125-pound pumpkin

showed that farming was important, too.

Entering the palace, visitors boarded an elevator to a model coal mine underneath the building. There, a mule pulled a train of carts along the tracks, and miners chipped away with pick and drill.

Upstairs, the auditorium could hold 4,000 people. A waterfall 35 feet high (modeled after Niagara Falls) used more than one and a half million gallons of water each day. William McKinley, who later was elected president of the United States, toured the palace. So did thousands of others, some from as far away as Oregon and New York. Visitors were fascinated with the new and unusual things like passenger elevators and electric lights. There were old, unusual things to see, too—like Indian relics, mastodon bones, and George Washington's stirrup.

The Coal Palace was used the next year, but after that it was torn down.



One might have expected a medieval knight to stride out of the Ottumwa Coal Palace. But the palace was built to honor the work of coal miners and farmers. Notice the bumpy, coal-covered walls.

## The Program of Days and Some of the Special Features of the Great Exposition.

### THE PROGRAM:

Tuesday, Sept. 15th, Opening day & Ottumwa Day. Carter Harrison, ex-mayor of Chicago, Orator. Band of 60 pieces.  
Wednesday, Sept. 16th, Davis County Day.  
Thursday, Sept. 17th, Soldiers Day. Gen. Alger, of Michigan, Orator.  
Friday, Sept. 18th, Wapello County Day.  
Saturday, Sept. 19th, School Day. Special Rate, to schools in a body.  
Tuesday, Sept. 22d, Clark County Day.  
Wednesday, Sept. 23d, Republican Day. Major Wm. McKinley of Ohio, Orator. Monroe County Day.  
Thursday, Sept. 24th, Iowa Day.  
Friday, Sept. 25th, Jefferson County Day, and Henry County Day.  
Saturday, Sept. 26th, Traveling Men's Day.  
Monday, Sept. 28th, Keokuk County Day.  
Tuesday, Sept. 29th, Wheelman's Day. D. J. Canary, of Massachusetts, performer. Appanoose County, Labor and Miner's Days.  
Wednesday, Sept. 30th, Van Buren County Day.  
Thursday, Oct. 1st, Farmer's Day. Secretary of Agriculture Rusk, Orator.  
Blue Grass Day.  
Saturday, Oct. 3rd, Mahaska Day. Women's Day.. Carrie Lane Chapinan, Orator.  
Wednesday, Oct. 7th, Democratic Day. Senator Palmer, Orator.  
Thursday, Oct. 8th, Lucas County and Marion County Day.  
Saturday, Oct. 10th, Des Moines, Burlington and Keokuk Day.  
The days not included have not yet been assigned to special occasions but the palace will be opened and provided with special features on those days.

### ONE FARE ON ALL RAILROADS.

Remember that all the railroads centering in Ottumwa, the C. B. & Q., the C. M. & St. P., the Wabash, the C. R. I. & P. and the Iowa Central, make a rate of one fare to Ottumwa, on every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, during the exposition and on Wednesday, Sept. 23 in addition. Tickets good for four days.

### THE PALACE ATTRACTIONS.

In addition to the wonderful and bewilderingly beautiful decorations of the palace itself is the great reproduction of Niagara, over which 2,000,000 gallons of water flow daily, the gardens in the tower 180 feet above the floor, the Bohemian glass Blowers, the wood workers from the Paris exposition, etc. ect.

The greatest bands in the country engaged for the whole season, and concerts and operatic entertainments every night.

were probably admitted free that day, and could set up special exhibits. On September 17, soldiers and veterans probably marched in a parade.

School Day was September 19. It may have been like Kids' Day at our county fairs, when admission is free. In the late 1800s there were four terms in the school year, not two semesters and a long summer vacation. During the fall and spring terms students were often excused from school to do farm work. On School Day the entire class was probably excused to visit the palace. Some students may have played in the bands. Some may have recited poems or short speeches they had memorized (called recitations).

