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## The Sioux City Corn Palaces

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Dorothy Schwieder  
Patricia Swanson

IN THE SUMMER OF 1887, while much of the Middle West was suffering from drought, the area in and around Sioux City appeared as an oasis in the midst of a desert. During that year abundant rainfall had produced excellent crops, which in turn brought agricultural prosperity to this part of north-west Iowa. Good crops had been produced for over a decade, while surrounding areas had been less fortunate. Agricultural prosperity had fostered remarkable growth in Sioux City itself; and, in 1887 the community's citizens were anxiously seeking a way to publically express their gratitude. After considering various alternatives, they hit upon a novel way to express their thankfulness and advertise their fair city as well—they decided to build a huge palace of corn! Between 1887 and 1891 the people of Sioux City erected a total of five corn palaces, each larger and more elaborate than the one preceding it.

The five corn palaces, while reflecting local interests and boosterism, were also part of a broader agricultural movement in Iowa. By the late 1800s agricultural experimentation in the Hawkeye State had prompted the discovery that certain crops would grow better than others in different localities. Local agrarians and business boosters were eager to tell the world about their specialties. They hoped, as well, to attract new people and enterprises to their communities. Thus, to demonstrate to the world their particular specialties, Iowans in the 1880s and 1890s built, in addition to a series of corn palaces, a blue grass palace, a flax palace, a coal palace, and a hay palace. The citizens of one community even talked of erecting

an onion palace.<sup>1</sup>

Although the actual corn palaces were not built until the late 1880s, their roots go back to the 1870s and reflect the agrarian distress of that period. The post Civil War years were difficult ones for American farmers: they faced high railroad rates, unfair interest charges and low farm prices. Compounding these economic troubles were several locust epidemics which occurred throughout the Midwest in the 1870s. Great hordes of grasshoppers descended upon the land, devouring everything in their path and coming in such huge numbers, that like a black cloud, they blotted out the sun. Before they moved on, entire fields were stripped of grain. Drought conditions also affected many midwestern farmers and resulted in the loss of both crops and livestock.<sup>2</sup>

Among the many concerned people in the Sioux City area was a Catholic priest who lived in the neighboring community of Jefferson, South Dakota. In May of 1876, Father Pierre Boucher decided that he and his parishioners should seek divine intervention to end the area's agricultural misfortunes. Along a selected route, they erected huge wooden crosses, designated as Stations of the Cross; then Father Boucher and his pilgrims marched the eleven mile journey, worshipping at each Station. The following morning, the people in that area beheld an exhilarating sight—no more grasshoppers! For the next several decades farmers in that region experienced bumper crops, while many others in the Middle West continued to suffer from drought and crop failure. Sioux City was described as a green spot in a field of brown, and as corn and hog prices soared, the area experienced welcome prosperity.<sup>3</sup>

Reacting to their good fortune, the people of Sioux City felt that some type of thanksgiving festival would be in order. Someone suggested holding a "Sioux City Thanksgiving and Harvest Festival and Corn Jubilee." One idea led to another

<sup>1</sup>Earl Ross, *Iowa Agriculture: A Historical Survey* (Iowa City: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1951), 87-88.

<sup>2</sup>Ray Billington, *Westward Expansion* (2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Company, 1960), 724-744.

<sup>3</sup>John F. Schmidt, *A Historical Profile of Sioux City* (Sioux City: Sioux City Stationary Company, 1969), 165.

and soon people were talking about decorating a building with corn. Originally the plan called for workmen to decorate the new Woodbury County Courthouse with corn and perhaps place huge piles of corn in the streets.<sup>4</sup> Then came the suggestion that marked the start of an enterprise never before undertaken anywhere in the world—why not build a palace of corn? Commenting on the unusual suggestion, the *Sioux City Daily Journal* (August 21, 1887) observed: “St. Paul and Montreal can have their ice palaces, which melt at the first approach of spring, but Sioux City is going to build a palace of the product of the soil that is making it the great pork-packing center of the northwest.”<sup>5</sup>

