

The Blue Grass Palace

The morning of August 21, 1890, dawned cool and cloudy, threatening rain. Hundreds of men and women of Creston, who had toiled for weeks to build and decorate the second blue grass palace, watched the sky anxiously. At about eight o'clock, however, the clouds cleared away, the sun shone forth brightly, and the promoters of the Blue Grass Palace Exposition and District Agricultural Fair rejoiced. The dedication that afternoon by Governor Horace Boies was not to be marred by the weather man.

The Blue Grass League of Southwestern Iowa, organized in the law office of J. B. Harsh at Creston on May 11, 1889, had sponsored the first attempt, during the summer of 'eighty-nine, to build a blue grass palace which would advertise southwestern Iowa as the corn palaces had heralded the advantages of Sioux City. The enterprise had met with flattering success and, encouraged by the results, the league had planned the wonder palace for 1890, where the eighteen counties of the league would exhibit the products of the soil and join in a carnival holiday after the harvest was ended and summer was merging into autumn.

The second blue grass palace, a building three times the size of the first palace, was erected on the Creston fair grounds. Facing the race track on the

east the structure extended north and south almost the length of a city block and was fully half as wide. Its conical shaped central tower reached a height of one hundred and twenty feet, while on both the north and south wings were cupolas ninety feet high. A square, five-story tower forming the central part of the main entrance supported a flagstaff from which a banner bearing the legend, "Creston Blue Grass Palace", floated in the breeze a hundred feet above the ground. From the flagstaffs on the two cupolas, the towering central dome, the four smaller towers, and the two turrets, the Stars and Stripes were unfurled. Multicolored pennons were placed at regular intervals along the upper promenade which encircled both the north and south wings. A broad suspension bridge stretched from the central dome to the cupolas, affording an unobstructed view of Union County farms that swept away to the horizon. The entire surface of the palace was covered with heavy layers of long stemmed blue grass, timothy, clover, and straw arranged in designs and effects highly artistic.

At an early hour on the morning of the opening day the fair ground presented a lively scene. The owners of shows, refreshment booths, lemonade stands, and shooting galleries were setting up for business, fakirs were erecting their tents, and wagon loads of exhibits awaited their turn for unloading. Inside the palace workmen were hastening to complete the huge auditorium for the reception of the

Governor. The stage was carpeted and profusely decorated with flowers and plants. South of the stage stretched a large painting by a local artist which featured a picture of the palace with little angels filling the sky, each equipped with a banner bearing the name of one of the counties of the league. The angel with the Union County banner perched on the center spire of the palace.

The crowd began to arrive shortly after noon and by two-thirty the huge auditorium was packed by an audience of three or four thousand people. Hundreds, unable to squeeze their way into the auditorium, had to be content with wandering along the promenades, visiting the suspension bridge, or inspecting the exhibits. Meanwhile the famous Iowa State Band which had accompanied the Governor from Des Moines entertained the waiting crowd with classical and popular music.

A few minutes after three o'clock the watchers on the suspension bridge saw the procession approaching from town. In the van rode the Governor and his staff followed by the mayor of Creston and the city council. Next came the Creston fire department in uniform while local citizens and visitors in hacks, carriages, and buggies brought up the rear. As the official party entered the auditorium the band blared forth with the stirring march, "Hail to the Chief", and the crowd greeted the first citizen of the State with loud applause and noisy cheering. In his address Governor Boies lauded the members and pro-

moters of the Blue Grass League and expressed his surprise and delight at the beautiful structure which he had the honor to dedicate. He concluded his address with remarks on the political situation, urging that every citizen should know the principles upon which his government is founded and should study carefully the issues of the day. A handshaking reception followed the program of the afternoon, and the first day of the exposition ended with the large crowd very hot but exceedingly happy.

