

# Corn-ceptual Tribute to Agriculture

**October, 2007**

By Dana Sease

It's hard to miss the huge building covered in corn that's known as the Corn Palace when driving through Mitchell, S.D. - the Corn Capital of the World.

Called the "agricultural showplace of the world" as well as "the world's largest bird feeder," the Corn Palace is the main attraction of Mitchell, a town in which the local radio station is KORN and the high school sports teams are the Kernels.

"We also like to call Mitchell the 'Gateway to South Dakota' because it's the first stop as you're heading west in the state," said Troy Magnuson, gift shop manager of the Corn Palace.

Over 500,000 people each year visit the unique and "a-maize-ing" Corn Palace. With the exterior of the building completely covered in murals made out of native South Dakota corn, grain and grasses, the Corn Palace is a one-of-a-kind salute to agriculture. Local residents are proud of the Palace's "corn-ceptual art" and "ear-chitecture."

Each spring, the murals on the building are designed by a local artist to reflect a theme. The theme for 2007 is the same as last year's theme - "Salute to Rodeo" - due to drought that resulted in a shortage of corn. The tradition of using corn to redecorate the Palace each year has been broken before: during the Depression, World War I and II, and Mitchell's Centennial year.

Typically, the murals on the building depict an important aspect of the lifestyle of South Dakota. The Corn Palace Committee along with Cherie Ramdell, the Corn Palace artist for the past five years, selects the theme. After the theme has been chosen, approximately 20 local residents redecorate the palace in the summer.

Redecorating the Palace starts in the early summer when all of the grasses and grains from the previous year are removed from the building. In the late summer, the large "corn-by-number" project takes place. New scenes are drawn

on black roofing paper and are marked to show where the 11 different colors of corn go. Nearly 275,000 ears of corn are sliced in half lengthwise with a power saw and carefully nailed in their designated places, flat-side to the building.

These murals require thousands of bushels of corn, grain, wild oats, grasses, blue grass, brome grass, straw, rye, and wheat each year. A local farmer grows all of the materials needed to re-adorn the Corn Palace. The annual cost to redecorate the Palace is over \$100,000, and the process takes about three months.

The Corn Palace is much more than a tourist attraction. Year-round it serves as a multi-use center for the community and region. The facility hosts concerts, sports events, exhibits, proms, graduations, and other events for the community. Each basketball season, approximately 150 basketball games take place in the Corn Palace. A nearby private Methodist university, the Mitchell Christian School, and Mitchell's senior high school team - the Kernels - hold their games in the Palace.

For over 100 years there has been a Corn Palace Festival in Mitchell;

Traditionally, the Corn Palace Festival takes place in late September to celebrate the harvest. Representatives from surrounding counties exhibit their crops and goods at the festival. The Corn Palace Polka Festival and the Corn Palace Stampede Rodeo are other popular annual events.

The first Corn Palace was built in 1892 when Mitchell was only 12 years old. The people of Mitchell wanted to encourage people to settle in the town, so the Corn Belt Real Estate Association built the first Corn Palace to put on display all of the crops that could be grown in the South Dakota soil. The Palace cost \$2,976.48 to build and succeeded in putting Mitchell on the map.

The first Corn Palace became such a success that the 100 x 66-foot wooden building became too small. In 1905, a bigger Corn Palace was built a block south of the original Palace. Both of the first two Palaces were made out of wood, had dirt floors, no electricity, and were detailed in design. Because the Corn Palace was a wooden structure, it was no longer considered safe in 1919, when new safety laws were created.

In 1921, the third and present Corn Palace, made of steel and brick, was completed. Created to be a multi-use facility, the Corn Palace is still used by the community over 75 years after it was first built, and it is also a popular destination for tourists.

According to Magnuson, who comes in contact with tourists daily at the Corn Palace bookstore, tourists come to Mitchell primarily to see the Corn Palace because "it is a display of Midwest values; it's a testimony to perseverance."

The Corn Palace is located at 604 N. Main St., Mitchell, South Dakota.

For more information, and to confirm times, dates or prices:

[www.cornpalace.org](http://www.cornpalace.org), (605)-996-6223.