

# 11. The Iowa Seed Corn Specials

**T**HE EFFECTIVENESS of Iowa's historic Seed Corn Specials was due in no small part to the information available from the County Farm demonstrations with corn. Those demonstrations gave the lecturers important information regarding the quality and condition of the seed corn being planted.

The story of the Seed Corn Specials was so well told by J. S. Trigg, Editor of the *Iowa State Register*, in his May 12, 1905, issue, that it is reproduced in part. Mr. Trigg spent nine days on the Special.

Photographs which occupied about one-half of the front page showed the crowds gathered on the streets, at depots waiting for the train, in the lecture car, and in an uptown hall. A photograph of the six men who did most of the speaking appeared there and is reproduced here as Figure 11.1. An Iowa map locating the stops was also shown and is reproduced as Figure 11.2. Charts much used on the Specials are shown in Figures 11.3, 11.4, and 11.5.

## THE ACHIEVEMENT OF IOWA'S SEED CORN SPECIAL

"The most important crop grown in the state of Iowa is corn. Nine million acres of the best land in the West are devoted to its production. . . . Considering the fertility of the soil, the average yield per acre has been so low as to attract attention. It remained for Professor Holden of

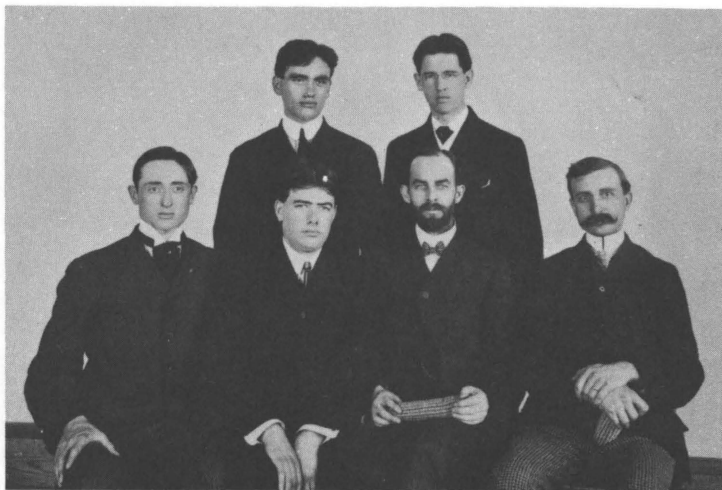


Fig. 11.1. Lecturers on the "Seed Corn Specials." Seated from left to right. M. L. Bowman, senior author of the textbook, *Corn*, published in 1908; M. L. Wilson, who later became director of U. S. Agricultural Extension Service from 1940 to 1953; Perry G. Holden, Professor of Agronomy and later director of Iowa Agricultural Extension Service; and J. W. Jones, then assistant in Agronomy. Standing, from left to right; M. L. Mosher, author of this report, and Louis G. Michael, then Experiment Station chemist and later a "corn development envoy" to Russia (see Chapter 12).

Ames College to discover the reason and seek to apply a remedy. It was found, upon careful examination of many fields of corn, that there was a great irregularity, and usually a deficiency, in the stand of corn resulting in a small crop, and the cause of this poor stand was directly attributable to poor and defective seed.

"A careful examination of the cornfields of Iowa last year disclosed the fact that there was not, taking the cornfields of the state as a whole, to exceed two-thirds of a stand. By a careful selection and testing of the seed corn it would be entirely possible to get a 90 percent stand. Could such a stand be secured it is entirely reasonable to assume that it would result in an increased