With the important specialties of corn and hogs, Sioux City, in the 1880s, provided a fertile atmosphere for new ideas relating to agricultural innovation. First surveyed in 1854, it had been designated the county seat of Woodbury County in 1856; one year later it could boast of a population of nearly 1,000 inhabitants. Railroad service—a vital necessity for economic expansion—became a reality in March of 1868. Growth continued, and by 1870 the community was served by two newspapers and an Academy of Music. Between the years 1880 and 1887 the city’s population more than tripled as the number of inhabitants soared from 7,000 to 30,000. With its young, energetic citizenry and its rapidly growing population, Sioux City appeared destined to become a major commercial center, perhaps rivaling even a city like Chicago.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a corn palace, then, proved to be a great inspiration for the young city’s inhabitants. Moreover, their enthusiasm was shared by thousands of people in nearby towns and on neighboring farms. The people of the area had a keen appreciation of the role that agriculture played in their lives, and particularly of the importance of corn. With this awareness, an epidemic of corn fever began to sweep over the countryside. People began experimenting with corn as an art form, and the slogan, “Corn is King,” appeared to be on everyone’s lips. People began quoting Longfellow’s trib-

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>*Sioux City Daily Journal*, August 21, 1887, 3.

<sup>6</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, May 7, 1939.

ute to Mondamin, the god of corn, and newspapers carried articles explaining the origin of harvest festivals and the myth of Ceres, the goddess of grain. Society matrons held corn parties where the ladies appeared bedecked with "strings of corn beads" and the men wore "corn husk cravats."<sup>7</sup> It seemed that Sioux City had indeed gone "corn crazy."

It was up to Sioux City architect W. E. Loft to turn the corn palace dream into a reality. His original design called for a building fifty-eight by fifty-eight to be located at the northwest corner of Fifth and Jackson Streets. These plans were changed, calling for a building measuring 100 by 100 feet. Finance committees were appointed to raise a total of \$25,000, and construction of the "Eighth wonder of the World," was underway.<sup>8</sup> Two weeks before the festival was scheduled to open, however, it was decided that the original wooden structure was inadequate. The facility was then extended westward to include the Goldie Roller Rink. A few days later the area was enlarged still further when the space between the Roller Rink and the Baptist Church, located at the corner of Fifth and Pierce, was added. The completed structure contained 18,500 square feet of floor space.<sup>9</sup>

The planners' initial intent was to construct a building that would reflect Sioux City's appreciation of agriculture; it was not intended to be a beautiful structure, nor a particularly spacious one. But once underway the project snowballed. Everyone for miles around wanted to help and Sioux City was almost inundated with a flood of corn. Within a short time the plans for a simple celebration with a corn-covered courthouse had been forgotten and a magnificent edifice was in the making.

The month of September was filled with excitement as workers began erecting the unique structure. People in and around Sioux City contributed large amounts of produce for decorating materials. The Sioux City and Pacific Railroad showed their support by hauling grains, vegetables and fruits

<sup>7</sup>John Ely Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," *The Palimpsest*, III No. 10 (1922), 315.

<sup>8</sup>*Sioux City Daily Journal*, August 24, 1887, 3.

<sup>9</sup>Schmidt, *A Historical Profile*, 166.

free of charge, from surrounding areas, into Sioux City. As the opening date drew closer, excitement continued to mount; each day brought many new announcements in the *Sioux City Journal*. On September 21st, the *Journal* reprinted an excerpt from the *Forest City Press* which proclaimed that Sioux Citizens "expect to have corn juice on tap even though Iowa is a prohibition state."<sup>10</sup> A local music dealer, J. G. Smith, became so smitten with "corn fever" that he wrote a poem eulogizing the event. Appropriately entitled "Corn is King," the work was published in the *Sioux City Journal* on September 23rd. The following is a partial reprinting of Smith's poem:

Corn is King  
 The time is now at hand  
 In this great and glowing land,  
 Where side by side we stand,  
 And clasp each other by the hand,  
     and shout and sing,  
 Corn is King.