Orators were well-known people invited to speak. Without television or radio, the public needed to hear speeches to find out the opinions of politicians. Major William McKinley was the orator for September 23. In 1891 he was elected governor of Ohio. South central Iowa and Ohio were both areas of coal mining and farming, so McKinley would have been a good choice for a speaker at the Coal Palace. In 1896 and 1900 McKinley was elected president.

Carrie Lane Chapman, who spoke on October 3, was a well-known Iowan. (To find out more about her, look in the library under the last name of her second husband, "Catt.") She traveled across the nation urging that women be allowed to vote. It took another 29 years until the 19th Amendment to the Constitution granted to American women "suffrage"—or the right to vote in elections.

What other clues to hidden stories can you find in this palace schedule? Some of your best detective work will be in the library and in other articles in this *Goldfinch*.

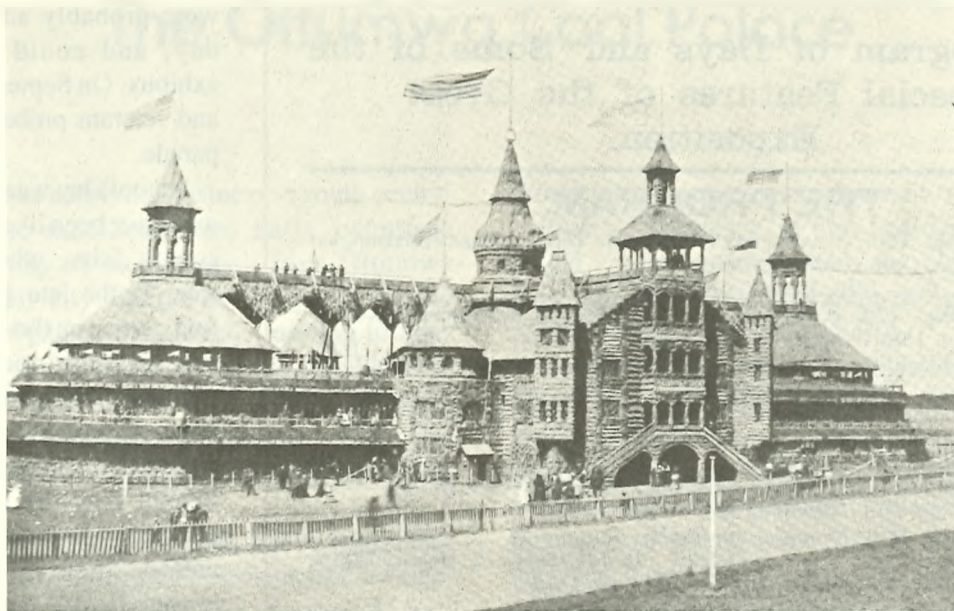
## What's in Your Attic?

The schedule of events shown here for the Coal Palace was found pasted inside an old scrapbook. (On the front side is the picture of a coal miner and the palace. See page 2 of the *Goldfinch*.) Old scrapbooks and advertisements like this one are called primary sources. To a historian primary sources are very valuable.

Primary sources are materials that were written, printed, or recorded during the period of time that a historian chooses to learn about. (Secondary sources are written by people who first studied primary sources, and then wrote down their own thoughts. The

*Goldfinch* is a secondary source.) You may have many primary sources in your home. Photos, diaries, old newspaper articles, and letters are other examples. A historian looks carefully at primary sources. Behind each line of this palace schedule, for example, is a larger story about how people worked and played, and about the important people of the time.

What does this program tell us? It tells us how people could travel to the palace (by train) and what they would see there. Each day a different county or group was honored. For example, look at September 26. Traveling salesmen



The 12-foot-wide suspension bridges on the Bluegrass Palace gave the best view for watching the horse races.

