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Multiple Property Documentation Form

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This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867 to 1917

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917

C. Geographical Data

The entire State of Nebraska

See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

James A. Hanmon
Signature of certifying official

May 16, 1988
Date

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society

State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Beth Boland
Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

7/6/88
Date

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

Introduction

Opera houses are significant for their association with and in reference to the historic context, "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska," and the property type, "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867-1917." Under Criteria A, opera houses' areas of significance on a state level include the performing arts, entertainment/recreation, and social history. In the area of the performing arts, opera houses were important for providing a location for home talent productions, lyceum course entertainments, minstrel shows, touring stock companies, specialty performances, musical entertainments, and professional production companies of classic or "hit" shows. In the area of entertainment/recreation, opera houses provided a location for community gatherings, dances, and lectures. Opera houses' contribution to social history included a location for community gatherings, political meetings, educational activities, and athletics.

The period of significance for the property type begins with the year 1867, when Nebraska achieved statehood, although each individual opera house's period of significance starts with the year of construction. By 1917, the opera house era had faded in favor of newer, more modern lifestyles. In the area of the performing arts, "dramatic" touring productions were replaced more and more frequently with vaudeville-style specialty acts or frothy musical comedies of little literary merit. Many were no more than revues featuring ample female flesh. Additionally, professional stock companies dwindled in number as the New York Syndicate restricted most touring shows to large towns on main rail lines. Smaller towns on trunk lines could no longer afford professional entertainment. Finally, the period of significance ended in many cases because the buildings had outlived their usefulness. Many fell into disuse as towns built single-function structures such as first-floor community auditoriums and movie houses. In the areas of social history and entertainment/recreation, increased numbers of automobiles meant that people could easily travel fifty or sixty miles for an evening's excursion, dooming small town opera houses which traded on local dances and similar activities for most of their business. The novelty of moving pictures, plus their lower admission rates and higher profits for theatre owners, also drew off potential audience members.

Opera houses were not the only entertainment venues in small Nebraska towns, but they provided communities with a sense of "arrival" at a level of civilization reminiscent of their homes in the East and in Europe. By the time some leading citizen built an opera house, the town represented a microcosm of a settled American prairie community. Although live entertainment happened in all villages--everywhere from churches to street corners--the construction of a facility designed for the presentation of plays represented a major step forward. Entrepreneurs responded to a need in the towns for a space large enough for everyone to congregate, not only for musical and dramatic performances, but also for dances, box socials, political meetings, fraternal organizations, and even basketball.

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Early Community Growth

The Railroads

Opera houses, the centers of town leisure life, appeared only after the railroad had established a depot in the town, assuring that touring entertainers could make connections for their next booking. Besides bringing a power source, such as coal or lumber, and taking area produce to eastern or western markets, the railroads brought new citizens--immigrants or travelers from the East--anxious to start over on lands free for the working. These people arrived with more than dreams; they brought trades, skills, customs, and attitudes on a variety of ideas, including what constituted "culture" in a civilized community. Railroads made possible standards of life unavailable to villages served only by freight wagon. Libraries, newspapers, a wider selection of finery and conveniences, and live entertainment flourished in railroad communities.

Population Growth

Of 310 communities which supported opera houses during the fifty years following statehood, only forty participated in the census of 1870, the year after the completion of the Union Pacific's first set of transcontinental tracks. That number more than doubled by 1880, and a further 81 communities reported 1890, as more and more tracks and trunk lines were laid.

For the most part, Nebraska communities remained small. By the census of 1900, just 20 percent of Nebraska's 310 opera house towns had a population of over a thousand; when all 455 reporting population centers from that census are considered, the percentage drops to 13.6. Growth occurred inconsistently; the depression of the 1890s slowed the process. Only nine more towns reported a population in excess of 1000 in 1900 than had done so in 1890.

Town Business Growth

It took time for skilled craftsmen to bring villages more than the businesses necessary for survival, such as the general store, post office, blacksmith, livery barn, school, lumber and coal yard, elevator, hotel, and saloon. Railroad towns clustered around the depot, usually in a T formation with the station at the top, surrounded by the most imposing businesses, such as banks or mercantiles. Opera houses often occupied the second stories of such edifices.

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Occupations

The south central community of David City exemplifies a typical Nebraska opera house community. Its three rail lines--the Missouri Pacific, the Burlington and Missouri extension of the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy, and the Union Pacific--and its population of 2,000 made it a minor prairie metropolis with businesses ranging through most nineteenth century middle American occupations. Attorneys, music teachers, horse breeders, photographers, and merchant tailors joined saloonkeepers, physicians, barbers, shoemakers, blacksmiths, grocers, and bankers to create a community in microcosm. The town, with electricity and a good water system, boasted fifty-one businesses in 1890, among them three banks, three grain elevators, roller mills, a machine shop, two brickyards, a lumber yard, several hotels, and two newspapers (*Nebraska Gazetteer 1890-91* 137).

Despite such prolific urban activity, David City, like most Nebraska settlements, remained a community based on agriculture. Even allowing each of the listed businesses to support ten citizens--a generous average considering that well over half the establishments were not employers at all but specialized professionals such as dressmakers, barbers, physicians, postmasters, photographers, veterinarians, painters, and teachers--three-quarters of the population remained unaccounted for. Agriculture is the only logical occupation for the rest of the David Citians in 1890.

Advent of the Opera House

As town populations swelled after 1880, bringing in more Eastern entrepreneurs and businessmen to populate towns, a desire grew in communities to have a more polished, professional entertainment similar to that available in the East and in midwest metropolises such as Chicago or Kansas City. Trains meant that touring theatrical companies could make connections within a reasonable time at a reasonable price, but town fathers knew that first-rate companies would not consent to perform in the makeshift halls erected early in the life of most small towns. Any community desiring regular dramatic activity--professional or amateur--needed a theatrical facility large enough to hold a fair percentage of the community's citizens. Most of the halls built at the time the towns got started were inadequate to the needs of burgeoning urban centers fifteen years later. The time of the opera house, a structural concept imported from Italy to America in the eighteenth century, had arrived on the west bank of the Missouri.

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Although editors irregularly printed construction news, they made up for it in the effusiveness of their praise for the public-minded citizens responsible for building the opera houses. The *Chadron Journal* offered a restrained opinion when the Pace, Chadron's newest theatre, opened early in 1916, promising, "that this is the most complete building of its class this side of Omaha. We are proud of the play house and can not too highly eulogize our fellow townsman for his efforts in supplying a long felt need" (24 Mar 1916).

When it reported the opening of the grand Love Opera House in Fremont in December, 1888, the *Fremont Weekly Herald* summed up both the community idealism represented by a new opera house and the appreciation offered to the person behind the building:

A building of this character is more to the city than a structure of equal cost and size and appearance designed for many another purpose. Theatricals have become almost an indispensable adjunct to the civilization of to-day [sic] and of course whatever tends to elevate their character is to that extent a public blessing. Mr. Love has shown a commendable public spirit in the erection of his fine temple of histrionic art and while he will receive due credit for his spirit of enterprise, every one will wish him a full measure of the more tangible benefits which he expects shall accrue from the investment (20 Dec 1888).