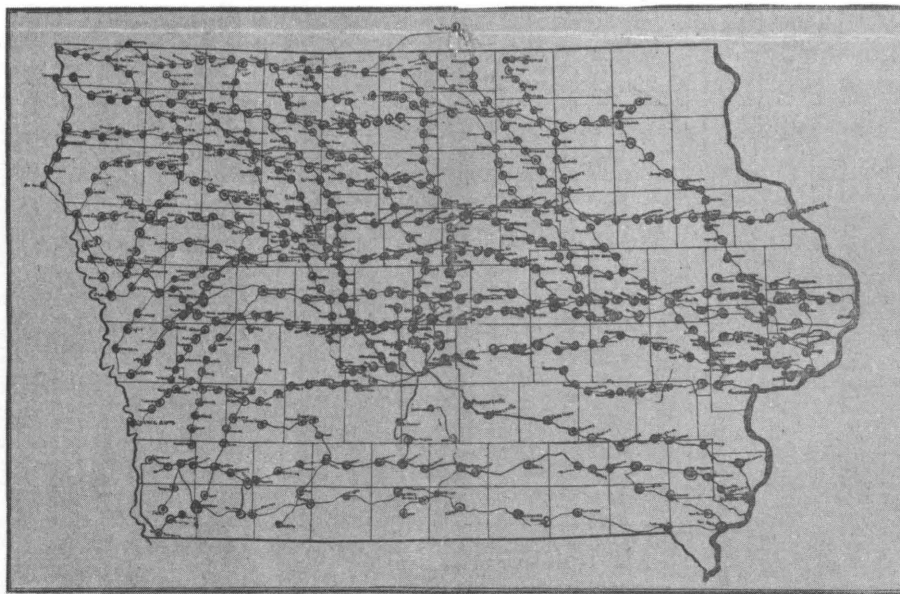
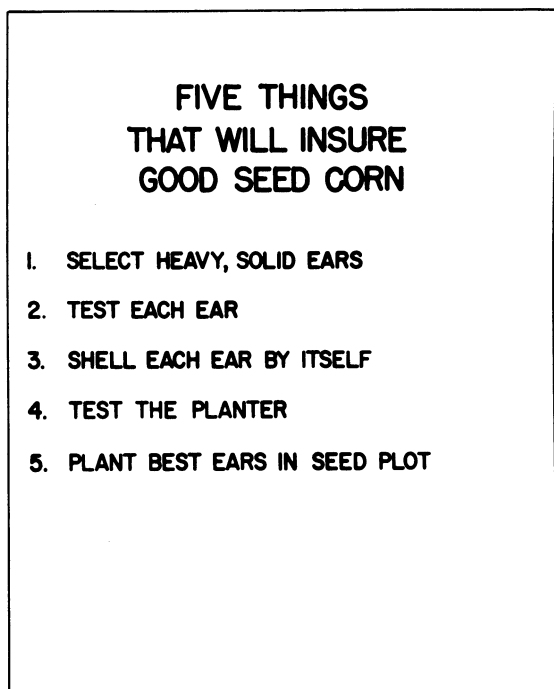


Fig. 11.2. Map showing stops made by the Seed Corn Special. "The above outlined map shows how fully the state was covered. It should be said that on the 'Q' road, which courses through the southern part of the state, the stops were made forty miles apart and free transportation given to the farmers from intermediate counties, quite fairly covering its territory."  
(From the *Iowa State Register*)



**Fig. 11.3.** This chart was used regularly on the Seed Corn Specials to emphasize a good seed corn development program.

yield of at least five bushels per acre and such an increase would amount to 45,000,000 bushels, worth to the farmers of the state not less than 40 cents a bushel or \$18,000,000; a sum sufficient to warrant many times over all the work and the money invested in this seed corn train scheme.

“... It is interesting to note just how the idea of the special train propaganda originated. As we have been able to trace it out, we find that during a discussion upon the seed corn question, a year ago last April, Superintendent Given of the Chicago, Rock Island and Pacific road first made the suggestion that it would be a good plan for the railroad to send out a car and give instruction to the farmers along the line of the road upon the subject of the importance of paying more attention to their seed corn.

"The idea was no sooner suggested than it was eagerly and heartily indorsed. . . . The first seed corn train was sent out over the Rock Island, and later over the Burlington. It was such a success that this year the scope of the work was extended to other lines.

"The campaign opened February 13 and closed April 19, during which nearly the entire state was covered, 570 towns were visited, and 935 lectures delivered to 110,163 corn growers of the state.

"The plan of operating the trains was as follows: The railroad company furnished free of charge a train made up of three commodious passenger coaches for audience rooms, and two private cars for the accommodation of the lecturing force. They also advertised the schedule of the train extensively by posters and through the local newspapers.

"On an average about 12 towns were visited each day. In many cases a hall was secured in advance, where one was located convenient to the train, and the audience would be seated and waiting when the train arrived. At the larger number of the towns, however, the lectures were delivered in the cars. Quite frequently the three cars were filled and three lectures would be delivered at the same time.

"A period of 30 minutes was allotted to each stop for the lecture, which was usually much too short for the audience.

"The substance of the lecture given called the attention of the corn grower to the great losses resulting from a poor quality of seed and the consequent irregular and deficient stand. He was shown how it was easily possible for him to determine the germinating power of each ear of corn saved for seed, by the use of a testing box.