## A Palace Made of Bluegrass

One day in the late 1880s a train chugged through the lush countryside of southwestern Iowa, around Creston. Seth Macy looked out his train window at the cattle and horses grazing in the fields of bluegrass. He knew that bluegrass was an excellent food for livestock. And he knew that nowhere did bluegrass grow better than in southwestern Iowa. He was impressed with the beauty and prosperity of the land, and with the hard work of the farmers. Back at his job on a Des Moines newspaper, he remembered his conversations with the farmers:

*The more I saw the more I kept saying to the people, why don't you advertise the advantages of your soil and climate? California cannot beat what you have here. The most stupid thing is that hundreds of homeseekers have passed through this beautiful region of southern Iowa and never found out what a good country it is. . . . I was so charmed with what I saw that I wanted to turn farmer at once. . . . If I had to live anywhere but in Des Moines, I would live in the blue grass regions that I have just visited, raise fruit, grow rich and die happy.*

Seth Macy was not the only one who wanted to promote southwestern Iowa. People from 18 counties

in the Bluegrass League joined together in 1889 to build a bluegrass palace on the Union County Fairgrounds. The palace was not large, but the one built in 1890 was three times bigger and was used until 1892. The palace faced east, and in the morning sun the sweet smells of the bluegrass and wildflowers on the palace walls must have attracted honeybees as well as sightseers.

For the best view of the fairgrounds, visitors climbed up to the wide suspension bridges that stretched between the palace towers. From there they could watch the horses speeding around the bend of the racetrack.

Inside the palace the crowds listened to politicians' speeches and band concerts. All kinds of exhibits were on display—from log cabins to pagodas, from timber wolves and wildcats (probably stuffed), to silkworm cocoons. Models of animals and buildings were constructed of the area's crops and lumber (56 different kinds of trees grew in southwestern Iowa then). Even the students of Osceola and Chariton exhibited their homework.

After 1892 the palace wasn't used anymore. The idea was given up. But for a few years the palace on the Union County Fairgrounds had been the pride of Iowa's Bluegrass Country.

# Flax in Forest City

Flax is not a common crop in Iowa, but around 1890 the farmers in northern Iowa experimented with raising flax. The fibers from the flax plant are woven into the cloth called linen, and the seeds are pressed for linseed oil. Growing flax in Iowa was a new idea, and building a flax palace seemed the best way to promote it.

On the cover of the *Goldfinch* you can see the Flax Palace, built in 1892 on the Winnebago County Fairgrounds in Forest City. The central block was three stories high, with an eight-sided wing on each

side. In the photograph the “Broom Brigade” stands guard at the palace.

The “Broom Brigade” was a walking advertisement for flax. About 20 young women shouldered brooms (made of flax, of course), and marched and pivoted, probably just like a drill team in a parade.

The palace auditorium was the ideal place for speeches and concerts and exhibits, but outside the visitors watched the Ladies’ Rifle Club Tournament, foot races, hot air balloon ascensions, and parachute jumps from the balloons.

A parachute jump was probably not a common thing to see in Iowa back then. One observer didn’t think it was very smart either. He commented that such a performance “will be considered amusing until the race of idiots who practice it is extinct.”

The palace was built to show the variety and value of flax, and to house other exhibits at the fair. Oddly enough, there was no prize offered at the fair for the best flax grown or displayed.

In 1893 the building was covered with flax again, but for the last time as a palace. As late as 1940, some parts of the original structure were still standing on the Winnebago County Fairgrounds.



A proud owner and jockey pose their horses just beyond the Flax Palace. Boys were paid 3 cents an hour to weave the flax into bundles. For another view, see the front cover.

# The Presidents Tour the Palaces

## Cleveland on the Train

Not everyone visits a corn palace on a honeymoon, but in 1887 President Grover Cleveland did. The President and his new wife were on their wedding trip, traveling 4,500 miles by train across the United States. Sioux City was the only small city he visited. And the Corn Palace was the reason why.

Now we see politicians every day on television. We see them as they leave on airplanes for other countries, when they take vacations with their families, and when they are at work in Washington, D.C. But a hundred years ago, a visit from a president was very big news. People could find out what he really looked like, how his voice sounded, and how he acted. And of course, Sioux City was mighty proud that the Corn Palace was worth a president's stop on his honeymoon.

The President asked that there be no elaborate reception, but the people lined the streets. Everyone wanted to see his new wife, too. Frances Cleveland was rumored to be one of the most beautiful women of that time.

