

THE PALIMPSEST

EDITED BY WILLIAM J. PETERSEN

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The Sioux City Corn Palaces

While nearly the entire country suffered from drouth in the summer of 1887 propitious showers saved the crops in the middle portion of the Missouri Valley. The corn fields of northwest Iowa yielded amazingly, and the concomitant hogs grew fat. In the midst of this fortunate region lay Sioux City, the prodigy of the West. From a bustling town of about seven thousand inhabitants in 1880 it had grown into a thriving city of approximately thirty thousand population—the third most important meat packing center in America. Within the year property values had increased enormously, extensive improvements were under construction, and thousands of people had come there to live. The future seemed assured.

Grateful for this extraordinary prosperity and in recognition of the decisive importance of the agricultural interests of the surrounding territory, sev-

eral of the prominent business men of Sioux City met on the evening of August 20th to devise a means of public expression of thanksgiving for the bounteous crops of the Northwest and the remarkable growth of the city. Various plans were considered. One man suggested a jubilee with heaps of corn along the streets as continual reminders of the cause of the festival. Another proposed to decorate the courthouse with cornstalks and make it a center for public speaking, music, and entertainment. Then came a brilliant idea. Why not build a palace of corn! Let the design be unique and appropriate, let the edifice be adorned with all the products of the field — though chiefly with corn — and within let there be music and dancing and artistic exhibits of produce.

It was an inspiration of the moment. The burst of enthusiasm that greeted the idea of a corn palace festival grew apace. The whole city caught the spirit of the occasion and the people of the surrounding territory became intensely interested. A town meeting was held the following week, an organization was formed with Mayor J. M. Clelland as president, committees were appointed, and work on the project began.

Meanwhile everyone was experimenting with grain as a medium of artistic expression. Corn seemed to be particularly well adapted to such a use. Indeed, for the time being, corn was apparently the most important article in the life of the com-

munity. The slogan, "Corn is King", appeared to be a veritable reality. Never was a monarch held in more reverential esteem by his subjects. Odes to corn flowed from the pens of numerous rhymesters: Longfellow's tribute to Mondamin, the god of corn, was quoted until everyone must have known it by heart: the newspapers were filled with articles explaining the origin of harvest festivals and discussing the function of Ceres, the goddess of grain. Corn parties were quite the vogue in social circles: the ladies came adorned with strings of corn beads while the gentlemen wore corn husk cravats. One facetious reporter declared that cornstarch had become a favorite food for the babies.

As the concept of a corn palace developed, the original plans were outgrown. At first it was estimated that five thousand dollars would be needed for the festival but later the sponsors of the exposition decided to raise as much as twenty-five thousand dollars if necessary. By the end of September the whole project had assumed so much importance and promised to be so successful that the Sioux City Corn Palace Exposition Company was organized and incorporated with a capital stock of two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. The corn palace itself, as originally designed by E. W. Loft, was to occupy a space one hundred feet square on the northwest corner of Jackson and Fifth streets, but two weeks before the opening it was decided to double the size of the building by extending it westward to

include the armory and adding two more pavilions.

The first corn palace exposition opened on Monday evening, October 3, 1887. The whole city was in gala array for the jubilee. Illuminated arches spanned the intersections of the streets in the business district. Stores and houses were appropriately decorated. There was corn, corn everywhere, and in the midst of this festive display stood the corn palace — the pride of Sioux City and the marvel of all who beheld it.

Fantastically Moorish in general appearance, the first corn palace nevertheless possessed an individuality of architectural design peculiarly adapted to the purpose for which it was intended. At each front corner was a square tower representing Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Great arched entrances opened upon both Jackson and Fifth streets through smaller towers. Above each doorway was a panel in which agricultural scenes were portrayed in bas-relief, wrought with colored corn and other grains, while upon a platform at the top of each entrance tower was depicted an allegorical scene in figures.

The towers were connected by the battlemented walls of the edifice, above which rose graceful pinnacles, and beyond in the background was the corn-thatched roof — a solid mass of green. From the center of the roof towered the cupola, its arches and panels fashioned like those below and its spire rising to the height of a hundred feet. The long fly-

ing buttresses which swept gracefully down from the four turrets of the cupola to the corner towers constituted the most conspicuous feature of the palace and, together with numerous openings and arches, they contributed an appearance of airiness and whimsicality quite in keeping with the ornate exterior. To the west the armory was decorated in the same manner as the corn palace proper, while beyond were two pavilions in towers corresponding to those of the principal building.

The entire outer surface was covered with corn and other grains. The fantastic lines of the superstructure were modified 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 vocal with the significance of the great Northwest.

The space inside the palace beneath the cupola constituted a large auditorium the walls of which formed "one grand panorama of delightful imagery", rich with the beauty of nature's own painting. The bright colors of grain and grass and straw were

massed and blended in surprising brilliance and harmony. Yonder was a map of the United States made of seeds, each State of a different color; there a huge carrot spider was poised in a web of corn fibers; and most marvelous of all was the tableau of the golden stairs — a beautiful wax figure of Ceres, clad in a robe of satin husks and bearing a cornstalk scepter, stood upon a stairway of yellow corn.