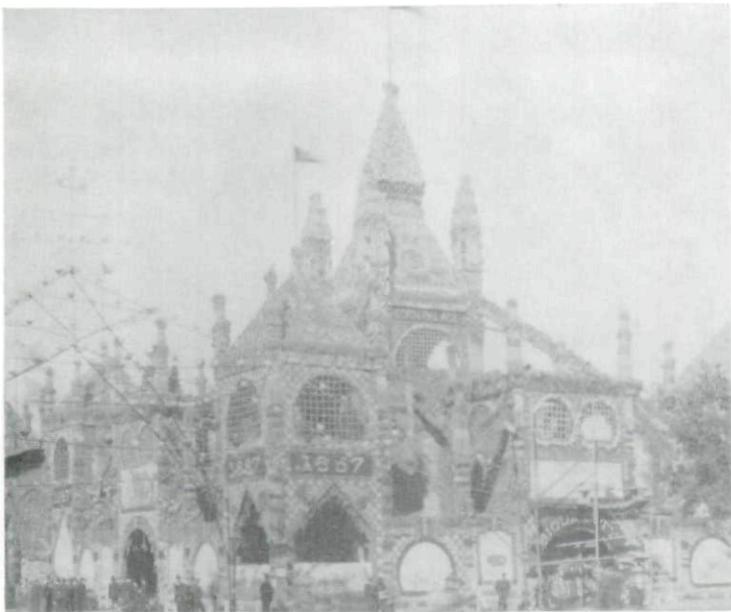
The farmer used to heave a sigh  
 Whenever the price of corn was not high,  
 But now take your glasses from your eye  
 And see it 110 feet in the sky.  
     It will pring—  
     Well, Corn is King.

The Journal is the best paper to read;  
 'Twill tell you everything you need,  
 And if its advice you will heed  
 To the Corn Palace you will go with speed;  
     And join and sing,  
 Corn is King!<sup>11</sup>

Smith's poetic utterances reflected the mounting excitement that filled the entire community as the project neared completion. On September 24th, the *Journal* noted that one more phase had been completed as plumbers finished installing drinking fountains in the facility. On September 29th, the Corn Palace Board of Control, inspired by the overwhelming

<sup>10</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, September 21, 22, 1887, 6. To prevent confusion over the titles of *Sioux City Journal* and *Sioux City Daily Journal*, it should be noted that sometime between late August and early September, 1887, the *Sioux City Daily Journal* changed its title to the *Sioux City Journal*.

<sup>11</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, September 23, 1887, 6.



*Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum*

**First Corn Palace, Built in 1887**

response to the approaching event and sensing the enormous potential of future Corn Palace expositions, filed articles of incorporation for the "Sioux City Corn Palace Exposition Company." Stating that Sioux City was to be the permanent home of the Corn Palace, they were convinced that the event would "make Sioux City the Corn Palace City of the World."<sup>12</sup>

Architecturally the first corn palace defied classification, although it had many features of Moorish design. In the center of the structure stood a 100-foot tower adorned with a huge cupola, arched windows, minarets and pinnacles. At each of the front corners was a square tower representing Dakota, Nebraska, and Minnesota. Connecting the main tower to each of the corner towers were "long flying buttresses which swept gracefully down" to the lower structures. The windows were framed with ears of corn strung on wires, and the roof was thatched with stalks of grain. Arched entrances opened onto both Jackson and Fifth Streets, and above each

<sup>12</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, September 24, 29, 1887, 6.

doorway was an agricultural scene depicted in corn.<sup>13</sup>

Once the outside was completed, attention turned to the interior. All agreed that the inside must rival the exterior in beauty and perhaps reflect even finer taste. Yet, with only a week remaining before the palace was due to be completed, the interior was unfinished. Corn Palace officials hurriedly appointed a Board of Control to handle the problems, and their solution was to invite the women of Sioux City to come in and complete the job. The interior was divided into twelve sections, and the women—appropriately named the Ladies Decorative Association—were divided into twelve groups with each group responsible for one section. Allowed to do whatever they pleased, the following is an account of their finished handiwork:

There was no gaud, no tinsel, no laying out of precious metals, no use of costly pigments. An ear of corn, a handful of grasses, a bunch of weeds, a wisp of straw—these were the only materials available. Yet under the deft hands of women, these simple materials became works of art.<sup>14</sup>

On one interior wall the women created a large map of the United States which they decorated entirely in grains and seeds, each state designed in a different color. Another attraction was the wax figure of Ceres, the goddess of grain. Adorned in a silky pale robe of cornhusks and bearing a corn-stalk scepter, she stood poised at the top of a golden stairway created from yellow corn. In one corner a huge spider made of carrots hung suspended in a sparkling web of cornsilk. The walls, covered with grains and grasses, contained murals that depicted every conceivable design: meadows, rivers, canoes, buffalo and Indian symbols and emblems. Even the Iowa State Seal had been re-created from corn and cattails.<sup>15</sup>

One might say that Sioux City did go crazy over the Corn Palace Festival, for they did not stop with just the building decorations. Citizens bedecked the main streets with almost as much concern as the local attraction itself. Great illuminated arches stood at the major street intersections, several of which measured fifty feet high. Each arch was lined with 250

<sup>13</sup>Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," 316-7.

<sup>14</sup>Schmidt, *A Historical Profile*, 166.

<sup>15</sup>Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," 318.

gas jets covered with different colored glass globes. Eight of these arches spanned Fourth Street (the city's main thoroughfare), and the largest had peaks and pinnacles and were thatched with corn. Altogether workers laid two miles of pipe in order to light the 7,000 gas-jets. Sioux City, when viewed from afar and at night, looked much like a flaming fairyland, with the fairy castle included. Even stores and offices entered into the festivity. Storefronts were decorated with corn and pumpkins and windows were filled with harvest scenes, all done in grains and vegetables.<sup>16</sup> A local observer noted that "half of the business houses have corn signs which are more beautiful than any painter can make."<sup>17</sup>

On October 3, 1887, the Corn Palace Festival officially began. Good weather prevailed, and Sioux City opened its doors to multitudes of visitors. The festival, marked by speeches, concerts, dances, fireworks and prizes, lasted one week and a parade highlighted each day's activities. On October 5th, approximately 200 Omaha, Sioux and Winnebago Indians—decked out in their war paint, feathers and skins—paraded through the streets "uttering war hoops." On October 6th, an industrial parade dominated the activities. The October 7th procession again featured Indians from nearby reservations who appeared in their native costumes. The newspaper article announcing the Indian parade entry cautioned that the "fastidious are requested not to blush." Parade officials offered a wide array of prizes for anyone that chose to enter: a \$200 prize for the best country display, a \$100 first place prize for the best competing band and a \$25 prize for the best representation of frontier life.<sup>18</sup>

The number of persons attending surpassed even the most optimistic estimates. To accommodate the hundreds of Corn Palace visitors coming from surrounding communities, local railroads were forced to add additional passenger cars to their daily runs. Many prominent officials also came to see the

<sup>16</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, September 21, 29, 1887, 6; Schmidt, *A Historical Profile*, 167.

<sup>17</sup>*Iowa State Agricultural Society*, (Des Moines: George E. Roberts State Printer, 1888), 70.

<sup>18</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, September 5, 6, 7, 1887, 1.