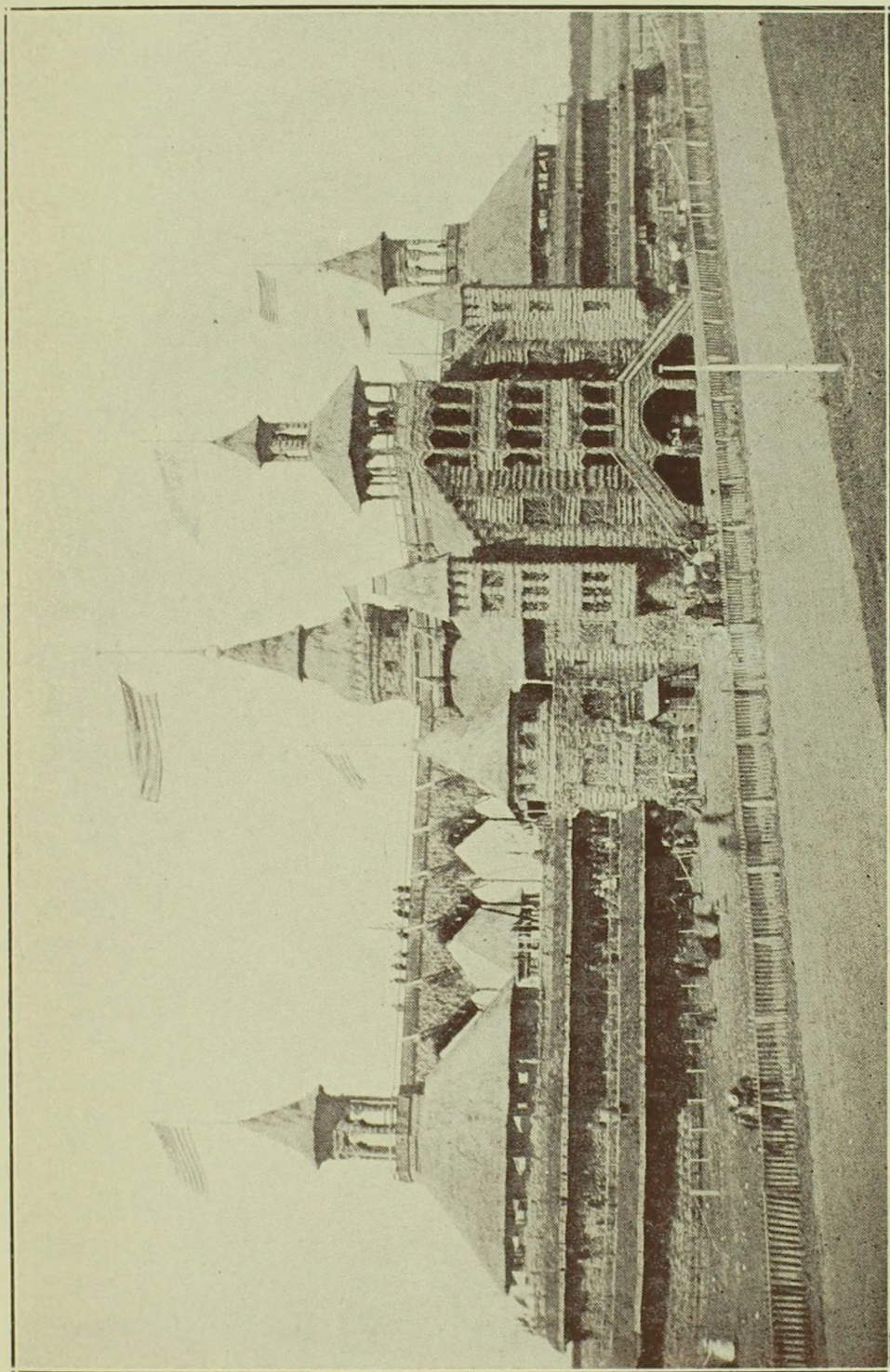
The second day of the exposition, which had been set apart in honor of Taylor and Adair counties, was perhaps of equal interest. Honorable Roger Q. Mills, of Texas, author of the Mills Tariff Bill, had been selected as the orator of the day, and he had arrived in time to attend the dedicatory exercises on the previous afternoon. Early in the morning of August 22nd the roads leading into Creston were black with buggies, carriages, and wagons bringing the country folk from far and near. At nine o'clock two special trains arrived on the north branch, carrying the Fontanelle band and a large crowd from Adair County. Half an hour later two special trains from the south brought the Taylor County delegation accompanied by the New Market band of nine pieces, the Conway band of twelve, the Lenox band of ten, and the Fifth Regimental Band of Bedford — one of the prize musical organizations of the State. At ten o'clock the blue grass palace special from Omaha, elaborately decorated with flags, bunt-

ing, and banners, rolled into the station yard, loaded with visitors and a big band from the Nebraska metropolis. The different delegations formed in line headed by the Nebraska group, and with bands playing martial music, flags flying, and banners waving they marched north to the palace grounds.

The crowd surged back and forth through the palace admiring the artistic decorations and the displays of agricultural products. Interest centered, however, about the apartments occupied by the two counties to which the second day of the exposition had been dedicated. The ceiling and the three walls of the Adair County booth were completely covered with corn, oats, grasses, and wheat arranged in novel patterns. A large, square centerpiece covered with all the varieties of grasses grown in the county served as a base on which a horse and sleigh made of the products of the soil caught the attention of the visitors. A straw man with a mustache of red corn silk sat in the sleigh driving a corn horse with plaited blue grass reins and harness. At one side of the booth a miniature replica of a Fontanelle elevator covered with red shelled corn held a supply of grain and grass seed which poured through little spouts into tiny box cars on the railroad track. A Newfoundland dog and a horse, both life size and constructed of blue grass, and a sheep made of oat and wheat heads occupied prominent places in the display. Samples of brick from a Fontanelle kiln, firkins of rich butter, and cheese, vegetables, grains,

and fruits were arranged in attractive fashion, the whole effect being a worthy tribute to the taste of the committee in charge of the Adair County offering.