After a week of street parades, fireworks, Indian war-dancing, speeches by notable people, band concerts, and competitive military drill the first corn palace was formally closed on Saturday, October the eighth. On the following Monday evening, however, as the climax of the jubilee, a big corn dance was held in the armory. The next day came a party of eastern capitalists, including Cornelius Vanderbilt and Chauncey Depew, to view the "eighth wonder of the world". Mr. Depew, who was prevailed upon to make a speech, declared that he had seen nearly all of the natural and unnatural wonders of the world, but never a corn palace before. "Any city so enterprising and so prolific in beautiful designs, and enthusiastic in all public enterprises must of necessity be the metropolis of the northwest", he said.

Early the next morning President Cleveland, who was on a tour of the country, arrived from St. Paul in his special train. At six o'clock the streets were crowded with people eager to catch a glimpse of the chief executive and his beautiful wife as they passed along to see the corn palace. Except for this spon-

taneous tribute there was no special demonstration and no formal reception. Within the corn palace the band played just as it had during the festival, while the presidential party inspected the displays of agricultural products and admired the unique decorations. Marveling at the prodigal resources of the Northwest, President Cleveland returned to his private car with a large ear of corn sticking out of his pocket and a new vision of its significance lingering in his mind. The corn palace, he remarked, was the first new thing he had seen on his trip.

Early in the summer of 1888 plans were begun for the second corn palace festival. During the weeks of preparation the local newspapers followed developments with exalted enthusiasm, the railroads were induced to announce half-fare rates to Sioux City, souvenirs were on sale by the first of September, arrangements were made for an elaborate program of entertainment, and long before the opening day on September 24th free passes were sent to Congressmen and other prominent people.

While the architecture of the second corn palace was of a composite order, it was less fantastic than the first had been. The building was square, covering a quarter of a block on the northeast corner of Pierce and Sixth streets. At the corners and midway along the sides facing the streets were towers projecting from the line of the wall and rising to a height of fifty feet.

Like the first corn palace the exterior of the sec-

ond was entirely covered with corn and other grains. It was estimated that thirty thousand bushels of corn were used — all that a section of land in northwest Iowa would normally produce. Ears of every color, sawed lengthwise into halves and transversely into sections, were nailed to the walls in intricate patterns and geometrical figures. Along the top of the wall ran a border of wheat sheaves, the upper portions of the towers were elaborately embellished, and the battlements were tufted with millet and sorghum seed. From the northwest to the southeast corners the color scheme of decoration was graduated to suggest the succession of seasons — the somber, neutral shades of winter gradually increasing in brightness, variety, and richness of combination until the full splendor of the autumnal tints appeared.

The whole interior of the palace was a wilderness of color. The booths around the walls in which produce was displayed were the units of decoration. One represented a Grecian temple and another a barnyard scene. A grotto presenting an illusion of ice and snow was “marvelously effective”.

Viewed from the promenade that encircled the vast amphitheater the maze of ornamental detail seemed unified by a band of golden-rod and millet separating the lower booths from the gallery. The supporting pillars, transformed with white corn into graceful columns of marble, carried the eye upward from the vividness and life below to a belt of invert-

ed wheat sheaves at the base of the dome-like roof. From there the glance was swept across the surface of the dome by the majestic grain-covered arches to the point where they met at the center. Unity and diversity, harmony and contrast concentrated their potencies in the vision. The mellow radiance of illumination added a glamour that accentuated the atmosphere of sentiment and romance which pervaded the place. "It suggests to me scenes of what fancy paints fairy land to be", declared Governor Larrabee.

The third corn palace was opened on Monday evening, September 23rd, with an address by J. M. Thurston, the "most gifted of western orators". During the first week a bicycle tournament was held and later several conventions met in Sioux City. Hundreds of Indians from the reservations attended the festival in their primitive garb, and entered wholeheartedly into the spirit of the jubilee. They were very conspicuous in the old settlers' parade, imparting the color of by-gone days to that pageant of progress. Not content with such a showing, however, they paraded daily by themselves. Another special attraction was a talking machine. Phonograph records were made and reproduced at the corn palace — to the anguish of the musicians.

Probably none of the corn palace festivals attracted more excursion parties than the one in 1889. During the first week a large delegation representing the Blue Grass League came in a special train

festooned with blue grass. From Omaha came another large excursion, and a "very quiet party" of deaf mutes from the School for the Deaf spent a day in Sioux City. But the most portentous event of the festival was the visit of a hundred New England capitalists who came on a special train all of the way from Boston. It is alleged that all expenses were paid by A. S. Garretson and that the capitalists were continually reminded that Sioux City was abundantly blessed with brains and possibilities but much in need of money.

The most distinctive feature of the third corn palace was a grand tower over one hundred and eighty feet high. It was built in four courses, each smaller than the one below, thus affording space for balconies from which the whole city could be seen. Flanking the main tower and connected with it by bridges were two smaller towers. The west end of the palace extended across Pierce Street in a great archway through which the traffic passed.