Opera House Entrepreneurs

Few in Nebraska relied on an opera house only for financial support, though. Even in the largest cities, the opera house provided a creative or public spirited outlet for the builder, not a place to get rich. Fred Funke, owner of one of Lincoln's early theatrical palaces, made his money in wholesale liquor (*Gazetteer* 1884), as did H.P. Larson, who bought Fremont's Love Opera House in 1903 (*Gazetteer* 1902). J. W. Love himself had been in real estate, loans, and advertised himself as a breeder of Clydesdale and Percheron horses (*Gazetteer* 1888). W. A. Downing, H. J. Allen, W. C. Tillson, and J. J. Osborne, who called themselves the Kearney Opera Co., and who put up the money to erect the Kearney Opera House in 1891, were associated with the Kearney National Bank and the Kearney and Black Hills Railroad Company (*Gazetteer* 1893). In Omaha, while managers like William J. Burgess, Leslie N. Crawford and Thomas Boyd reported no other occupation than the theatre, the *builders* of those theatres made their fortunes in more conservative areas. James E. Boyd, who founded two of Omaha's most prestigious opera palaces,

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earned his money as a pork packer (*Gazetteer* 1879). George Brandeis, primary financial support for Omaha's last great opera house built in 1910, came from a family wealthy from both banking and a profitable department store (*Gazetteer* 1909).

In smaller towns, builders and early managers of opera houses practiced most local occupations, with the exception of farming, although several men claimed the livestock business as a livelihood. Not all owners' names are known, and not all known names are accounted for through research in the *Nebraska Gazetteer* from various years through 1917, but of 241 early theatrical entrepreneurs tracked down, none advertised himself as a farmer. Like today's Yellow Pages, the *Gazetteer* offered free business listings, earning its fees from advertising; many owners or managers appeared twice, once as the opera house proprietor or manager and once as whatever other position they held in the community, so it is unlikely that farming was omitted as an occupation.

Several possible reasons explain this nonparticipation by farmers in opera house management. First, farmers lived a chancy existence, relying on the whims of nature, the bank, or the railroad to determine if they broke even in any one year. Second, any extra funds accruing to farmers went into more land or into machinery to make the land more profitable. Finally, the hard physical labor required in farming meant that little time and energy were left over for a second job, especially one that was several miles away over inadequate roads in a farm wagon pulled by animals which had already put in a full day's work. If there were rich farmers who also participated in opera house management, they kept their daytime occupation out of the *Gazetteer*.

Most owners or managers of opera houses were either the merchants who ran the retail store on the ground level of the brick block housing the opera house, or those involved in leisure activities--that is, people who operated public entertainment facilities. Those who claimed opera house proprietor or manager as their sole employment lived in the larger cities exclusively. During the nineteenth century merchants dominated the owner/managers' professions, but by the twentieth century, leisure employments outdistanced merchants by more than 10 percent.

The rapid, sometimes annual change in opera house managers, as reported in the Cahn *Theatrical Guides*, shows that running a theatre was not a paying proposition. A sense of civic duty or a desire to help civilize the community may have brought the opera house into being, but it didn't pay the bills. Regardless, owners sank money into the venture from time to time. Renovations followed most changes in ownership. Louis P. Larson, who took over Fremont's opera house in 1903 from the Love family, used the summer hiatus when the

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theatre sat empty to refurbish the facility. Most of his changes were cosmetic; Larson extended the stage, tore out private boxes and the three front rows of the parquet, and painted the ceiling and walls. He also installed a steam heating plant (Schanke 232-3).

Most proprietors took the good will of their patrons seriously. They recognized the necessity of attracting top productions, and knew that poor performances would keep audiences away the next time. They made sure their fellow townsmen knew of their efforts, too. The published plea of James Pace in the *Chadron Journal* a few months after his opera house opened illustrates his concern for his customers:

The closing of my Opera House on Monday evening May 29, 1916, was for the sole purpose of preventing my patrons from being swindled into believing that the Opera of Ill [sic] Trovatore would be presented by a regular company when in truth and in fact I learned on the morning of that day that the promotor [sic] thereof was to be the entire company. I considered the return of money far better than to allow my house to be used for any bunco performance such as that promised to be. I have gone to great pains and expense to erect a respectable place of amusement for the citizens of Chadron, and hope ever to receive my just share of patronage, in my endeavor to please (2 Jun 1916).

Pace had justifiable concerns with competition; the Nelson Opera House, now operating under the name Chadron Opera House, still presented theatrical efforts and other community events, while the new Rex Theatre traded in moving pictures. The good will of Chadron's theatre-going public kept his new enterprise in business, and he knew it. Like other opera house owners around the state, he tried to book the best he could afford for his patrons.

Areas of Significance

Activities taking place in Nebraska opera houses fall into three areas of significance: the performing arts, entertainment/recreation, and social history. Most opera houses in small towns saw comparatively few theatrical activities during their days of usefulness, but all of them filled an important niche in the community, providing a place for companionship. "I just remember there were friends there. It was an enjoyable occasion," reminisced Hilda Vasey of Cozad, who attended the Allen Opera House in her teens. "It left a good flavor in your mouth. You liked it and it was nice, something to look forward to. Any memories I have of it are good" (1 Nov 1987).

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The Performing Arts

"The opera house fills a long felt want. Every citizen is proud of it" (*Fremont Weekly Tribune* 20 Dec 1888) sums up the affection townspeople had for their local theatre. Although it met other community needs most often, the times the traveling troupes or home talent trod the boards are the first in memory of many folks interviewed who remember the heyday of the opera house.

Stage entertainments meant a time for people to get together, to forget troubles with money, with weather, with the railroad, with keeping food on the table. Friends gathered at the opera house, where for a quarter each--sometimes less--the whole family could watch their neighbors put on a play for a good cause, thrill to the exploits of Eliza and George as they fled the horrors of Simon Legree, see a favorite book brought to life by an acting company from New York, laugh at a minstrel show, or enjoy a Lyceum Course musical program. Those in larger towns knew that several times a year a stock company would arrive, giving a different play each night for a week. Those lucky enough to live in cities could attend performances several times a week by the most glittering names in the entertainment world.

Several broad types of theatrical entertainments were held in Nebraska opera houses. For small town theatres, these include home talent school and drama club productions, which received glowing reviews by local editors, even though those editors seldom commented on professional touring companies; shows; the edifying Lyceum Course offerings, brought in by the local high school or businessmen's club as an annual fund raiser; minstrel shows; stock companies; specialty acts; musical performances; and the varied plays brought on tour by production companies from New York or Chicago, which took a single play on the road for the September through May season. These shows ran the gamut from spectacular effects through novel dramatization, melodramas, rural dramas, ethnic comedies, all the way to classics of the stage. From 1910 on, more and more comedies with music, vaudeville variety programs, and shows touting "Girls, Girls, Girls!" grew in popularity.

Home talent. At least once a year, most communities found an excuse to stage a play using local citizens. These plays received the same or more build-up as professional touring productions; local editors touted the benefits of the play, the cast, the cause, and the spectacle. Sometimes home talent, particularly dramatic clubs, toured in surrounding communities. The Aurora Dramatic Club offered at least one selection a year in Hampton, a village five miles away. Pawnee City's Little Tycoon Opera Company played *Tecumseh* in 1892, an event praised by Editor Somers of the *Chieftan*:

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They were greeted with as fine an audience as this city can produce, and it was certainly very appreciative of the splendid entertainment to which it listened. We venture the assertion that there is not another town of the size of Pawnee City, in the entire west, that can muster talent which will duplicate the performances of this superior opera company or the magnificent band which accompanies it (1 Oct 1892).

Lyceum courses. Late in the nineteenth century, small towns with limited income bases chose the attractive option offered by lyceum bureaus in Lincoln, Omaha, or further afield. For a set price, usually five hundred dollars, a season of four, five, or six edifying evenings could be purchased. Administered by high schools or the various commercial booster clubs as fund-raisers; these entertainments consisted of musical performances and lectures or specialty acts, rather than plays.