"The method of testing seed corn presented involved testing the germinating power of each individual ear of corn, a method very simple and effective in operation, enabling the corn grower to remove every defective ear before it was shelled and used for seed. He was also

## TEST EACH EAR

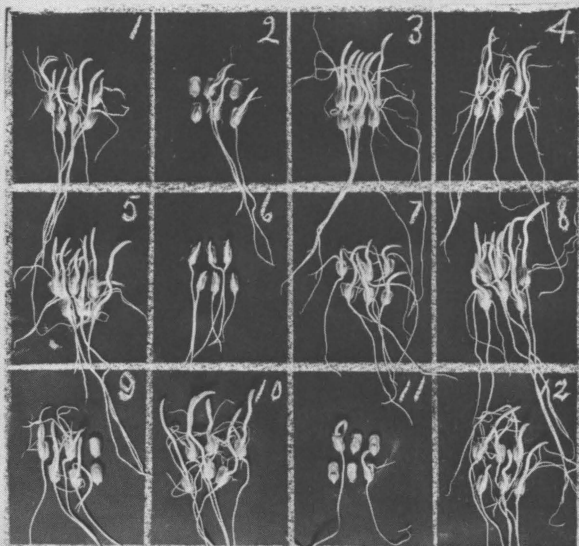


Fig. 11.4. The chart "Test Each Ear" was the heart of the seed corn lectures.

given instructions how to select, save, and care for his seed corn; and also shown how he might greatly improve the quality of his seed corn by careful breeding up.

"The greatest interest and enthusiasm was manifested at every place reached by the trains. The average attend-

ance at each meeting was 193 and the audiences were almost exclusively made up of men engaged in growing corn. At not a single place during the whole trip was there anything approaching a failure to have a good meeting. While at some places a few men were found who were at first skeptical of the practicality and value of the plan of testing seed corn presented, there were few such to be found after the lecture was concluded.

"It is doubtful whether any of the valuable experimental work done by our Agricultural College was ever before so generally, helpfully and practically put within reach of the farmers of any state, and the result is going to be that greater attention will be paid to the quality of the seed corn planted in Iowa this season than ever before.

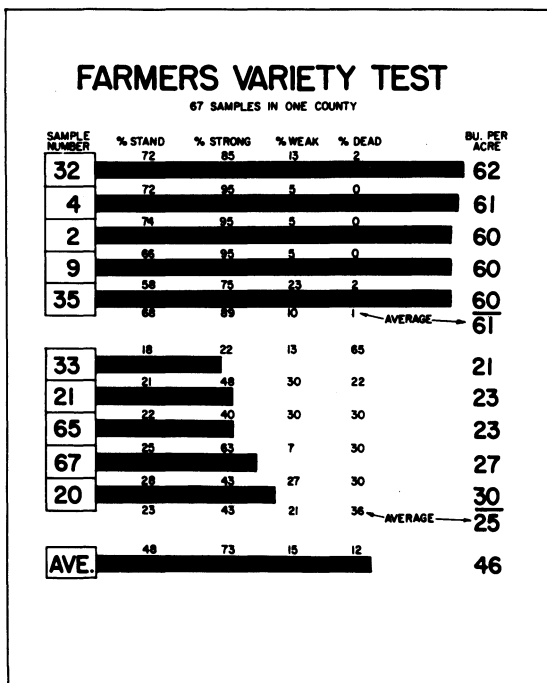


Fig. 11.5. The chart "Farmers' Varieties Tests" was used on the Seed Corn Specials to show the poor quality of much seed corn being planted by Iowa farmers.

"The trains over the different lines of roads were handled in excellent shape by the road officials. Appointments were kept on time and the large audiences well looked after.

"The interest of the railroads in the work is in the line of promoting a better type of agriculture on the farms tributary to their roads; better crops meaning more traffic for them. The cost to the railway companies to operate these trains is estimated to have been about \$15,000 and aside from any financial return which may come to them in the future, they have given the farmers of the state an evidence of disinterestedness and a desire to promote their interest which will be remembered.

"The corps of lecturers included P. G. Holden, Professor of Agronomy; Professor J. W. Jones, assistant in farm crops; L. G. Michael, station chemist; M. L. Bowman, farm foreman, and M. L. Mosher and M. L. Wilson, senior students at Ames Agricultural College."<sup>1</sup>

The following data accompanied the above article:

Facts about Iowa's Seed Corn Specials

	<u>Railroad</u>	<u>Miles traveled</u>	<u>Days</u>	<u>Stops</u>	<u>Talks</u>	<u>Attendance</u>
In 1904	C.R.I. and P.	474				
	C.B. and Q.	930				
	D.M., I.F. and N.	76				
	Total in 1904	1,480	8	100	150	17,600
In 1905	C.R.I. and P.	1,862	12	148	195	19,890
	C.B. and Q.	1,139	5	40	80	19,378
	D.M., I.F. and N.	76	1	8	9	510
	C.M. and St. P.	1,488	10	131	210	23,000
	C. and N.W.	1,958	13	149	300	33,420
	Ill. Central	1,332	8	94	141	13,965
	Total in 1905	7,855	49	570	935	110,163
	Total both years	9,335	57	670	1,085	127,763

---

<sup>1</sup> Copy of a diary showing attendance, speakers, and notes at all stops on the Seed Corn Special of 1905 and a reproduction of the lectures is filed in the libraries at the Iowa State University, the University of Illinois, and the Michigan State University to serve as a supplement to this book.