

Oscar Will Seed Company

One major benefactor of the Northern Great Plains Experiment Station was the Oscar H. Will Seed Company. The Pioneer Brand today is universally associated with Pioneer Hybrids International, a DuPont company headquartered in Des Moines, Iowa. However, that trademark was first associated with a Bismarck, Dakota Territory, seed and nursery business created in the early 1880s by Oscar H. Will. Will's Pioneer Brand seed served farmers and gardeners around the world for more than 75 years, reaching customers through a colorful, informative and now collectable annual mail-order catalog. The Pioneer Hybrids trademark proved it to be one of the largest assets of Oscar H. Will & Co. in the late 1950s.

Oscar and his son, George F. Will, introduced important agricultural varieties of the corn and beans, in addition to hardy and fast-maturing vegetables for northern gardens. It wasn't all about seeds, however, as the company also introduced many trees and shrubs, including the Russian Olive in 1906, and supplied millions of trees to the windswept region.



Heirloom and suppliers continue to offer many of the company's corn and vegetable sees, and dry bean enthusiasts select Will's Great Northern by the tons at grocery stores nationwide. Scholars discuss the significance of the company's impact on modern agriculture in the north, including a recent report that credits Will's Northwestern Dent Corn, with providing at least 5 percent of the genetic background of all modern corn hybrids in the U.S.

Oscar published his first mail order catalog in 1884 at Bismarck, Dakota Territory, three years after he arrived there to run Major Edward M. Fuller's greenhouse, garden and floral shop. It was a modest black-and-white piece with relatively few pages, and a circulation of about 1,000. He offered trees, shrubs, flower and vegetable seed, cut flowers, fresh vegetables in season, and he continued to call the company the Bismarck Greenhouses & Nursery, the name Fuller chose when it was established in 1881.

Within a few years, the company's name was changed to Oscar H. Will & Co. to reflect a brief partnership. Shortly after, the moniker "Pioneer Seed house of the Northwest" appeared on catalog covers along with the registered trademark "Will's Pioneer Brand." By the early 1900s, the catalog had grown in size and circulation, reaching as far as Russia, South Africa and Columbia. The larger catalog featured a color cover and was more agriculturally orientated, focusing especially on field corn and later hybrid field corn. At its peak, Will & Co.'s grew to more than 80 pages and had a circulation of about half a million.

Will & Co. did substantial early business supplying trees for homesteaders who had filed tree-claims. One tree contract tendered before the turn of the century was for 800,000 seedlings to be delivered to Crookston, Minnesota. The Northern Pacific Railway in North Dakota also contracted with the company for two million trees to be planted along the tracks between Jamestown and Mandan as a living snow fence. A task reputed to have taken from 1898 to 1919 to complete. Large tree orders were later delivered to the Canadian government and the National Park Service. Certainly, many of the older trees still growing in the shelterbelts in the Northern Plains are the results of Oscar's efforts.

Although the company was voluntarily liquidated in 1959, its legacy lives. And people interested in early American commercial art – especially related to agriculture – collect ephemera from the once thriving company.



Right (from top): Will's 1916 catalog featured a spray of gladiolus on the front. But even then, the company was a significant player in agricultural seed supply, which is the theme of that catalog's back cover; a Native American woman shelling corn is a theme appearing on several Will & Co., catalogs. This image from the 1928 catalog is accompanied by a small inset show a modern farm behind a lush field of alfalfa, curing World War II. Will's Pioneer Home Garden Colledction was temporarily renamed Will's Victory Garden Collection, but it still included all the essentials for feeding a family throughout the year.



Right: 1904 photograph of the Oscar H. Will & Co. building in Bismarck, N.D.



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