The 1912-1913 Lodge Pole Commercial Club season offered five "big numbers too good to miss" (*Lodge Pole Express* 12 Oct 1912) for the reasonable price of \$2.00 for adults, \$1.00 for children. Since Lodge Pole had a population of 245 in 1910 but boasted a seating capacity of 600 for the opera house, boosters must have hoped to gross seven or eight hundred dollars, a tidy sum even after the \$500 Lyceum Bureau charge and other expenses were deducted.

The various lyceum bureaus took pains to put together attractive packages. These relieved small town opera house owners, who often had little working knowledge of what would or would not bring in a full house, of the necessity of selecting respectable entertainment from among the myriad entertainers and touring companies traipsing across the country. Managers no longer had to worry about the quality of a show or if it would appear as scheduled. Lyceum bureau numbers were guaranteed; if performers could not meet a date, another act would take their place.

The 1912-1913 Lodge Pole Lyceum Course offerings are typical of such features. In late October the Original Strollers Quartette, four male singers and bell-ringers, presented an evening of "singing, impersonations, violin playing and bell ringing which alone will be worth the price of the entire course." Early November brought the Yare "Dutch Girls" Duo, whose novelties offered "the best culture combined with a fascinating simplicity." Newton Wesley Gaines arrived a month later, delivering a lecture full of "humor and pathos, natural sympathy, warmth of feeling, and wealth of information." Late January brought character comedian and impersonator S. Platt Jones, whose publicity guaranteed, "You will laugh in spite of yourself. You will clap your hands until they are sore and your sides will actually ache." The final

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event, the black Original Carolina Jubilee Singers, appeared in March, "singing the old negro melodies, plantation and camp meeting songs of years ago" (*Lodge Pole Express* 12 Oct 1912).

Minstrel shows. Knights of the Burnt Cork were a mainstay of nineteenth century rural American theatre. Often minstrel shows were presented by local talent, since the singing, jokes, and blackface were simpler for amateurs to achieve than entire plays. Lodges, particularly, enjoyed the events. The *Crawford Tribune* regaled its readers with the details of the Eighth Cavalry's Merry Minstrels performance held at the Syndicate Opera House in Crawford in 1909.

Sophisticated city theatres were not exempt from the minstrel craze. Omaha's Boyd Theatre presented three minstrel shows during its 1891-1892 season; one the next year; three in 1893-1894; and still offered a show as late as the 1909-1910 season (Fanders 158-240).

Stock companies. During the early years of the opera house era, few stock companies toured, but by the 1890s more and more took to the road as opera house managers found it advantageous to bring in a troupe for a week, presenting a different play each night. Audiences enjoyed watching the same actors and actresses perform different roles.

The best known Nebraska stock company was organized by O. D. Woodward, manager of the Boyd Theatre and part-owner of the Burwood, both in Omaha. Woodward's stock company eventually covered a circuit including Omaha, Kansas City, St. Joseph, Minneapolis, and Sioux City (Fanders 70). The company began at Omaha's Creighton Theatre in 1897 but grew popular rapidly, receiving feature coverage in the *New York Dramatic Mirror's* Christmas, 1899 issue.

From the start, Omahans took the Woodward Stock Company to their hearts. Early reports were pleasant, but guarded: "Considering the short time they have been together, they are giving a remarkably smooth performance" (*New York Dramatic Mirror* 31 Aug 1897). Six weeks later, when the company's run was extended for three weeks, the correspondent offered more plentiful praise: "The success of the Woodward Theatre Company, which is now entering on its sixth consecutive week, is phenomenal. It is no unusual thing to turn hundreds away" (4 Sep 1897). The next year the Creighton became a stock rather than first class theatre, featuring the Woodward Stock Company on a long-term run beginning in January, 1898. By the following summer, the Woodward Theatre Co. expanded and prepared to leave Nebraska, enlarging and improving the company as it gained national recognition. In January, 1899, the company, now using the name Minneapolis and St. Paul Woodward Stock Company, returned in triumph to the Boyd Theatre, since the Creighton had

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converted to vaudeville exclusively. Omaha welcomed them enthusiastically. "One of the largest and most brilliant audiences of the season turned out to see *Cyrano de Bergerac*, first time the play was in Omaha" (21 Jan 1899).

Specialty performances. Vaudeville and other specialty performances always brought out the crowds. Family acts with talented singing and dancing children attracted good houses in Nebraska, sometimes returning more than once in a season. An example of the popularity of vaudeville in Nebraska is apparent in the conversion of the Creighton Theatre in Omaha to a vaudeville house after only three years as a legitimate theatre palace.

The Creighton, which had interspersed vaudeville sides between the acts of stock company plays as early as the fall of 1898, was bought by the Orpheum Vaudeville Circuit in November of that year. "Vaudeville has come to Omaha to stay and our society people evidently propose to take it up and enjoy it," reported the *Excelsior* theatrical correspondent (15 Jan 1898). On December 14, 1898, the Orpheum Circuit completed the theatre's conversion from stock-plus-vaudeville to full time vaudeville, featuring "the epitome of quality, uniqueness, refinement, novelty, greatness, and originality in its acts," offering "a bright, sparkling, refined entertainment" for 10, 25, or 50 cents.

Non-vaudeville specialties tended toward the exotic. Mysterious Smith and his company of mediums followed Houdini's footsteps; Smith practiced several escapes during his act, including release from 500 feet of rope without untying one knot and escape from a locked and tied mailbag. Sleight-of-hand and standard magic tricks filled his stage as well. Smith featured Olga, "the world famous mind reader," in his entourage (*Cozad Local* 24 Nov 1916). The next year, Cozad citizens enjoyed *The Paradise of the Pacific*, a musical production by Kulola's Hawaiians featuring "all the native songs, dances, and instrumental numbers played and sung as have never before been offered to the amusement public" (*Cozad Local* 26 Oct 1917). The Clarkson Z.C.B.J. Hall presented a home talent "Marriage of the Midgets" in 1916, using seventy-five children to present "a genuine wedding with all the accessories of bridesmaids, best men, flower girls, and invited guests" (*Colfax County Press* 19 Oct 1916).

Musical entertainments. Some opera houses did present opera and other fine musical entertainment. When the David City Opera House presented the Schubert Symphony and Ladies Quartette in 1901, the editor of the local newspaper explained that their popularity sprang from their "study to please the people. All their encores are either amusing, or artistic arrangements of those sweet old melodies so dear to all American hearts" (*Butler County Press*, 16 Oct 1901). The Boston Ideal Opera Company, which toured annually in Nebraska, brought classical opera; likewise, the arrival of the Chicago

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English Grand Opera Company to Chadron with *Il Trovatore* led the editor of the *Chadron Journal* to remind his readers, "Chadron people are much to be congratulated that they chanced to hear this company" (24 Nov. 1916).

Opera was not the only type of musical performance by large groups. Outfits like the Byron Troubadours of Chicago drew plaudits from local editors. The *Chieftan* editor explained for Tecumsehans who had missed the performance,

The Troubadours, a colored company, are possessed of rare talent and play the various musical instruments and sing in a decidedly acceptable manner. Two or three instruments which had never before been played in this city were introduced. Nearly every number brought forth an encore and the gentlemen responded very pleasantly (29 Oct 1904).

