

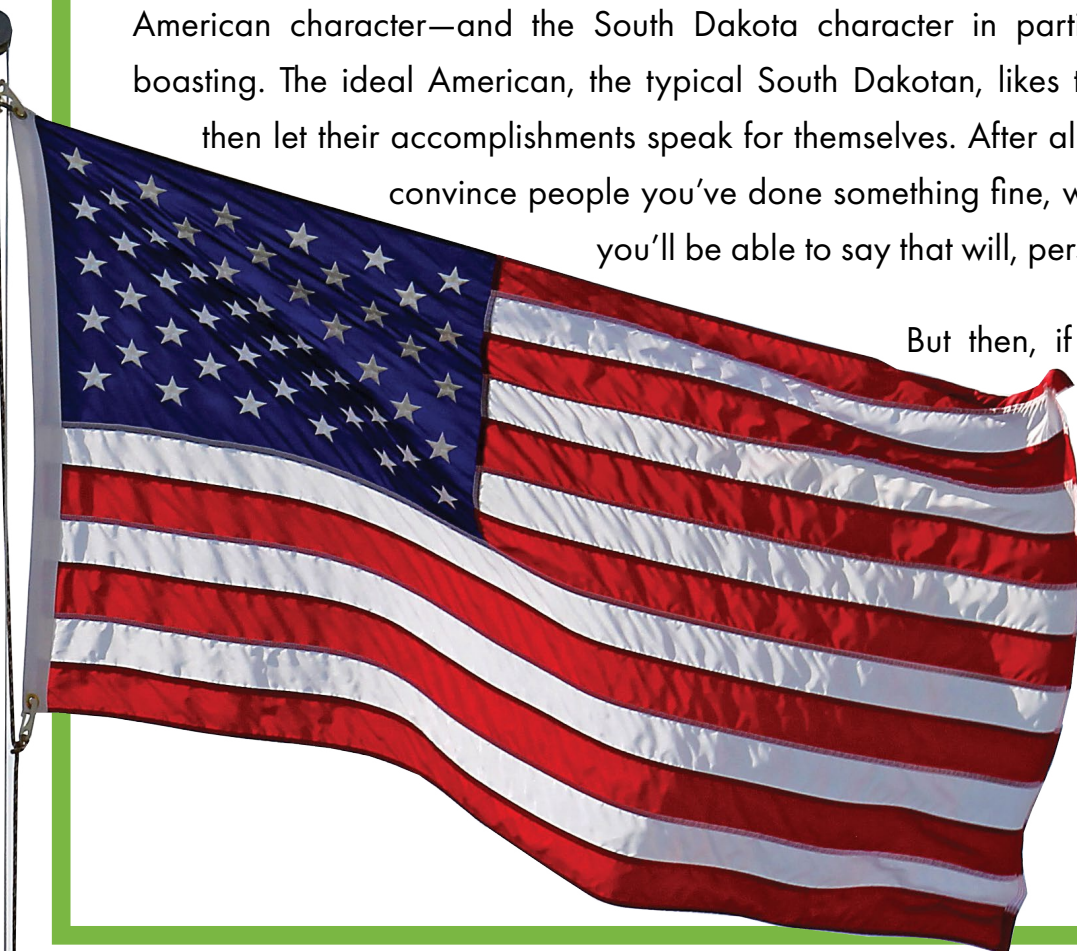
The Corn Palace

Never a Boast or Brag

Around the Fourth of July each year or some other patriotic holiday, like Veterans Day or Memorial Day, you have probably heard the song, “You’re a Grand Old Flag.” It was written by George M. Cohan, a very famous American composer of popular music. And popular it was. It was the first song from a musical that sold over 1 million copies of sheet music, back when lots of people still bought sheet music.

For some people, one of the lyrics seems a little out of place. After singing the glories of the American flag and her freedom-loving people, it goes on to say that America is a place “Where there’s never a boast or brag.” That’s not literally true, of course. Still, there is something in the American character—and the South Dakota character in particular—that shies away from boasting. The ideal American, the typical South Dakotan, likes to accomplish something and then let their accomplishments speak for themselves. After all, if what you’ve done doesn’t convince people you’ve done something fine, well, there probably isn’t much you’ll be able to say that will, persuade them otherwise.

But then, if you or your group or your community or your state has something good or even great to offer and people aren’t noticing it, how do you go about getting it the attention it deserves without bragging?