The Corn Palace had closed the day before, but of course President and Mrs. Cleveland were given a personal tour. No doubt the couple was tired from their long travels through the states, where everyone was trying to show them the best of each city. But Iowa's Corn Palace must have made an impression. The President left the building with an ear of corn tucked in his pocket, and said, "At last they have shown me something new."



President Grover Cleveland and his wife, Frances, stopped at the Sioux City Corn Palace on their wedding trip. Here the illustrator for the national magazine *Harper's Weekly* (Oct. 8, 1887) shows them relaxing in their presidential railroad car.

## Harrison in the Rain

President Benjamin Harrison visited the Coal Palace in Ottumwa on October 9, 1890. The palace might have looked a bit gloomy to him that morning. It had been raining for hours. He was supposed to review the grand parade at one o'clock. All the stores were closed, by the mayor's orders. It was a wet but excited crowd waiting in Ottumwa that day.

By noon the skies had cleared, and the parade was on. Afterwards, 4,000 people poured into the huge auditorium to hear the President's speech. It seemed that he was indeed impressed with their coal

palace. "If I should attempt to interpret the lesson of this structure," the President started to tell the crowd, "I would say that it was an illustration of how much that is artistic and graceful is to be found in the common things of life . . ."

But suddenly the President's voice was completely drowned out. Someone had turned on the model of Niagara Falls. First the morning rainstorm, then a 35-foot-high waterfall!

Soon the water trickled to a stop, and the crowd could hear the President's words again: "I take great pleasure in looking upon this

structure, a tribute to the enterprise, skill, and artistic genius of the city of which you in all Iowa may be justly proud."

In the evening about 10,000 people crowded into the Coal Palace to shake hands with a president of the United States. Water had not totally ruined President Harrison's visit. In fact the town might have been overcrowded if the weather had been perfect. One newspaper reported that: "it was a good thing that it rained or else Ottumwa would not have been able to hold them all."

# How To Build Your Own Exposition Palace

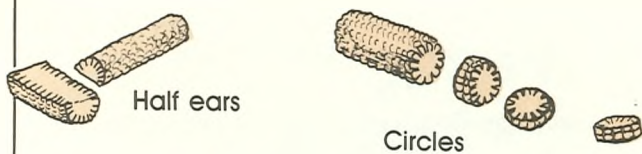
Building an exposition palace was a huge job. Look at how much material was needed for the first corn palace in Sioux City:

- 300,000 feet of lumber
- 15,000 bushels of corn
- 5,000 bushels of Winnebago Indian corn
- 500 pounds of carpet tacks
- 3,000 pounds of nails
- 1,500 pounds of brads (thin nails)
- 2,500 feet of rope
- 500 pounds of small wire
- 3,500 yards of colored cloth

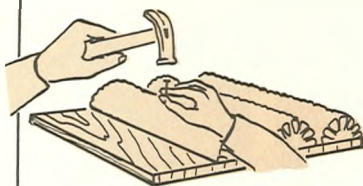
But with only some sturdy cardboard, glue, and materials from nature, you can build a model palace, or experiment with different patterns and designs for decorating a palace.

Back in 1890, a man named Mr. Quick took a close look at the Sioux City Corn Palace while it was being built. Look for ideas for your palace in his description of how the corn was cut different ways for different designs:

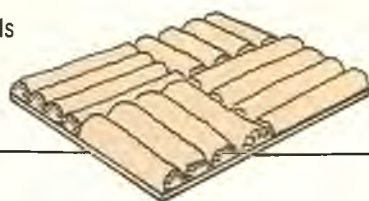
“Over yonder is a little buzz-saw run by an electric motor. It has a hopper like a corn-sheller and a man feeds it with ears of corn. They come out neatly split in the middle, just as a long cucumber might be sliced in two with a knife. Near him is another man at a machine. . . . He is cutting off transverse [cross] sections of ears of corn. . . .”