Production companies. The largest number of companies on the road during the opera house era consisted of troupes of actors, managers, advance men, and entourages who took a single play out for a year's run across the country. While New York, then as now, was perceived as the pinnacle of the actor's success, a large number of actors and plays seen in Nebraska were never reviewed by the *New York Times*. Most local newspapers published publicity--provided by a company's advance man--in the issue before a play's arrival. Unfortunately, few editors followed up the next week with a recounting of the production, so only scanty details concerning performances remain. Typical "reviews" devoted more time to the audience reaction than to the performers' efforts. "A good sized crowd greeted the troupe and nearly every person present was highly pleased with the quality and excellence," reported the editor of the *Butler County Press* after a 1906 appearance by Sanford Dodge in *Romeo and Juliet*. "Everything went off smoothly excepting an unusual amount of unnecessary noise made in the gallery" (3 Oct. 1906).

Unlike today, few local publicity releases referred to eastern critics' opinions; whether or not a show had had a successful Broadway run had nothing to do with its reception on the prairie. Most plays which toured the state do not even appear in the consolidated *New York Times Theatre Reviews, 1870-1911*. Nebraska audiences had favorite performers and plays; opinions from back east apparently carried little weight, since few references to them exist. Advance agents might describe audience reactions from earlier stops on a show's run, but only to help convince Nebraskans to attend the performance, not because Eastern opinions counted any more than those in the midwest.

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Performing arts in larger cities. Considering the limited economic base and audience pool available in smaller towns, a scarcity of nationally prominent performers shouldn't be unexpected at most Nebraska opera houses. Those who lived in Omaha or Lincoln, though, saw the most glittering stars regularly; actors and plays of national repute arrived several times a month for runs of three or four days, interspersed with less expensive shows. Larger communities like Fremont, Nebraska City, Beatrice, Kearney, Grand Island, and Hastings, often booked these top attractions for a one- or two-night stand, trading on their strategic locations on rail lines between major midwestern metropolises like Kansas City, Omaha, Denver and Minneapolis to attract top-rated troupers.

During its 1900-01 season, the Boyd Theatre in Omaha--pre-eminent theatre in the state under the auspices of entrepreneurs Burgess and Woodward--featured over a hundred different productions (Fanders 193-198). Major stars performed for Omaha audiences at the Boyd; "original" New York companies brought in shows. Four minstrel companies, three dialect plays, Herrmann the Magician and the Al Winter Production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* entertained those with less cultivated tastes, while six opera companies, three concerts--including one by John Philip Sousa--and dramatizations of best-sellers appealed to citizens with elevated interests. Two home talent productions, one an Elks minstrel show and one a school play, pleased local audiences. After the regular season closed at the end of May, the Ferris Stock Company moved into the theatre, presenting a new show each week from June 1 through July 14.

Despite its short life as an opera house, the Creighton drew prominent entertainers before its managers relegated it to a second class stock-and-vaudeville facility less than three years after it opened. Paxton and Burgess, managers of the Boyd Theatre, also handled the Creighton after 1897; they evidently felt Omaha could only support one pre-eminent theatre, or perhaps they wished to offer the city two varieties of entertainment consistently--the best touring productions and stars at the Boyd, the top-notch Woodward Stock Company at the Creighton. The experiment failed, forcing Paxton and Boyd to sell the Creighton to the Orpheum vaudeville circuit in late 1898.

In addition to stars, theatrical palaces also brought in the best touring companies. Hanlon's *Superba*, described as "a unique mechanical and pantomimic spectacle," promised "a feast for the juvenile eye with an occasional gratification for the juvenile ear in the way of a song" (*New York Times* 27 Dec 1892:5). The New York company of *Trilby*, A. M. Palmer's drama about hypnotism, appeared at the Creighton in September, 1895; its burlesque, *Thrilly*, followed a month later. Charles Frohman's Stock Company brought in

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Liberty Hall and *Sowing the Wind* for the opening of the Creighton in August, 1895, advertising "the same cast, scenery, and effects as seen for 200 nights at the Empire Theatre [New York]" (*Omaha Excelsior* 17 Aug 1895).

Changing styles of entertainment. By 1910, as legitimate theatre sought to cope in a world featuring more vaudeville and moving pictures, musical comedy and shows offering lots of pretty girls became the norm for touring companies. Thin plots held together by bright songs and risqué costumes became the order of the day. "*My Sammy Girl* is the newest, breeziest, happiest, funniest play with original music introduction of the year," reported the *Chadron Journal* (4 Oct 1918). "Talented actors have the numerous parts and the comedians have the comedy stunts well in hand."

Entertainment/Recreation

Community gatherings. Events at the opera house generated excitement in ordinary, small town lives. This anticipation not only comes out in conversations with people who remember attending functions in the opera house, but also in the newspapers. Traveling troupes and lyceums were heavily advertised in the issue before their arrival--three mentions on the page devoted to local happenings was usual--but seldom reviewed. Local productions always received more press and ordinarily earned rave reviews. Editors saluted citizens with the gumption to entertain the community. "The best entertainment this season" was a common laud.

Dances. Dances occurred more often than any other form of amusement in Nebraska small town opera houses, a tradition begun in the days of sodbusting on the frontier, before towns were more than a few crude wooden shacks housing only the basic enterprises of life. They were the universal indoor amusement. They were held on every holiday, in celebration of the election of successful candidates, when a new barn was built, when a couple were married, and on any other occasion for which an excuse could be found. Besides opera houses, they were held in homes, barns, stores, restaurants, courthouses, dining rooms, and even on the prairie.

People celebrated life with dancing. In Hampton, where dancing took place more than any other kind of entertainment in the I.O.O.F. Opera House, masquerades were popular. "No spectators allowed!" chortled a January issue of the *Hampton Times*. Orchestras were brought in from as far away as fifty miles for special events. Any excuse would do to hold a dance. Admission was charged to cover the cost of the band, the hall and to raise funds. Most dances cost from 50 cents to a dollar for the evening, although sometimes ladies were admitted free. Fire departments, dancing schools, lodges, bands, Commercial Clubs, ball teams, all sponsored dances in the opera house. Bad

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weather did not deter those hardy citizens in search of a good time: "A fair-sized crowd gathered at the opera house Thursday evening regardless of the cold, damp weather and a fine time was had by all participating. The crowd made merry til a late hour" (*Snyder Banner* 21 Oct 1910). Hard Times dances, "Tacky" dances, Married Folks dances, celebrations in honor of young men who enlisted in 1917 (*Lodgepole Express* Nov 1917), hoe-downs to pay for new band uniforms (*Aurora Republican* 8 Oct 1909)--all drew crowds. Most dancers were well behaved; those who wanted a rowdy time went elsewhere. "Some of the boys thought they could enjoy themselves better at the billiard hall and went there--some of them repented afterwards," sneered the Hampton correspondent for the *Aurora Republican* (3 Dec 1897).

Lectures. A popular form of entertainment, often part of the season's package booked into an opera house by a Lyceum Bureau from Lincoln, Omaha, or further afield, was the lecture. Most audience members looked forward to speakers as a chance to hear about exotic lifestyles beyond their reach. Dr. Whitefield Ray, the South American traveler, entertained Cozad audiences in December 1916; Professor J. P. D. Meyn of Chicago spoke in Snyder at least three times, illustrating his talk with "sceneries of Switzerland and Italy" (*Banner* 2 Oct 1908). Captain S. Alberti spoke in David City of "various places and persons in Russia and Siberia which he illustrates with a stereopticon" (*Butler County Press* Oct 1903). One of the most promoted was the recital lecture of Miss Ethel Dunn, who had attended the Oberammergau Passion Play in Germany the previous year. "Elegantly arranged and beautifully illustrated, her lecture is dignified and at the same time pathetic and appealing. It charms and at the same time edifies those who attend to see and hear it," one testimonial ran (*Butler County Press* 1911). Colonel Copeland discussed "Seeing the Elephant" in 1900, a common pioneer image. "The Sky Pilot" was Professor Adrian M. Newens' topic. Political issues, especially new ones, brought advocates; the amount of press depended on the political leanings of the editor.

