

The Ottumwa Coal Palace

Great things often spring from small beginnings. So it was with the Ottumwa coal palace. Sometime late in the year of 1889 three of Ottumwa's most prominent citizens — Henry Phillips, Calvin Manning, and Peter G. Ballingall — met to consider the advisability of erecting a coal palace to proclaim to the world the rich gifts of nature in southern Iowa. Interest in the project spread and other meetings were held. A company was organized and stock was sold at five dollars a share. As time passed, however, it became more and more difficult to raise sufficient money. People were perfectly willing to have a coal palace built but seemed unprepared to supply the funds for such an expensive venture.

At last the zero hour arrived. The promoters realized that the money must be secured at once or the whole scheme abandoned. A mass meeting was called. Several of the business men of Ottumwa urged the people to double their stock in the company but few responded. The coal palace project seemed to be doomed. Suddenly Mr. Ballingall appeared on the stage. Voicing his enthusiasm in a loud tone accompanied by frantic gestures and increasing his own subscription to seven hundred dollars, he succeeded in reviving the optimism of the

assembly. One man bought two hundred shares in the coal palace, and before the meeting ended over thirty thousand dollars had been promised.

The summer of 1890 was a busy one in Ottumwa. While the coal palace was being erected elaborate plans were made for the exposition. All of the counties in the coal-mining district of Iowa were invited to display their wares in the palace and many prominent men were invited to come to Ottumwa during the festival season.

The morning of the opening day of the palace, September 16, 1890, dawned cool and cloudy, but about nine o'clock the clouds cleared away and when Governor Horace Boies arrived later in the forenoon the sun was shining brightly. At one-thirty a long procession, headed by the Iowa State Band, the Governor, the directors of the coal palace, city officials, and a company of militia, formed on Main Street and marched west to the great black diamond palace near the Burlington passenger station.

There in the Sunken Park, which had once been the bed of the Des Moines River before the railroad had turned the stream from its course, was an imposing structure. Fully two hundred and thirty feet in length, more than half as wide, the central tower rising to the height of two hundred feet, the high battlemented walls, the numerous turrets, and the tall narrow windows — all contributed to an appearance of mediaeval feudalism. The somber aspect of the frowning castle was intensified by the glittering

jet of the coal which veneered the walls. In architectural style the building was a combination of the Gothic and Byzantine orders.

Directly above the main entrance were the words "Coal Palace" formed with coal that glistened in the sunlight and stood out clearly against a silver-gray background. High on the tower above were two pictures, one portraying conditions in the carboniferous age and the other a modern coal mine, while between them stood a miner with his pick raised in the act of striking. Across the front of the building on either side of the entrance tower the first story projected from the line of the upper wall, forming a balcony. Just below the battlements of this balcony ran a broad frieze upon which were designs representing the industries of Ottumwa. The turrets at the four corners of the great central tower were veneered with cubes of coal laid so as to expose three sides and reflect the light from the different faces. In the tower itself, one hundred and fifty feet above the ground, was an observation gallery and dancing pavilion.

Viewed from the outside the coal palace was more imposing than artistic, but within grace and beauty reigned. The pillars, walls, rafters, and ceiling were completely hidden by the exhibits and exquisite decorations. Corn, oats, wheat, rye, barley, millet, blue grass, timothy, clover, and flax were skillfully arranged in brilliant masses of color. Around the walls of the palace were beautiful panels containing

pictures in corn symbolical of agriculture, industry, mechanics, music, art, literature, geography, and commerce.

Directly opposite the main entrance was a cascade so cleverly constructed that the line of demarcation between the banks of the stream and the painted valley could not be discerned. Miniature crags and boulders jutted out of the water, trees were growing in the valley, a suspension bridge spanned the abyss, and calcium lights from behind threw a rainbow into the falls. Immediately in front of the cataract was a spacious platform on which notable men, famous bands, the coal palace chorus, old Powhatan and his dusky braves, or the Mikado with his retinue claimed attention every evening.

Except for the space occupied by the auditorium the lower floor and the spacious gallery were entirely devoted to the display of agricultural, mineral, and mechanical products. The counties of the coal palace region vied with each other to produce the most pleasing exhibit; the Blue Grass League sent a splendid display; two meat packing plants were represented by booths; and the Northern Pacific Railroad was advertised by the most magnificent showing of all.

No doubt the most unique attraction at the coal palace was the miniature mine. Entering the dark, coal-lined shaft from the gallery the visitor was lowered slowly to the labyrinthine recesses beneath the palace. There a meek and noncommittal mule

hitched to a train of pit cars waited for his load of passengers. The entries, rooms, and tracks were complete in every detail, rich veins of coal were visible, and several miners were at work with pick and drill producing "concentrated heat, light, and power". To the thousands of people who took the "mine route" in the coal palace this demonstration was a revelation.

During the coal palace season, which lasted from September 16th to October 11th, nearly every day was set apart in honor of some organization, county, or State. Governor Boies dedicated the palace on Iowa day. Missouri day was September 26th; the twenty-ninth was Cedar Rapids day; Des Moines day came on the first of October; one day the railroads commanded attention; the traveling men, old soldiers, miners, and ladies each had a day of their own; and every coal-mining county surrounding Ottumwa and the blue grass region of southwestern Iowa took turns at flaunting their merits during the festival.

The climax of attractions was reached on the ninth of October when President Benjamin Harrison spent a day in Ottumwa. It was raining steadily at eight o'clock when the presidential train pulled into the station and few people were present to greet the chief executive. He was met by his brother, John S. Harrison of Kansas City, and taken immediately to the home of his sister, Mrs. D. T. Devin, where breakfast was served. The rain was still falling at

ten o'clock when the President went to explore the coal palace, but at noon the clouds dispersed and at one o'clock the presidential party reviewed the grand parade.

That afternoon an enormous crowd jammed into the coal palace to hear Mr. Harrison speak. The President declared that he was particularly interested to see the things of beauty that had been made of familiar materials. "If I should attempt to interpret the lesson of this structure", he said, "I should say that it was an illustration of how much that is artistic and graceful is to be found in the common things of life and if I should make an application of the lesson it would be to suggest that we might profitably carry into all our homes and into all neighborly intercourse the same transforming spirit".

At this juncture the cascade was turned on and the rush of water completely drowned the President's voice. Perfectly at ease when contending with a brass band, he had never before been asked to speak in the roar of Niagara. "I had supposed", he said when the waterfall had been stopped, "that no political suggestion of any sort was to be introduced into this friendly concourse of American citizens", and he felt that he had "good cause for grievance against the prohibitionists for interrupting us with this argument for cold water."

Mr. Harrison dined at the home of W. D. Felton, an old friend and former resident of Indianapolis. In the evening nearly ten thousand people crowded

into the coal palace for the privilege of shaking hands with the President. It was nearly nine o'clock when the reception ended and a few minutes later the special train pulled out for St. Joseph, Missouri.

For more than a year the coal palace stood as a monument to the enterprise of the citizens of Ottumwa. It was readorned and opened again in connection with the festival in 1891 which was not as successful as the first had been. Though the exposition was attractive, the waterfall was improved, and the mine continued to operate, enthusiasm for the project seemed to have subsided. Neither General Russell A. Alger, Governor Horace Boies, nor Representative William McKinley drew the crowds that had visited the first coal palace. The structure was later torn down and the Ottumwa coal palace passed into history.

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