

# Iowa's museum celebrates corn

By LORETTA SORENSEN

IOWA'S "Corn State" notoriety goes back to 1856 when some early settlers broke prairie sod and planted open-pollinated corn. While today's nearly countless acres of emerald green corn seem so commonplace, historians like Steve Kenkel know how deeply the roots of this valuable crop are embedded in Iowa's farming history.

"In 1856, settlers planted 668 acres and harvested 27,522 bushels, averaging 41.2 bushels per acre," Kenkel says. "By 1880, Shelby County was one of 23 Iowa counties to break the 4 million-bushel barrier, harvesting 4,039,000 bushels from 89,300 acres, averaging 45.2 bushels per acre."

Kenkel's extensive corn history knowledge stems from development of his Hybrid Corn Pioneers Historical Expo, an event he hosts at his farm every other year. The farm is near Earling in western Iowa, and this year the expo is Aug. 24-25. He



**CORN ARTIFACTS:** From corn planters to seed sacks, the museum holds many corn-related implements and memorabilia.

## Key Points

- Iowa has built a unique museum on his farm devoted to history of hybrid corn.
- Purpose is to help folks understand the significance of corn in Iowa's history.
- Exhibits show and explain vintage corn-related tools and memorabilia.

has a corn museum on the farm filled with vintage corn-related items, many of which are accompanied by detailed signage to explain things. One sign reads, "Welcome to Shelby County — Hybrid Corn Capital of Iowa." The greeting honors the history of the many seed companies that sprang up in Shelby County in the early 1900s. Some of the items displayed in Kenkel's museum are connected to those businesses.

### From sacks to shellers

The expo includes an extensive exhibit of seed sacks, an 1860s wooden two-row corn planter built by George W. Brown (corn planter inventor), an 1848 cylinder corn sheller (earliest patented design), a collection of corn planters ranging from 1850s to 1950s, and many other corn-related items. Working corn machinery and check-planting demos, as well as youth activities, are all part of the weekend.

To help people understand the importance of modern corn hybrids, Kenkel uses an antique check-planter to plant three side-by-side corn demonstration plots. "In the mid- to late-1800s, farmers planted Reid's Yellow Dent, an open-pollinated variety," Kenkel says. "That's in one plot. In the 1930s, the first American corn hybrid variety, US-13, was planted, and that's in our second plot. Today, farmers are planting modern varieties like Dekalb's triple stack 62-97. That's in our third plot."

Ohio-born and Illinois-raised, James L. Reid (1844-1910) gave special attention to developing Reid's Yellow Dent after witnessing the poor performance of his father's Gordon Hopkins seed corn. Reid's variety netted first prize at the 1891 Illinois State Fair and top honors at the 1893 World



**HYBRID HISTORY:** Steve Kenkel provides a walk-through presentation of the historical corn plots he has at his corn expo, outlining the benefits of new hybrids and how they compare to the first corn varieties.

Columbian Exposition. However, open-pollinated corn varieties were notorious for broken stalks and corn ears on the ground, meaning corn had to be picked by hand. Double-cross hybrids changed that. Hybrids tolerated higher levels of fertility. Adding fertilizer greatly improved yield.

In Iowa, Shelby County farmers were at the forefront of corn hybrid development, securing 1893 Chicago World's Fair top corn prizes. Eight of 23 ears entered won first place in the World Championship corn competition. One generation later, numerous hybrid corn pioneers emerged.

### County has hybrid heritage

"In 1926 Dr. Alva Wilson (Wilson Hybrids at Harlan) became one of the hybrid seed corn pioneers," Kenkel says. "Between 1930 and 1940, hybrid corn yields in Shelby County rose from 36 bushels per acre to 54.6 bushels per acre. In 1940, Shelby County was one of 25 Iowa counties producing more than 6 million bushels of corn." In 1942, many Iowa farmers were planting their entire acreage to hybrid corn. By 1946, 18 hybrid seed corn companies were in business in Shelby County.

Prior to hybrid corn development, corn rarely produced average yields of more than 30 bushels. Hybrid varieties grew out of early 1900s scientific discoveries

identifying how heredity influences plant development and function. Outstanding individual open-pollinated corn plants were collected by scientists and purified by self-fertilization (selfing or inbreeding), and one inbred parent was crossed with another to produce hybrid vigor.

"But there's no disputing the results. Scientists are now creating hybrid seed with yield potential that would have out-tounded our forefathers," Kenkel says.

In his museum, Kenkel commemorates Shelby County's seed company history and displays a large collection of historic corn-planting implements and corn-related items. Corn hybridization has been declared as "one of mankind's greatest achievements of the last 1,000 years."

Kenkel says he runs the museum and expo to "salute the hard work and dedication of the pioneers in corn development. Their painstaking, time-consuming efforts yielded a bounty that will continue to be harvested by future generations."

His research uncovered so much about the history of the seed corn industry in Shelby County that Kenkel published a book, "The Hybrid Corn Pioneers." From June through September private museum tours can be arranged by contacting Kenkel at 712-579-1320 or at [nskkenkel@fmctc.com](mailto:nskkenkel@fmctc.com).

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