Social History

Community gatherings. While communities of more than five thousand boasted of opera houses with permanent seats designed to accommodate theatrical and musical presentations or an occasional political caucus or lecture, these were the exceptions. Most small town opera houses, with an average seating capacity of about five hundred, intended to serve all community needs. They were essentially large rooms with a stage at one end, sometimes a balcony, and movable seating which could be arranged as needed for the current event--in rows for performances using the stage, along the side walls at dances and sporting events, or at tables for banquets. An evening at the opera house meant a chance to see friends, particularly those who lived

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outside of town; it gave parents some place respectable to bring the children, and a chance to compare notes with other parents of children the same age; young people could meet, mingle, and court under the watchful eyes of the community without fear of disapprobation for unseemly conduct.

Political meetings. Aside from dances, Octobers in the opera houses were given over to prominent speakers stumping for local or regional candidates. William Jennings Bryan regularly toured the eastern end of the state; ads for his appearance were of a prominent size on the front page. It didn't matter whom he supported; whether he came to the depot, the courthouse lawn, or the opera house, his speeches drew big crowds.

The western end of the state saw few statewide elected officials; it was an occasion when one did come: "Come hear a real live Senator [Gilbert M. Hitchcock] talk on the issues of the day," invited the *Lodgepole Express* (18 Oct 1916). Speakers sometimes addressed ethnic crowds; Stanislav Serpan was imported from Omaha to Clarkson in the 1916 election campaign to address the Czech members of the community (*Herald* 21 Oct 1916). Occasional Populist speakers tried to generate supporters, but as the *Hampton Times* reported of one such incident, "women and Republicans [were] mostly in attendance" (Oct 1899).

Educational activities. Although brick opera houses did not predate public school buildings, the earliest educational facilities were crude by comparison, often not including a gymnasium or auditorium. School plays, commencements, and athletic events like basketball were moved to the opera house as the logical location able to hold the crowd.

Opera houses saw many school declamation contests. When Allen's Opera House opened on January 11, 1907, it offered a local declamatory contest and school entertainment. "This program promises to be one of the very best of the season," pledged the *Cozad Tribune's* editor. "It will be divided into three acts and each act will be full of merry humor, comic episodes, and thrilling incidents. Come and see the new scenery, the adjustable lights, and the opera house with a seating capacity of 500 people" (4 Jan 1907).

School entertainments served as talent showcases for pupils. A Lodgepole "grade entertainment" featured a flag salute, songs, readings, piano solos, hoop drills, a flag drill, a cadet drill, bugle call, the cooky song, a girls' pantomime, and a boys' pantomime, "Just Before the Battle, Mother" (*Express* Feb 1915). Sometimes box socials raised money for special school equipment, such as the Victrola Fund for the Cozad High School (*Cozad Local* 2 Nov 1917).

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Athletics. Sporting attractions were common in opera houses of the less settled western end of the state. The Army Theatre at Fort Robinson, which doubled as the post gymnasium, held many local boxing and wrestling matches for the cavalry troops stationed there. Jack Dempsey fought Lightning Murray of the Tenth Cavalry in the theatre during June, 1905; Murray won by a knockout (*Crawford Tribune* Jun 1905). Chadron hosted a world's champion wrestling match in 1916, between Joe Stecher, the world's champion, vs. Karl "Bavarian" Busch, "The Pride of Chicago." Tickets went for the exaggerated prices of two, three, and five dollars each! (*Journal* 1 Sep 1916).

Decline of the Opera House

By the time Omaha's last great opera house, the Brandeis Theatre, opened in 1910, the face of legitimate theatre had altered. Vaudeville shows and revue-style musicals now brought in the crowds that had once preferred melodramas. Even theatres which continued to show dramas used vaudeville performers as filler between acts. Although vaudeville theatres charged the same admission price as legitimate houses (*Omaha Excelsior* 2 Nov 1895), the trend toward that type of entertainment suggests that theatre managers found it easier to sell tickets for vaudeville performances.

Records of Omaha vaudeville houses confirm the form's popularity before the turn of the century. After the sale of the Creighton to the Orpheum Vaudeville chain in late 1898, Manager Jake Rosenthal reported to the Omaha correspondent of the *New York Dramatic Mirror*, "The house has jumped into popular favor and this is not to be wondered at when you look at the bill" (31 Dec 1898). Acrobatic troupes, comedians, singers, family acts, midgets, animal acts, comic sketches and other assorted entertainments kept audiences entranced. Less than two months after the Creighton's conversion, the *Dramatic Mirror* informed its readers, "The application for chairs were [sic] so numerous that Manager Rosenthal seated a portion of the overflow upon the stage. This innovation was greatly enjoyed by those who were favored, and as many of them had never before been behind the scenes it really caused these seats to be preferred" (21 Jan 1899). Better yet from a management point of view, by the close of the 1899-1900 season Rosenthal reported that "he did not play a single week at a loss" (*New York Dramatic Mirror* 2 Jun 1900). This suggests that playing at a loss was an accepted fact of life in the midwest entertainment world.

In the legitimate theatres, events transpired in the 1890s which left small opera houses on railroad trunk lines unable to book many major attractions. A group of enterprising New York advance men founded a trust in 1896, dubbed the Theatrical Syndicate, to control both the shows (product) and the theatre outlets (market). These six men recognized the advantages of

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mounting what came to be called combination companies, duplicate versions of successful Broadway plays assembled to tour on the road, billed as "Direct from New York" (Henderson 24). As businessmen, they knew that putting together a company performing one hit play across the country would generate greater financial returns than sending out a stock company doing several plays of varied quality. Since the Syndicate and the Shubert Brothers, their major competitors, did not want to present companies performing stock, individual producers could not generate enough bookings to afford to mount a production.

In the smaller towns, most of which could afford neither the major trust syndicate bookings nor full scale vaudeville, the best option for live entertainment was Lyceum Bureaus, neatly packaged programs guaranteed at an affordable price. These events superseded performances by touring companies, but this was symptomatic of rather than a causal effect in the decline in legitimate theatre in Nebraska, as was the trend toward the community auditorium for village-wide events. Two pivotal factors relegated the opera house to a lesser position after 1910: the popularity and reliability of movies as an audience draw; and the lifestyle changes generated by the growing availability and affordability of the automobile.

Moving Pictures

In the years after 1910, movie theatres advertised more than small town opera houses. The excitement once reserved for live theatre troupes was now generated by moving pictures. Newspapers described new motion picture theatres in language similar to that once used to characterize opera houses.

Although local entrepreneurs showed movies in the opera houses at first, smaller ground floor theatres designed exclusively for motion pictures soon cornered the market. The 1909 *Nebraska Gazetteer* included 51 movie theatres, climbing to a high of 298 entries by 1917. In addition, listings for theatres appeared for a number of very small towns starting in 1907; based on the cost difference between movies and live theatre, and the assumed limited economic base of such villages, these were probably multipurpose halls trading on the new moving picture business. More and more, second floor opera houses were closed off as first floor movie houses brought in the business.

Several other economic variables made movies more attractive than live plays for theatre owners. First, moving pictures were much more cost-effective for theatre owners. Public fascination with the new medium created a profitable enterprise for local entrepreneurs, one which required little capital outlay or risk on their parts. Theatre owners could cut back prices from live productions, offering customers a "bargain," without losing money. Movie seats usually sold for less than half the cost of opera house seats.