"one and only Corn Palace," including Cornelius Vanderbilt, a well-known eastern capitalist, and Chauncey Depew, president of the New York Central Railroad.<sup>19</sup>

The Corn Palace officially closed on October 10th, but the following day President Grover Cleveland and Mrs. Cleveland arrived by special train. The President had taken a detour from Omaha to see the splendid castle of corn that he had heard so much about. He appeared greatly impressed with the quality of grain on display. The *New York Times*, commenting on the President's trip, observed that "a more entertaining array of novelties has not met the gaze of the President since his trip began."<sup>20</sup>

With this final visit, the first Sioux City Corn Palace was hailed as an overwhelming success. It had attracted over 130,000 visitors and much publicity as well. The *New York Times* called it "really something new under the sun," and the *London Times* also gave it coverage. The Chicago press and other eastern papers devoted space to the event, and several magazines published articles describing the edifice. Many eastern people were so favorably impressed with both the Corn Palace and the economic future of Sioux City that the amount of eastern capital flowing into the city increased considerably. Thus, the Corn Palace had produced unforeseen benefits, and Sioux City citizens—jubilant over its success—decided to make the Corn Palace Festival an annual event.<sup>21</sup>

The second Corn Palace, built in 1888, was more splendid than the first, largely because the sponsors had learned from their initial experience. Located at a new site, Sixth and Pierce Streets, the entire plan was more spacious. The basic exterior design featured one huge main tower and several smaller towers, each square in shape and gaily decorated with grain. The exterior revealed not one square inch of wood except for the flag staffs. Inside, one found a large court surrounded on all sides by spacious galleries. In this domed court people listened to music played by the famous Elgin Band from Elgin, Illinois, which gave concerts three

<sup>19</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, October 6, 1887, 1.

<sup>20</sup>*New York Times*, October 13, 1887, 1.

<sup>21</sup>Schmidt, *A Historical Profile*, 167.

times daily. Lovely murals created from grains once again graced the interior. Featuring dances, speeches, parades, and military drills within its walls, the second palace boasted "toilet rooms and conveniences for ladies and gentlemen." For the second Corn Palace Festival officials persuaded railroads to give half-priced fares to passengers coming to Sioux City, and free passes to the Corn Palace festivities were sent to Congressmen and other prominent officials. In these ways



*Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum*

**Second Corn Palace, 1888**

exuberant Sioux Citizens attempted to advertise their wondrous monument to corn. Their methods apparently succeeded; officials estimated the total attendance for the 1888 festival to be around 350,000, more than double the number of visitors that attended the previous year.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup>*Sioux City's Corn Palaces* (Sioux City: Pinckney Book and Stationary Co., 1890).

The first and second festivals, phenomenal successes that they were, naturally inspired the citizens of Sioux City to undertake a third celebration the following year. The previous festivities had already widely advertised Sioux City as the "Corn Palace City of the World," and Sioux Citizens wanted to implant that idea even more firmly in the minds of all Americans. Hoping to implement this ambition, publicity



*Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum*

**Third Corn Palace, 1889**

officials sponsored a special train—the Corn Palace Train—to make a tour of the eastern seaboard. The corn-bedecked train left Sioux City in the spring of 1889, carrying 135 goodwill passengers. A band accompanied the party and played rousing tunes at the stops along the way. The cost of the trip—including decorations, fares and other expenses—totaled

approximately \$20,000 which was paid by the businessmen of Sioux City.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the special train did focus attention on Sioux City. At Washington, D.C., the party stopped to attend the inauguration of President Benjamin Harrison. Following his inauguration, the President and members of his cabinet, plus other political figures, came aboard to inspect the train and extend their good wishes. The train then continued on to New York to further spread the "Corn Palace word." The *New York Times* took considerable note of the visiting Iowans and observed that the train—made up of five Wagner palace vestibuled coaches and a baggage car—was elaborately decorated. "Everything used in the decorations except the iron nails is the product of Iowa cornfields and the whole train is a marvel of beauty," reported the *Times*. Noting the countless forms of corn used, the reporter concluded that it was all "blended and arranged as to form magnificent specimens of rustic art."<sup>24</sup>

The publicity of the Corn Palace Train and the two previous ventures all combined to produce great expectations for the third affair. Chanting the refrain, "Corn is King, Sioux City is his home and we the people are his loyal subjects," Sioux Citizens did indeed produce another festival that lived up to their highest expectations. Featuring a main tower 200 feet high completely covered with corn and other grains, the Corn Palace of 1889 towered over the surrounding buildings, even surpassing nearby church steeples. The interior designs, exquisitely crafted by a workforce of 269 women, were far superior to those in previous structures. People from nearly every state in the Union contributed displays, which added a new touch. The Seventy-fifth New York Regiment Band entertained visitors daily, and 100 leading capitalists from New England arrived by special train to examine the palace.<sup>25</sup>