Enter the Corn Palace. Sometimes it is called “The World’s Only Corn Palace,” though that does sound a little boastful. Sometimes it is called “The World’s Largest Bird Feeder,” because the pigeons and other fowl (even the occasional squirrel) begin pecking away at it for its tasty morsels as soon as the corn hits the walls. That second title is a better example of how to do something without bragging. After all, who would crow about building a huge bird feeder?

So why build a corn palace in the first place? Well, back when the country was being settled by European farmers, there was a strong sense that the Great Plains—stretching from Montana and North Dakota to the north all the way to New Mexico and Texas to the south—had an image problem. When the army sent explorers into this region in the early 19th century, they called it the “Great American Desert.” Stephen Long said it was “unfit for cultivation,” and Zebulon Pike said it reminded him of the “sandy deserts of Africa.” Now, if you’re a settler bringing his family west to farm, those aren’t encouraging words. So, as long as land was available on either side of the Great Plains, you would prefer to settle there. As the railroads traversed the Great Plains, though, new towns were established every so many miles to provide for train depots and refueling stops, and those communities needed settlers to homestead those lands.



South Dakota Department of Tourism. Photo by Chad Coppess.

But the demand for the lands remained low. Why? Because people believed it was poor farmland. To counter the problem, many communities—34 in all—erected corn palaces. (Now, let's clear up one misconception many people have about these. When people first hear of a "corn palace," they envision a building made entirely of corn. That's not the case. These are structures built like any other, with cement and wood beams and steel, with one difference: The walls are covered in corn and other grain crops which show designs or even depict people, landforms, and historical events. They are kind of like stained glass windows in churches, telling a story, but in this case, in corn.)

The idea was to demonstrate the bounty that the land was producing. Far from being a desert, the Great Plains produced such a bounty of crops that there was enough to feed everyone locally, sell the surpluses to hungry people around the country, and still nail some to the walls for a celebration! Over time, people got the message, and the corn palaces weren't needed anymore. They slowly trailed off until there was only one, The Corn Palace in Mitchell, South Dakota.

Louis Beckwith, a Mitchell businessman, donated the land for the first Mitchell Corn Palace in 1892. He and his other committee members were trying to send that same message but hoping to do so without bragging. They wanted more people to come to Mitchell but wanted to do so without much ballyhoo. So, they built their "palace" and let people judge for themselves. They didn't argue that eastern South Dakota was the "land of milk and honey." They didn't claim that just anyone could farm in the area or start businesses there and that crops and profits would burst forth without effort and risk. Instead, they simply erected a building, threw an annual celebration for the community around it, and placed interesting, pleasing illustrations made of corn and other grains on its walls. Some people today call it "folk art." Others call it "corn by numbers," (like the "paint by numbers" sets people often enjoy). And the artform, while it sounds a bit hokey, began to be quite beautiful, even stunning. The great South Dakotan and Native American artist, Oscar Howe, designed the walls of the palace for



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almost a quarter century. Cal Schultz, a renowned artist, followed him for the next 25 years. Today, local college students create the designs.

One thing all the designs have in common, though, is that they aren't boastful. They depict everything from famous South Dakotans, to Lewis and Clark, to South Dakota landscapes. They are a not exactly subtle—after all this is multi-colored corn nailed to the walls—but definitely not pretentious depiction of all the various realities of sometimes South Dakota and sometimes beyond. They are something to look at, an achievement that entertains locals and visitors alike, and lets them decide just what they should take away from the experience.

Like the good American and the model South Dakotan, they make their mark and hold their tongue.

Each year, as many as 500,000 people stop on Mitchell's Main Street to see what will take shape on the Corn Palace's exterior walls that year. Those traveling through have varying opinions. Some think it is wonderful and genuine folk art. Others see in it the worst form of a tourist trap. And if you ask the view of the average member of the Mitchell community, they might admit it isn't exactly "high art," and they might just chuckle over having the world's largest bird feeder. But more often than not they'll just smile, offering little assessment of any kind of their local landmark. After all, the Corn Palace, as a now 130-year-old accomplishment, can speak very well for itself.



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Want to learn more?

Travel to Mitchell and see the "palace" for yourself. While you are there, see if you can figure out why they rebuilt the Corn Palace in 1905? Hint: It had something to do with a competition with the City of Pierre.