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The Rex Theatre in Chadron, Palm Theatre in Cozad, Community and Lyric Theatres in David City, and the Royal Theatre in Howells all charged ten and twenty cents for movies in 1915 and 1916, while the opera houses in those communities, during the same time, charged twenty-five, thirty-five, and fifty cents a ticket. Low prices, coupled with lower overhead determined by smaller facilities and projection equipment rather than actors and scenery, meant that some of the managers' financial jeopardy was relieved. If a stage show did not sell out, an owner would have to come up with part of the fee out of his own funds. A theatre manager who misjudged a company or the strength of a live attraction could experience a potentially staggering financial setback. The comparatively negligible cost of a moving picture meant that entertainment could be as profitable as running a saloon.

Second, as more and more films became available, theatre managers could offer patrons a variety of entertainment choices. Comedy, melodrama, farce, cartoons, war stories, and an adventure serial could all be shown in the same week for less money than a stage production cost.

Third, when it came to advertising, the film industry sought to equal or outdo its aging cousin. Movie ads used the same superlatives favored by live theatre to draw in the audience. The "greatest picture ever staged of the real western life" appeared in Chadron, produced by a local film company. Later that year, Chadron moviegoers crowded into the Pace in capacity to watch an "educational, instructive, thrilling, sensational, and striking" film on diving horses, narrated by Dr. Carver, the horses' trainer. "Nothing before was ever seen like it!" claimed the *Chadron Journal* (13 Oct 1916). The movies offered pictures of real scenery, not painted backdrops, and the best actors, not just the best person within a stock company for a particular part. Some films even starred real-life celebrities, as in 1915's *Battle of Cameron Dam*.

Finally, the facilities themselves, usually new and erected at a substantial investment, attracted moviegoers with plush pizzazz. In larger cities, movie house entrepreneurs went out of their way to compete with the lavish theatrical palaces used for live stage shows. In Omaha, a new motion picture theatre, the Rialto, opened in 1918. This theatre offered flamboyant competition to the failing Boyd and Brandeis; built for \$750,000, it represented an investment of more than six times the original expenditure on the Boyd in the 1890s (Fanders 139). Besides, moving picture theatres overwhelmed the legitimate stage in numbers alone. By 1917, Lincoln had seven theatres--the Oliver, Orpheum, Rialto, Colonial, Magnet, Strand, and Lyric--but only the Oliver and Orpheum offered live theatre. The Orpheum presented quality vaudeville acts; the other five theatres catered to the movie-going crowd (Walton 61).

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Automobiles

Movies gave those seeking entertainment more variety; the automobile conferred freedom. Coupled with the growing global awareness that came to veterans of World War I, the car meant that going thirty miles for an evening's entertainment now took an hour instead of three or four. Small town opera houses lost patrons as autos became more affordable and common.

Final Decline

Sharp declines in the number of professional touring companies, popularity of motion pictures, and availability of automobiles all contributed to the decline of the opera house as a viable civic center in Nebraska towns. Society moved on; community auditoriums and movie houses attracted the crowds that once patronized opera houses. Audiences sat on the edge of their chairs during "The Perils of Pauline" as they had once feared for Eliza when she leaped onto the ice floes with her son, Harry, in her flight across the Ohio River to freedom (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). Audiences no longer restricted themselves to whatever the local manager could afford to bring into town for entertainment; cities up to sixty or seventy-five miles away could be considered when deciding what to do for an evening.

By the time the United States Doughboys came marching home in 1918, the opera house era had ended. New lifestyles emerged; those opera houses which remained were used rarely, and then seldom as performing arts sites. Yet in their heyday, these edifices had served as the hubs of social life, filling significant functions in the areas of social history; entertainment and recreation; and the performing arts in their respective communities.

F. Associated Property Types

Opera House Buildings

I. Name of Property Type

II. Description

"Opera house," a generic term used by more than 325 communities across Nebraska, seldom referred to a grand theatrical palace, that offered the best-known professionals. Instead, it was a fancy moniker attached to one of the multifunction halls found in Nebraska's emerging urban communities on railroad lines during the fifty-year span following statehood, 1867-1917.

One hundred and thirty extant opera houses were surveyed during 1986-87; no structure bore more than a superficial resemblance to any other. Most Nebraska opera houses were above commercial buildings with diverse, multi-functional floor plans. Few entrepreneurs took the gamble of erecting a single-purpose structure with a raked floor and permanent seats; most theatres in Nebraska had flat floors and filled many community gathering needs besides theatre.

III. Significance

Opera house buildings represent an important property type for their association with and in reference to the historic context, "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska," as outlined in "Historic and Prehistoric Contexts in Nebraska, Topical Listing" (1985). These buildings gain significance in Nebraska's history as representations of performing arts and social gathering facilities during the Victorian period in the state, which began when Nebraska achieved statehood in 1867 and continued for fifty years, until 1917. The opera house building epoch spread throughout these decades; of 481 opera houses with verified dates of construction, 23 percent were built during the 1880s, 22 percent in the 1890s, 33 percent in the 1900s, and 19 percent between 1910 and 1917. By the time America entered the war in Europe in 1917, theatre-building in Nebraska had shifted from opera houses to one of three types: assembly halls without stages; community auditoriums; or movie houses. Since this corresponded with the decline of national touring companies, the upsurge in

IV. Registration Requirements

In addressing integrity, properties will be eligible under Criterion A if they remain in the place where they were during their period of important association (location) and if they retain sufficient historical appearance to recall that association, including design, materials, and workmanship, but especially feeling and association. Minimally, this means that the auditorium boundaries, as viewed in a floor plan, remain unaltered so that, upon entry, one experiences the "feeling" of a theatre. In most cases the stage must remain intact and any balcony should retain its original configurations. The exterior, aside from the first-floor retail facade, should retain its original appearance. In the case of opera houses, interior integrity is more important, but exterior integrity is still required to make a property eligible under this multiple property nomination. These are not inflexible requirements, however; each former opera house must be considered individually, since some are such exceptional examples of specific aspects that a deficiency on some points does not automatically remove them from consideration for this multiple property listing.

See continuation sheet

See continuation sheet for additional property types

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II. DESCRIPTION

A Workable Identification System

In most Nebraska towns, commercial districts were not architecturally linked together by skilled professionals; they developed gradually, relying on builders of limited expertise, using local construction crews of varying abilities and experience, working with materials of irregular quality. Some bricks came from local kilns, others had to be hauled in; most lumber came from other parts of the country. Expense of materials directly determined the elaborateness and size of the buildings. Confusion often arises when assigning vernacular architecture to specific categories.

The Nebraska State Historical Society's Historic Preservation Office, which administers the Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey (NeHBS), recommends a commercial architecture classification system originated by Richard Longstreth, based on commercial street facades. Derived as it is from physical evidence, the Longstreth taxonomy lends itself well to categorizing the extant commercial buildings which once contained Nebraska's opera houses. According to Longstreth, "The facade does not just contain essential elements, it is composed. It boasts of ornament, signs, and other distinctive features. It exhibits the best materials and workmanship." He contends that only in rare instances are two facades identical, but that they do fall into a limited number of basic compositional patterns. His seven patterns create a workable basis for classifying commercial Nebraska structures housing theatres.

Two-part commercial block. This building, usually two to four stories, is divided into two distinct horizontal zones, or blocks, neither of which bears much similarity of treatment to the other. The horizontal division point usually occurs between the first and second stories, regardless of the total number of stories involved. The lower level had a public function while the upper floors did not receive heavy daily traffic. Typical uses for the upper zone include opera houses, lodges, meeting rooms, and offices.