The following spring, with three highly successful experiences behind them, the inhabitants of the Corn Palace

<sup>23</sup>*New York Times*, March 8, 1889, 8.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>*Iowa State Agricultural Society*, (Des Moines: George E. Roberts State Printer, 1890), 74; *Sioux City's Corn Palaces*.

City quite naturally began to think of their fourth extravaganza. Riding a wave of great local boosterism and civic pride, officials were determined that the fourth event must somehow surpass its predecessors. The final product did not disappoint them. Termed "a Mohammedan mosque with Iowa trimmings," the Corn Palace featured one central tower 200 feet in height and six smaller towers 100 feet high. A dome, built as part of the largest tower, formed an immense globe on which the different countries were mapped with grains of corn. The continent of North America faced toward the front with Iowa, and of course Sioux City, most prominently displayed. Visitors also found the interior unique and beautiful. One display which drew their attention was a miniature valley of a great river (probably the Missouri) and "from far distant mountains clothed in pines came a stream of water leaping over rocks, winding across a meadow, and falling into a lake below where palmettos were growing." The facility also contained an "auditory" that seated 1,200 people.<sup>26</sup>

A main attraction of the 1890 Festival was a parade in honor of Sioux City's first hardy pioneers. Among those participating were Sioux City natives dressed as pioneers and many Winnebago Indians dressed in bright costumes. The parade included a number of floats and models depicting pioneer life. One entry featured a living replica of an immigrant wagon train. The covered wagons were inscribed with a variety of colorful, and often humorous, slogans, expressing the hardships of the pioneers' trek to western Iowa. Among them were "Every man to his pants—the Indians are on us," and "Left flour at Sergeant Bluffs—have whiskey with me." In a more serious vein, the slogans also told of the thankfulness of many after reaching their destination and establishing their homes in the wilderness: "Iowa, beautiful Iowa, with soil so rich and deep, adopt us as your own."<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup>Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," 322-23; *Scrapbook of Sioux City History* (Sioux City: Sioux City Public Library), Book I; Iowa State Agricultural Society (Des Moines: George E. Roberts State Printer, 1891), 24.

<sup>27</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, October 5, 1940.

The Corn Palace idea had deep roots in the hearts of Sioux City's people and in 1890 a Sioux City vocal teacher, C. Jay Smith, was so inspired that he wrote a hymn in honor of the agricultural bounty that the Corn Palace represented. He entitled his work, the *Corn Palace Hymn*.

Arise! Proud palace of the western plain.  
 Clad in thy gilded garbs of golden grain.  
 A fairer temple than the king of old,  
 Arrayed in precious pearls and gems of gold.

Above thy walls white-winged peace shall rise  
 Like some tall tower that tapers to the skies,  
 And from whose lofty heights the prophet scans  
 The winding paths of the eternal plans.

The treasures of the fields and virgin vales  
 Are symbols of the source that never fails.  
 The bow that spans the heavens shall still proclaim  
 Though centuries move, that God is still the same!

And music's mystic mellow strains shall rise  
 To Him who formed the fields and framed the skies,  
 Who's beauty fills the earth from shore to shore  
 And lives forever and forever more.<sup>28</sup>

The 1890 Corn Palace was deemed such a spectacular success that no one even questioned the idea of undertaking a similar project the following year. Thus, in 1891, the fifth and last of the Sioux City Corn Palaces was erected. Described by contemporary observers as the largest and most noble of them all, the structure covered an entire city block. Although built over one of the city's main streets, the edifice contained a large archway which permitted traffic to proceed through the center. The main tower and dome over 200 feet high, and many smaller towers 90 feet in height, dominated the exterior of the building. At the top of the main tower visitors could stand on a special balcony and look out over the city to view the broad panorama of the three-state area.<sup>29</sup>

The designs adorning the interior and exterior walls of the last Corn Palace were exceedingly intricate, and the booths and displays more elaborate than ever before. Local

<sup>28</sup>C. J. Smith, "Corn Palace Hymn" (Sioux City: W. A. Dean and Company, 1890).

