

WE WERE
EAR!!!



Oct. 8, 2006---

MITCHELL, S.D.

-- Harvest season has come to the Great Plains, which means it's a great time to visit the world's only Corn Palace, here about 65 miles west of Sioux Falls. The building's exterior is crafted from native grasses, grain and, of course, corn.

Lots of corn.

About 275,000 ears of corn are sawed in half and nailed flat-side to the palace. Every year the corn designs depict a mural theme. Rodeos were the 2006 theme.

As they say around Mitchell, it's "a-maize-ing."

The Corn Palace can be found at 603 N. Main in downtown Mitchell (pop. 14,700). The quaint main street has a few antique stores, Corn Palace-related gift shops and the Jackpot, 511 N. Main, a Western restaurant and tavern where the songs of Merle Haggard play out over the sidewalk. Naturally, I walked in for a beer.

I sat down at the long bar and looked out a window at the deep blue skies. I wondered about winter on the Plains. Does it snow corn flakes here? I did not have a second beer. The Corn Palace looks like something out of czar-era Russia -- regal with onion domes and dozens of spires -- except the exterior is made in a corn-by-numbers technique. Scenes are drawn on black roofing paper and marked as to where the different colors of corn go. Eleven colors are included in each design.

The corn is grown by area farmers. No paint or artificial coloring is used, although in 1943 the murals were painted because area grain was needed for World War II. The roofing paper is tacked onto the palace, and crews nail each ear of corn in its designated space. The seeds of the Corn Palace were planted in 1892 when Mitchell debuted the Corn Belt Exposition to promote regional agricultural products. The event was an effort to attract settlers to the Great Plains. The first exposition was held in a wooden building, 100 feet by 66 feet, decorated on all four sides with corn.

Today's Corn Palace has a huge gift shop with more than 300 items of kitsch, including Corn Palace golf balls, corn cob jelly and corn cob lollipops. The building's interior smells like corn.

That's because the Corn Palace annually serves about 20,000 pounds of popcorn, grown specifically for the palace on the Plains.

With all that corn hanging around, some people call the Corn Palace "The World's Largest Bird Feeder."

"We've always had pigeons, blackbirds, sparrows on the building," said Troy Magnuson, assistant manager of tourism for the town of Mitchell and the Corn Palace. "We've had squirrels up on the building before. They do a little damage, especially on the south side of the building during the winter months because the sun is on that side of the building the whole day."

The current Corn Palace is the third Corn Palace, built in 1921. It is made entirely of steel and brick and covered in plywood. The corn, grasses and grains are affixed to the outside. The building is redecorated every year. But next year's theme is yet to be announced. This summer's drought is the reason Salute to Rodeo is up through next year. Farmers couldn't grow enough corn.

The Corn Palace Committee, along with resident mural artist Cherie Ramsdell select the annual theme. About 20 Mitchell-area residents are hired each summer to redo the palace. It takes about three months to redecorate the palace at an annual cost of \$135,000.

The Corn Palace is also one of the best places in America to watch basketball. Dakota Wesleyan, a private Methodist university in Mitchell, begins its season in mid-November, and it runs through March. The Mitchell High School team also plays at the Corn Palace. (Of course, they are called the Kernels.) Memphis Grizzlies guard Mike Miller is from Mitchell, and he played in the Corn Palace.

Entertainers such as Jack Benny, Lawrence Welk, Tom Jones and Willie Nelson have appeared at the acoustically pristine palace, which holds 3,200 for a concert. Check out the work

The image shows the Mitchell Corn Palace, a large, ornate building with a yellow and green domed roof and a green conical tower. The facade is made of brick and features several arched windows with murals of rodeo scenes. A banner across the front reads "Salute to Rodeo 2006".

MITCHELL CORN PALACE

★ Salute to Rodeo 2006 ★

of previous Corn Palace artists in the lobby.

I loved the 5-by-7-inch prints of Oscar Howe, a Yanktonai Sioux who designed the Corn Palace murals from 1948 through 1971. Howe deployed a fluid, spiritual flair that rolls across the South Dakota landscape. He called his basic design Tohokmu (spider web), harvested from his Sioux culture. Howe did WPA murals around South Dakota before coming to work for the Corn Palace. Howe, who died in 1983 at age 68, was named South Dakota artist laureate in 1960 by Gov. Ralph Herseth.

"There's a lot of work done back and forth between the artist, the committee and the farmer that grows everything," Magnuson explained. "We try to select an artist from Mitchell just for that reason. They start putting up the grains and grasses milo, rye, oat heads and sour dock in June. They start installing the corn in the middle of August and finish up about the middle of October."

The Corn Palace has been good to Mitchell. More than 400,000 visitors from all over the world visit the roadside attraction.

"Last year, tourism brought \$29 million into the city just because of the Corn Palace," Magnuson said. "People use our hotels, restaurants, our gas stations."

And locals are exceptionally attentive. After all, they're all ears.

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