One-part commercial block. This structure is similar to the lower zone of the two-part commercial block. A common practice with these buildings was to erect a false front to impart more importance to the structure.

Enframed window wall. Usually one-story, this facade includes a large center section, often glass, surrounded on three sides by a unified border.

Two-part vertical block. Two primary sections characterize this commercial facade, the lower one of two stories providing a base for the multiple stories above. The lower zone includes more embellishment, but the upper floors dominate the building's appearance.

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Three-part vertical block. Similar to the two-part vertical block, this type includes a distinct lid, or third zone, which sets off the top of the building. Because of their height, vertical blocks played little part in the story of opera house architecture in Nebraska.

Temple front. The most distinctive of the Longstreth types, temple front facades include either freestanding or engaged columns, pilasters, or piers, giving the impression of Greek or Roman temples from antiquity.

Vault. Vaulted facades seldom exceed three stories. A vaulted opening dominates the center of a massive front.

Most Nebraska opera houses fall into the categories particular to two- to three-story buildings: one- and two-part commercial blocks. One-part commercial block buildings tended to go up early in a town's development; they represented makeshift structures trying to give an impression of the town-to-be, often with false fronts. By the time most second story opera houses were constructed, the towns had reached the point in their growth when citizens looked to the permanence of brick and stone as a symbol of the community's solidity and growth potential. The town builders wanted an imposing institution citizens could take pride in, not an insignificant building tucked between the general store and the saloon. The opera house was usually at or near the main intersection of town, denoting its importance. Neither the vault nor the temple facade achieved much popularity in Nebraska opera house architectural styles.

Two facts stand out after reviewing extant Nebraska houses, aside from those that result from the gradual evolution of the Nebraska theatre structures during the opera house era. First, an overwhelming 65 percent of these nominated properties are two-part commercial blocks, proving that most of the entrepreneurs were businessmen first, using the opera house building's ground floor to generate substantial income so that the second-story theatre could exist as a virtually nonprofit enterprise without seriously jeopardizing the owner's financial position.

Second, no correlation of statistics explains the presence or absence of a balcony in any of these theatres. Some opera houses without balconies seem to have more austere, less theatrical purposes; one reason is that some of these small towns were within easy distance of an opera house in a larger community which saw considerable theatrical activity, bringing in professional touring companies on a regular schedule. Other opera houses without balconies are less than 25 feet wide. Architecturally, this limited width does not encourage the inclusion of a balcony across one end of the auditorium. In addition, stages in these houses had few accoutrements; proscenium openings in these small houses were only about twelve feet, wings were narrow, and stages were a mere ten feet from proscenium line to back wall. Theatrical presentations obviously held little priority in these small towns.

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**Structural Evolution from the
Nineteenth to Twentieth Centuries**

Although the earliest Nebraska opera houses were on the second story, a prominent trend away from second-story theatres developed by the beginning of the twentieth century. Few specific reasons have surfaced to explain the trend away from second-story opera houses, but several ideas deserve consideration. First, the national trend in major theatres was toward the first floor. A primary reason for this was the disastrous Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago, which took six hundred lives when it burned to the ground in 1903, despite claims that it was "absolutely fireproof" (Henderson 244).

Second, building on the first floor made economic sense. Since fewer materials were required to construct ground-floor theatres, the overall cost would have been less. Lower costs put an opera house within the reach of most towns; this is apparent when looking at the number of opera houses with seating capacities of 300 or less built in small communities after 1900. Forty-five Nebraska villages with populations of less than five hundred built opera houses after the turn of the century, compared to only twenty-four between 1870 and 1899. Also, first floor theatres had a slightly larger seating capacity, occupancy averaging about fifty more for first- than second-floor theatres. This meant that more money could be generated from ticket sales by building ground floor opera houses.

Progress contributed a third reason. More and more small towns had water and electric power by the turn of the century, and those that did not were thinking in that direction when erecting new buildings. Logically, a first-floor theatre would be less expensive to build and to electrify than one on the second floor; the same reasoning followed for indoor plumbing facilities.

Fourth, a trend toward the community auditorium occurred in the early years of the twentieth century. Town councils responsible for the maintenance and safety of public auditoriums preferred ground floor theatres, although the structures were often two stories high to accommodate both the balcony and the athletic events that took place there. This trend also eliminated the aspect of a dual purpose commercial and professional building; since it was built and maintained by public funds, it was no longer necessary that the auditorium be self-supporting.

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Despite a trend away from second-story opera houses during this century, though, the economic advantage in placing a theatre above a retail business still played a prominent part in the location of theatres. Combining two enterprises in one building would make a lot of sense for communities with small economic bases, one reason why second-floor theatres continued to be built until the end of the opera house era.

One further architectural feature distinguishes opera houses built in the nineteenth century from those in the twentieth. By and large, the commercial block buildings constructed in the late 1800s were more ornate with a proliferation of cornices, pediments, canopies, turrets, pinnacles, and elaborate brickwork. Structures from the early 1900s appear stark by contrast. The most logical explanation for this phenomenon is that the economic uncertainties during the late nineteenth century in Nebraska discouraged fiscal irresponsibility, which included decorative, nonfunctional architecture.

III. SIGNIFICANCE

popularity and technical improvements for moving pictures, and widespread availability of the automobile, it is a logical date with which to conclude Nebraska's opera house era, although some opera houses continued to function as civic social gathering halls for a number of years after 1917.

Opera houses represented the hub of small town community-wide activities and entertainment during the fifty years following Nebraska statehood. The gamut of offerings in these buildings ranged from great stage artists like Edwin Booth and Sarah Bernhardt, to speakers like William Jennings Bryan, to New York Stage productions, to opera and musical performers, to high school commencements, to roller skating and community dances. The first silent movies shown in Nebraska were previewed in the opera houses. These edifices were the focal points of leisure activity during their heyday and thus it is the social importance of the opera house to its time which dictates that any technical remains--buildings, scenery, theatre seats, programs and posters, costumes, etc.--be recorded and, where possible, preserved.

Under Criterion A, three areas of significance apply to the opera house. First, opera houses are significant in the area of the performing arts, hosting such events as national and regional touring companies, lecture series, speakers, musical performers, minstrel shows, comedians, and home talent plays. Second, opera houses are significant in the area of entertainment/recreation. They provided Nebraska towns with a place to hold community dances, basketball games, roller skating, banquets, and other similar events. Finally, opera houses are significant in the area of social history, since they served as gathering places

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large enough to hold most of the town's citizens. The opera house space served varied social functions, such as high school commencements, political meetings and rallies, fraternal and commercial club meetings. The evaluation of these properties must occur on a state level, due to the diverse variety of opera house types and the widespread geographic locations of these buildings across the state.

IV. REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS

Because of the age of these structures, their disuse since the opera house era in most cases, and a belated public awareness of their historic importance, it is unrealistic to expect to find any theatre unchanged by time. The integrity varies for each property; therefore, the evaluation was based on such factors as the presence and condition of the stage; balcony; auditorium walls; floor plan; ticket window; orchestra pit; dressing rooms; space outside the auditorium but on the same floor; interior decorations such as stenciling or pressed tin ceilings; graffiti from touring companies of the opera house era; interior fixtures and hardware; original seating; battens and/or rollers for scenery; condition and integrity of the facade; and other individualized factors unique to the various opera houses.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

Identification and evaluation of properties eligible for this multiple property listing required several steps. First, it was necessary to compile a list of *all* opera houses built within the context's time frame (1867-1917). Alan Nielsen's "An Historical Survey of Opera Houses and Legitimate Theatres Built In the State of Nebraska Between 1865 and 1917" provided much of this data in raw form. This list was categorized by county and all appropriate historical societies were contacted to determine the status of the identified opera houses. In cases where historical societies did not respond, newspaper editors, librarians, and postmasters were contacted for information. This process eventually identified 535 opera houses constructed in Nebraska between 1867 and 1917.