<sup>29</sup>Briggs, "The Sioux City Corn Palaces," 325-326.

citizens constructed many exhibits which highlighted the agricultural theme; exhibits from other states were also displayed, along with entries from several communities in South American countries. Some of the railroads serving Sioux City competed with one another in presenting novel displays. An example of the diversity of the exhibits was a booth with the figures of Romeo and Juliet—fashioned from corn silk and husks—poised upon a white corn balcony from which dangled a rope ladder, also constructed of corn. It was a group of Sioux Citizens, however, that created the display worthy of capturing first prize. The ladies of the Lilac History Club designed a miniature library made completely from corn, small grains and native grasses. The walls were covered with corn pictures and the floor with a grass rug. On a tiny table stood quill pens crafted from cane and oat straw. A corn lamp, gourd inkwell, and corn husk blotters completed the setting.<sup>30</sup>

The last Sioux City Corn Palace closed its doors on October 25, 1891, and although described by local boosters as the most beautiful and the most popular ever built, it appeared for a time that the building would possibly become the “worst white elephant the town had ever had on its hands.” No wreckers wanted to buy it and local citizens objected to leaving the huge, empty palace standing as it occupied a prominent position in the city’s business district. An auction was finally organized and advertisements posted announcing that the palace would be sold to the highest bidder. H. H. Buckwalter submitted the winning bid of \$1,211. Buckwalter’s son, Frank, along with some of his friends, began to tear down the carefully constructed decorations and mosaics. Hoping to recover their investment by salvaging as much of the material as possible, the men were faced with the disposal of hundreds of ears of corn. With a little experimentation they discovered that sheep would eat the kernels of corn! This discovery eliminated the tedious—not to mention impractical—process of removing the many nails before feeding it to any other animals. Local packing

<sup>30</sup>Ruth S. Beitz, “Sioux City’s Splendid Corn Palaces,” *The Iowan*, February-March, 1961, 43; *Sioux City Journal*, November 9, 1941.