The corn palace of 1890 was described as a "Mohammedan mosque with Iowa trimming". The dome, built in the form of a huge globe, was decorated with corn to represent the world, with Iowa and Sioux City conspicuously indicated in front. On top of the world was a great table supporting an upper dome — a sort of Moslem turret two stories high. Three towers similarly crowned graced each of the two front sides.

As the visitor passed through the main entrance

at the corner of Pierce and Sixth streets the most striking feature of the interior met his gaze. Above the annex on the other side of the auditorium was a miniature valley of a great river — perhaps the Missouri. From far-distant mountains clothed in pine trees came a stream of water, leaping over rocks, hemmed in between high hills, winding across a prairie, and finally falling over a ledge into a lake below where the palmettos were growing.

Three times during the festival, which lasted from September 25th to October 11th, King Corn came forth in the costume of a knight of old, followed by a retinue of glittering attendants. The allegorical history of corn, the monarch of peace, was depicted by beautiful floats on which patriotic citizens, arrayed in the trappings of the sixth century, formed numerous tableaux. King Corn upon his throne and surrounded by ladies and pages dispensed princely favors as he passed along. Before the throne was a bronze urn filled with fruit and guarded by two gilded lions, on either side of the throne stood an antlered deer, while at the rear was a column upon which a cherub perched with a cornucopia filled with fruit and flowers.

The festival of 1890 was to have closed in splendor. The Governors and Congressmen from Iowa and neighboring States were invited to visit the corn palace. In the forenoon there was to have been a grand parade and in the afternoon an informal reception of the prominent guests. But nobody

came except Governor A. C. Mellette and Congressman I. S. Struble. It rained all day and the roof of the corn palace leaked. Late at night while the rain poured down in torrents and the lightning flashed on every side the electric lights were turned out and the doors of the fourth corn palace were closed.

The ardor of Sioux City seems not to have been dampened by the dismal end of the fourth corn palace festival. The following year another magnificent palace was built, the noblest of them all. More than a block long and dominated by a majestic dome over two hundred feet high — said to be the largest ever constructed of wood alone — the fifth corn palace was so well proportioned, so graceful in every line that the enormous bulk of the building was unperceived. Except for the two entrance towers the palace resembled the national capitol in general contour. There was the broad expanse of horizontal lines expressive of a vast domain: there was the splendid dome significant of lofty aspiration.

Fronting on Sixth Street, the palace was intersected in the center by an immense archway over Pierce Street. Above the arch was a spacious balcony bounded at each end by stately turrets which were flanked by minarets overlaid with wild sage and white corn, giving the appearance of a chased silver column divided into diamond sections by bars of ivory. The arch façade was covered with red corn in a manner to represent carved rock. Above and beyond the balcony was the open work of the lower

reaches of the great central dome, draped in oats and converging below the broad blue frieze at the base of the upright portion of the dome. Upon this belt of blue a triumphal procession of domestic animals was portrayed with dark seeds and grasses. Above the frieze were minarets. Decorated with indigo corn at the base they passed through the shades of purple, red, orange, and yellow to dazzling white at the top. Between these minarets were the outlooks of the observation gallery adorned with lace-like fabric made of ropes of straw. The blue and gold capital of the dome supported a huge yellow cornucopia pouring forth the treasure of the fields.

“To be thoroughly appreciated,” wrote a witness, “the Palace should be seen at sunset, when the solid mass of the building is cast in shade. Then each tower and turret and minaret shines in the warm light as if wrought of gold, like some magnificent dream of ‘Spanish castles’ discerned above the mist which fancy dares not penetrate.”

The auditorium occupied the east wing of the palace while the west wing was devoted entirely to agricultural exhibits. In artistic detail and harmony of coloring the fifth corn palace surpassed all previous efforts. About the walls of the auditorium and in the balcony over the archway were numerous paintings and statues artfully constructed of grain. The designs were exceedingly intricate and the booths were the most elaborate that had ever been built in

the corn palace. A miniature library won the first prize. The walls of the library booth were adorned with pictures — a portrait of Dante, a winter scene, and a country maid with an apron of flowers. The floor was covered with a grass rug. Upon a table were quill pens of cane and oat straw, a corn lamp, a gourd inkwell, and several corn husk blotters.

Considerable space on the main floor of the west wing, which was decorated in Spanish moss and brake grass, was occupied by extensive southern exhibits. The exposition of produce from the Northwest was very complete. Several railroad companies vied with each other in displaying the resources of the country and presenting novel attractions.

The fifth and last corn palace was opened at noon of October 1, 1891, and remained on exhibition more than three weeks. Late in the evening of Sunday, October 25th, the final notes of "Farewell" had died away, the last stragglers had been ushered out, and only the long rows of chairs in the auditorium and the litter that strewed the floor told of the crowd that had assembled. The final footfall echoed drearily through the vast building as if the echo itself were oppressed at the thought that such a beautiful creation had been called into existence to be the center of a few days of festivity, only to be cast aside before the moon had waned. Then the doors of the Sioux City corn palace were closed forever.

JOHN ELY BRIGGS