“A man nails on four half ears side by side, with their flat side to the wall, and they make a square. These run up and down. Run the next

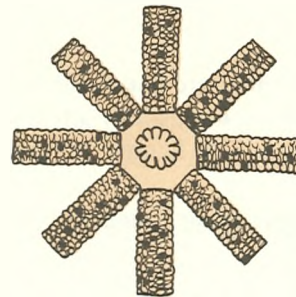


Squares or diamonds



square horizontally and you have another square of different appearance. Cover a large space with these alternating squares or diamonds. . . . imagine the gorgeous effect when all the colors found in corn are used. . . .”

A star or flower design could be made by nailing the slabs pointing out from the center. If the ear of corn was cut in round slices, the slice would be a circle with the white cob in the center and a ring of kernels (in blue, red, or yellow) around the outside. Individual kernels of corn were tacked on the walls, too.



Stars or flowers

If you live in the country, or know someone who does, you'll find lots of crops and grasses. If you live in the city, look for Indian corn on sale in grocery stores. Gather leaves, dried weeds, and small pebbles. Use felt markers in fall colors—red, brown, green, gold, purple, and yellow.

On the box, cut out arches for the doorways. Glue on tubes or smaller boxes for towers. Tie small bundles of grasses with yarn. Glue the bundles on the walls or hang them like streamers from the towers and arches. Glue kernels of corn or pebbles on the walls.

Pictures of valleys and meadows were made another way. First the artist built a frame of wood (like a picture frame) and covered it with cloth. Then with a crayon she sketched the outlines of the scene on the cloth. Grains were twisted in large or small bundles, and attached to the cloth to fill in the outlines.

From the descriptions and diagrams here, you can make similar designs. Slicing ears of corn would be too hard. But you can copy the patterns by gluing on kernels of corn or bundles of grain, or by drawing and coloring the designs with felt markers in autumn colors.

Can you think of other art projects made out of corn? In Sioux City, planners stuck cardboard invitations between the rows of kernels on an ear of corn, and sent the whole ear of corn to special guests. Corn kernels were strung into necklaces, and cornhusks were made into neckties, probably scratchy ones.

## your turn

1. Imagine that it's still 1890. Your town decides to build an exposition palace. You have been hired to design the palace and decorations. What would the palace advertise about your town? What products or crops would be used in the palace? Draw an architect's plan for the palace, or an artist's plan for decorating. Make lists of the materials needed.
2. Be a detective. If you live near Creston, Sioux City, Ottumwa, or Forest City, try to find out where the palace buildings stood. Check back in the articles for hints.
3. After President Harrison visited the Ottumwa Coal Palace, the Sigourney newspaper reported that other towns had plans for palaces, too. Davenport wanted to build an onion palace, Oskaloosa a hog palace, and Muscatine a melon palace. We know that there was a hay palace in Algona, but we have no record of the other three palaces. What might they have looked like? What kinds of problems would the builders have had with hog, onion, and melon palaces?
4. The palace expositions were like small world's fairs. The palaces were torn down after a year or two, but at the world's fairs, one building was usually left standing as a trademark for that fair—for example, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and the Space Needle in Seattle. Have you visited a world's fair? What building was the trademark?
5. Try to find the myths about Mondamin, the Indian god of corn, and Ceres, the Greek goddess of harvests.
6. At the Flax Palace, tickets cost 35¢. In one day \$3,900 was collected at the ticket office. How many people attended the fair that day?
7. Look over carefully the Ottumwa Coal Palace Program on page 11. Choose a character you would like to be. Decide which day you are attending, and write a letter to describe the exposition to a friend who lives far away. Tell your friend how you traveled there, and whom you saw.
8. Do you keep a diary or a photo album? These are primary sources. Someday in the future they will be useful to historians studying about Iowa in the 1980s. What other primary sources does your family or school have? Think about other ways besides writing and photography. What about tape recording?
9. In Mitchell, South Dakota, there is a corn palace still standing that is a popular tourist stop. If you have visited the South Dakota Corn Palace, report to your class about it. Bring photographs or brochures about it.
10. Act out the play on pages 8-9. Add a scene showing the Goodman family arriving at the palace.

**GINALIE SWAIM, Editor**

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*Cover photo:* The Broom Brigade poses with their flax brooms outside the 1891 Flax Palace in Forest City, Iowa.

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