

March, “The Diplomat”

John Philip Sousa* (1854–1932)

While John Philip Sousa’s march “The Diplomat” was dedicated to Secretary of State John Milton Hay, Sousa’s own words tell a different story. “I remember that one of my best marches, from the standpoint of lasting popularity, was written with the best tenderloin I ever had tasted for an inspiration. The march was ‘The Diplomat’ and the city was Mitchell, South Dakota, and mentally at least, I dedicated the march to the unseen cook who prepared that tenderloin.”

At the time, South Dakota was a young state, having achieved independent statehood in 1889. Pierre was named the temporary capital, but many people in the eastern part of the state felt the capital should be closer to the more populated areas, and the town of Mitchell challenged for consideration. To attract visitors, the citizens built a “corn palace” in 1892. It was a meeting hall complete with turrets and towers that were decorated entirely with split corn and grain. The Corn Palace Festival brought visitors from afar, and the citizens of Mitchell took great pride in the annual decorating.

In 1904, the town sought to bring the Sousa Band to perform at their annual Corn Palace Festival. Reportedly, Sousa’s manager laughed and asked for an exorbitant fee of \$7,000. With the imminent selection of a permanent state capital looming, the townspeople agreed to pay. As the story is told, when Sousa arrived, he saw before him the unpaved Main Street and refused to leave the train until he had a check for the full fee in hand. The town paid in cash. In addition to having the best tenderloin he ever tasted, Sousa ended up giving an extra concert each day of the festival and even returned three years later. Pierre became the permanent capital of South Dakota in 1905, but Mitchell continues the tradition of the Corn Palace Festival with elaborate corn and grain decorations.