Approximately 160 structures which once contained opera houses remain extant. Of those, about thirty were immediately discounted based on preliminary evaluation criteria. Some had been severely remodeled inside and out, or had lost their top floor (the site of the opera house), thus severely compromising their integrity. Each of those structures was visited as part of

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See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> State historic preservation office | <input type="checkbox"/> Local government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other State agency | <input type="checkbox"/> University |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Federal agency | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other |

Specify repository: D. Layne Ehlers (see below)

I. Form Prepared By

name/title	D. Layne Ehlers, Principal Investigator		
organization	OHBIN Study	date	April, 1988
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a reconnaissance-level Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey; minimally sites were photographed from opposing 45 degree angles and mapped. In cases where some interior integrity remained, owners were contacted and all were physically visited and photographed by D. Layne and Christian H. Ehlers. Measurements were made of interior dimensions and rough floor plans drawn. At the completion of the reconnaissance survey, structures were categorized on several levels:

[1] **Recommended for Intensive Survey:** These opera houses have retained considerable interior and exterior integrity and are potentially eligible for nomination to the NRHP, according to the registration requirements specified in F-IV of this multiple property nomination. Twenty-six were selected; of these, two were later rejected since one was torn down and the other had more alterations than originally believed. Another, discovered after the reconnaissance survey, was later added, bringing the total to 25.

Properties in this category are Thorpes Opera House, David City; Surprise Opera House, Surprise; Lodgepole Opera House, Lodgepole; Z.C.B.J. Opera House, Clarkson; Army Theatre, Fort Robinson; Allen's Opera House, Cozad; Love Opera House, Fremont; Schneider's Opera House, Snyder; Creighton Theatre, Omaha; The Auditorium, Geneva; Hampton Opera House, Hampton; Anna C. Diller Opera House, Diller; Tecumseh Opera House, Tecumseh; Pospeshil Theatre, Bloomfield; Z.C.B.J. Opera House, Verdigre; Martha Ellen Auditorium, Central City; New Opera House, Auburn; Lawrence Opera House, Lawrence; Steinauer Opera House, Steinauer; Table Rock Opera House, Table Rock; Gehling's Theatre, Falls City; Warren's Opera House, Friend; Gourley's Opera House, Rushville; I.O.O.F. Hall and Opera House, Bladen; Clem's Opera House, Gresham. Other opera houses originally categorized here were the Review Opera House in Dunbar, which was torn down shortly after completion of the survey; and the Pace Opera House in Chadron, which was reclassified as having Limited Integrity after further investigation.

[2] **Limited Integrity:** These opera houses have retained varying degrees of interior and exterior integrity, but alterations are significant enough to remove them from eligibility for this nomination.

Properties in this category are Butte Opera House, Butte; The Palace, Long Pine; Clay Center Opera House, Clay Center; Sutton Opera House, Sutton; Pace Opera House, Chadron; Soll Brothers Opera House, Scribner; Uehling Opera House, Uehling; Perkins Opera House, Maywood; Arapahoe Opera House, Arapahoe; Oshkosh Opera House, Oshkosh; McIntyre Opera House, Wolbach; Orleans Opera House, Orleans; Majestic Theatre, Fairbury; New Opera House, Tilden; Cash's Opera House, Talmadge; Monson Opera House, Osceola; Kovanda's Opera House, Weston; Civic Theatre, Hay Springs; Ashton Opera House, Ashton; DeMerritt's Opera House, Alexandria; The Auditorium, Carleton; Red Cloud Opera House, Red Cloud; McCool Opera House, McCool Junction.

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[3] **Extensive Deterioration:** In some cases, these opera houses might qualify for nomination, except that they have not been maintained and are physically unsafe structures.

Properties in this category are Harsin Opera House, Lyons; Wood Lake Opera House, Wood Lake; Beemer Opera House, Beemer; Priel's Opera House, Overton; Riverton Opera House, Riverton; Daudt Opera House, Scotia; Cole's Opera House, Culbertson; Wallace Opera House, Wallace; Damme's Opera House, Lorton; Rathbun Opera House, Shelby; Matheson Opera House, Pilger.

[4] **Exterior Integrity Only:** These opera houses, the largest category, have been extensively remodeled inside, thus losing their theatrical integrity, but have maintained facade integrity.

Properties in this category are the Hargleroad Theatre, Holstein; Neligh Auditorium, Neligh; Phelan's Opera House, Alliance; Abel Brothers Opera House, Miller; Meisner's Opera House, Shelton; Lund's Opera House, Oakland; Philpot Opera House, Weeping Water; Laurel Auditorium, Laurel; Laurel Opera House, Laurel; Quigley Opera House, Valentine; Edgar Opera House, Edgar; The Auditorium, West Point; Temple Theatre, Broken Bow; Nelson's Opera House, Chadron; Gem Theatre, Gothenberg; Smith's Opera House, Lexington; New Opera House, Ponca; Bennington Opera House, Bennington; The Auditorium, Exeter; Ramona Opera House, Hildreth; M.W.A. Opera House, Cortland; Terry's Opera House, Wolbach; Liederkrantz Hall, Grand Island; Michelson Theatre, Grand Island; Moore's Opera House, Wood River; Palace Grand Theatre, Palisade; Page Opera House, Page; Boelus Opera House, Boelus; Elba Opera House, Elba; Steele Opera House, Fairbury; Hostetler's Opera House, Minden; Norman Opera House, Norman; Crofton Opera House, Crofton; The Auditorium, Hickman; Keith Theatre, North Platte; Heinz Opera House, Madison; Stuart's Opera House, Madison; Opelt Opera House, Brownville; Superior Opera House, Superior; Holdrege Opera House, Holdrege; Plainview Opera House, Plainview; Pawnee Theatre, Columbus; Sears's Opera House, Ashland; Mitchell Opera House, Mitchell; Morrill Opera House, Morrill; Marquis Opera House, Scottsbluff; Queen's Theatre, Scottsbluff; Pfisterer's Opera House, Rushville; Bruning Opera House, Bruning; Weiser Opera House, Pender; Walthill Opera House, Walthill; Nobe's Opera House, York.

[5] **Other:** Two opera houses fell into this category: The LaBounty Opera House in Farnam had maintained interior integrity only, although this was more properly a hall since it had no stage and only room for one square of dancers. The other, the Hubbell Opera House in Hubbell, was built in 1921, thus disqualifying it, since it postdated the opera house era and fit more properly into the later category of community auditoriums.

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Twenty-five structures were selected for nomination by the Investigators, D. Layne and Christian H. Ehlers, and Joni Gilkerson, Architectural Historian for the Historic Preservation Office of the Nebraska State Historical Society. These were researched through newspaper accounts during the fall of the each year when each opera house functioned as an active theatre. Facade style was determined. Information on construction was recorded, where available, and lists of activities in each opera house were compiled. Abstracts were obtained from owners or prepared by D. Layne Ehlers at county courthouses, to verify year of construction; legal descriptions and locations on USGS maps were fixed. Floor plans were drawn by Paul Leitner, based on measurements prepared by D. Layne Ehlers and Christian H. Ehlers during the on-site visits in 1986-1987.

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