The Taylor County display also delighted the thousands who visited the booth. Suspended from the elaborately decorated ceiling a large wooden egg, thirty-three inches long and thirteen inches in diameter, called attention to the poultry business of the county. On the egg sat perched a small bantam hen and below it hung a card with the notice: "Hens laid 532,540 dozen eggs, worth 12c per dozen, or \$63,904.80." The center piece of this booth was a miniature residence of Queen Anne style, set in a lawn of close-cropped blue grass sprayed by numerous fountains. Gravel walks, bordered with flowers, extended around the house and across the lawn. Back of the house lay a lake with its banks embowered with flowers. The sunlight on the fountains, the velvety green of the lawn, the white walks, and the little house perfect in detail made one of the most charming pictures in the palace. The side walls of the booth were completely covered with pictures made of seeds, clover heads, corn husks, and ears of corn. One was a life-size horse constructed entirely of red clover heads, another of seeds and grain represented a Holstein cow, while a third was a sheep made of oats and wheat. Pyramids of fruit and vegetables, tubs of butter, shelves full of glasses of jelly, preserves, and canned apples,



THE SECOND BLUE GRASS PALACE

pears, peaches, plums, and berries completed a display to which the judges awarded second prize at the close of the exposition.

Fremont County captured the first prize of \$100 offered by the Blue Grass League to the county making the best display. It was a center of attention throughout the exposition. Like most of the booths the ceiling was covered with cornstalks, wheat, and oats, and the side walls were hidden completely by a covering of grains and grasses, but the arrangement of the Fremont exhibit was unique and unusually attractive. Long tables in rows down the center of the apartment were covered with white linen and held china plates piled high with apples, plums, peaches, pears, grapes, and berries. Beneath the tables cabbages, potatoes, carrots, beets, pumpkins, cauliflower, squashes, melons, tomatoes, celery, and egg plants were piled in heaps. Around the walls stood sacks with open tops displaying shelled corn, oats, wheat, barley, rye, millet, flax, broom corn, timothy, clover, and blue grass seed, while corn was also shown in the stalk and wheat and oats in bundles. Butter and cheese exhibits occupied a large space. One entire side of the apartment was filled with a fine arts exhibit — paintings and drawings in crayon, oil, water colors, and pastel — all the work of Tabor College students. Another student at that institution had arranged a display of seventy-six varieties of wood, all native of the county. A parlor with rustic furniture, constructed

from the products of the farm, was also a conspicuous feature of the Fremont prize-winning booth.

On Monday the twenty-fifth, the district fair began and with the racing program, the carnival gaiety, and the live stock exhibit it afforded the crowds new thrills and a revival of old delights. The thousands who surged back and forth from grandstand and amphitheater to the blue grass palace, from the quarter-stretch to the live stock barns reflected the Iowan's delight at a country fair. The showing of fat hogs, of fine sleek cattle, and of pedigreed horses taxed the capacity of the barns and sheds. The racing stables were also full. Grooms in old sweaters and dusty clothing discussed the races of the day with diminutive jockeys clad in the gay colors of their calling. The spielers of the side shows found a receptive audience, while the lemonade stands and refreshment booths did a rushing business. Fakirs, too, plied their trade and the carnival spirit reigned.

The fame of the blue grass palace spread. Ottumwa sent a delegation to Creston and Sioux City did likewise. The railroads advertised round-trip excursions for one-way fare and ran special trains daily to accommodate the visitors. Although no automobiles existed it was not uncommon for parties to drive to the fair from a distance of thirty miles or more, and stay two or three days. Creston hotels and restaurants reaped a golden harvest and the hackmen prospered. The unusual and distinctive

features of the displays were described in the newspapers throughout the State. Different counties of the Blue Grass League had charge of the programs on successive days, each striving in friendly rivalry to make the best showing. As a means of broadcasting the natural advantages of the fertile acres of southwestern Iowa, as a test of the ability of the people of this region to coöperate in a big enterprise, as a financial undertaking, and as a method of combining carnival fun with an educational program the Blue Grass Palace Exposition of 1890 was a complete success.

The following year and again in 1892 blue grass palaces advertised southwestern Iowa. Lyman Abbot of New York and W. C. P. Breckenridge of Kentucky were two of the speakers who came to mold opinion on topics of the day. Although of the same size and shape as the palace of 1890 alterations changed the appearance of the entrance in 1891 and made access to the suspension bridge more convenient. Probably the most striking feature of the third palace was a huge movable panorama composed of paintings depicting actual scenes from the blue grass region. In 1892 the outside of the palace building was painted to represent the stone walls of an old castle, the towers were painted to resemble brick, and the roof again was thatched. But the Blue Grass League had passed out of existence, and by this time the novelty of the palace idea had worn off so that the project was abandoned thereafter.

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