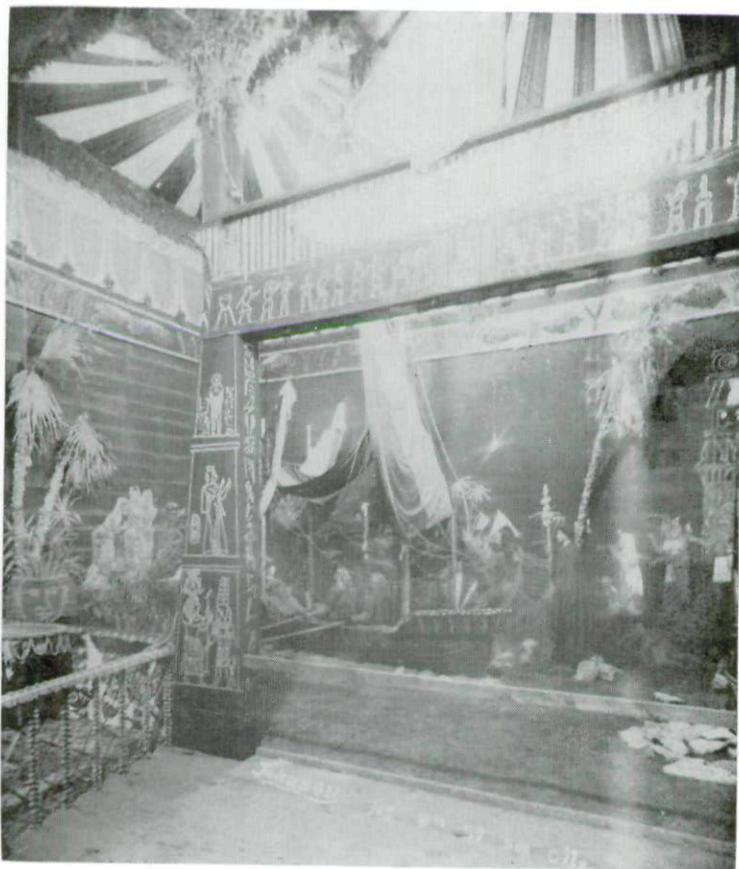


**Fourth Corn Palace, 1890**



*Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum*

**Fifth, and Last, Corn Palace, 1891**



*Courtesy Sioux City Public Museum*

**Interior View of Corn Palace erected in 1891**

plants then became customers for the hundreds of bushels of corn salvaged from the decorations of Sioux City's last Corn Palace. In addition to the corn, Buckwalter and his son recovered countless kegs of nails, yards of colorful bunting, and many boardfeet of lumber.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, with the demise of the fifth and most fabulous palace of all, the era of the Sioux City Corn Palaces came to an end. In the fall of 1891, the promoters fully intended that there should be another the following year. However, in May

<sup>31</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, October 17, 1937.

of 1892, when officials were considering plans for the sixth festival, Sioux City was struck by the ravaging flood waters of the Big Floyd River. The destructive flood caused some loss of life and heavy property damage, and Sioux City officials were forced to request outside financial assistance to aid in rebuilding the devastated areas. With their heavy financial losses, local people felt that they could not afford the added expense of a Corn Palace for 1892. Many people felt, too, that it would be improper for the city to have a festival and celebration so soon after seeking outside economic assistance. Instead, the community planned to wait until 1893 to stage another fabulous celebration; a comment by James F. Toy, a prominent Sioux City businessman, indicates that it was only to be a postponement: "No one wanted to drop the Corn Palace idea for good. All agreed that it is too much of a Sioux City institution and too novel for that. We will get together next year and build a stunning palace."<sup>32</sup>

Toy and his fellow Sioux Citizens, however, could not have foreseen the financial panic that would soon sweep the country, nor that the "stunning" palace of 1893 would never be built. Meanwhile, a group of enterprising young men from Mitchell, South Dakota, recognizing a promising venture when they saw one, announced the opening of the Mitchell Corn Palace in the fall of 1892. Never again would the citizens of Sioux City stage a Corn Palace Festival. With each passing year the extravagant palaces became more and more a part of Sioux City's past and less and less a reality for its future.

The history of the Sioux City Corn Palaces is far more than just an account of five huge castles constructed of corn and grain. They were a vital part of the total society of Sioux City in the late Nineteenth Century. The palaces were the result of the intertwining of many diverse elements—the energetic population, the developing economic institutions, the promotion of the region's specialty, and the great local boosterism. They represented the pinnacle of Sioux City's development in the 1800s. Like many other emerging middle western communities at that time, Sioux City was on the move.

<sup>32</sup>*Sioux City Journal*, June 2, 1942.

The same decade that saw construction of the palaces also witnessed the building of an elaborate opera house, construction of the first cable-car line in the state, erection of the third elevated railway in the world, and installation of electricity in the city. Alongside these noteworthy accomplishments stand the five castles of grain and corn—monuments to an enterprising and industrious people.



#### MUSEUM NOTES

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By John E. Phipps  
Museum Director

An arithmetic book seldom arouses enough interest in the average person to warrant display space in the museum—However, a recent accession certainly is an exception.

Authored by an Ohio schoolmaster in 1834, it is a single volume edition, handbound and handwritten. The outer covers are made of wood.

Samuel Billingsley, the writer, was also an expert at the art of penmanship and the pages are a tribute to his skill. The book was evidently compiled as an outline for his Math presentation and entries are dated over several years.

The book came to us as a gift in memory of Mrs. Ethel Godfrey of Knoxville and is now on display in the Manuscript Room—1st floor in the Iowa State Historical Museum.

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