

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

NATIONAL
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. 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. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Surprise Opera House
other names/site number NeHBS # BU14-8 OHBIN #10-15-01

2. Location

street & number Southeast corner, intersection Miller & River Sts. N/A not for publication
city, town Surprise N/A vicinity
state Nebraska code NE county Butler code 023 zip code 68667

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u> </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u> </u> objects
			<u> </u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867-1917

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

James A. Hanson May 16, 1988
Signature of certifying official Date
Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:

entered in the National Register. Beth Boland 7/6/88
 See continuation sheet.

determined eligible for the National Register. See continuation sheet.

determined not eligible for the National Register.

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture: Theatre;
music facility

Social: Meeting hall

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/Not in use

7. DescriptionArchitectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: vault-front facade

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete

walls Concrete

roof Asphalt

other Cement pillars at entrance

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Surprise Opera House is located at the southeast corner of the intersection of Miller and River Streets, on land donated by George Miller for a community hall and opera house. Constructed in 1913 by the town of Surprise, the concrete block, Vault-Facade structure measures approximately 40 feet wide by 70 feet long. It has a double-pitched, asphalt-shingled roof. Pillars decorate the front of the building. Access to the auditorium is through double doors in the center of the building. A ticket window accesses both the exterior of the building and the small 12-square-foot foyer under the balcony.

The auditorium is thirty-eight and a half feet wide with a number of windows on both sides. The room measures thirty-eight and a half feet long from the entrance to the proscenium opening at the stage. Three pillars support a curved balcony, which has a depth of ten feet at the center and thirteen feet on the sides. The front of the balcony is protected by a narrow knee-high wooden rail. Stairs to the balcony are on the house right side of the auditorium. The auditorium has a sculptured tin ceiling in excellent condition. The wooden floor is also in good condition.

The proscenium arch measures 19 feet wide by approximately 10 feet high; there are only about five feet of wing space on each side of the stage. No access to the stage exists on the sides. A space under the stage may have served as dressing rooms. The space is approximately the same size as the stage area. It is reached via a railed stairway on the stage right side. The stage measures approximately twenty feet from the proscenium opening to the back wall of the auditorium. An 18-inch apron contains a footlight trough. On trap door exists up stage right.

The structural and historical integrity of the building and theatre has been preserved.

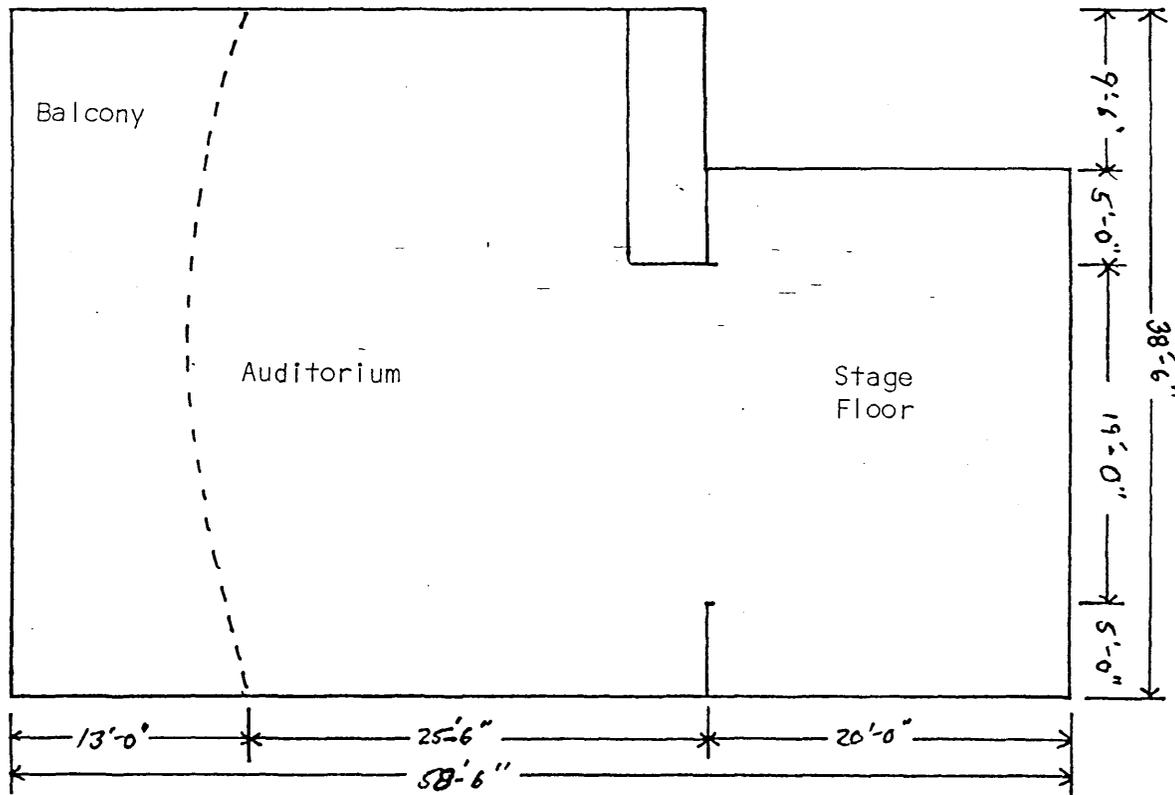
 See continuation sheet

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National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Floor plan, Surprise Opera House



8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Performing Arts
Entertainment/Recreation
Social History

Period of Significance

1913-1917

Significant Dates

1913

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Surprise Opera House is significant for its association with and in reference to the historic context "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska" and the property type of "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917." Under Criterion A, this opera house is significant in the areas of the performing arts; entertainment/recreation; and social history, on a state level, as a well preserved example of an opera house building in Nebraska. The building retains a high degree of historical integrity, possessing the physical and associative characteristics to make it an eligible member of its property type.

This opera house is significant in the area of performing arts for bringing a variety of entertainment to the community of Surprise. As a facility for the performing arts, it offered productions such as vocal ensembles; impersonators; gospel singers; and home talent plays. (See following table of Representative Entertainments 1913-1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of entertainment/recreation, since it provided a place where the whole community could gather to attend inspirational lectures, cartoonists, humorists, and moving pictures. (See following table of Representative Entertainments 1913-1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of social history because it gave Surprise a neutral, nonaffiliated location for women's society dinners and benefits for such organizations as the Red Cross. (See following table of Representative Entertainments, 1913-1917.) In the days before radio, television, and movies, activities at the opera house were anticipated for days or weeks ahead of time. It provided a place for people to get together to have a good time and forget their troubles over crops, weather, taxes, the railroads, and the generally hard life of settling the Great Plains.

The period of significance derives from the original construction date of the building, 1913, when the town board voted to erect a new town hall, the building they called the Surprise Opera House. The period of significance continues through 1917, the year considered to signal the end of the opera

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Butler County Press. 1914 - 25 Oct. 1917.
Doerling, Ed. Letter to the author. Surprise: 1987.
---. Personal interview. Surprise: 15 Oct. 1987.
---. Telephone interview. Surprise: 13 Oct. 1987.
Surprise Enterprise. 18 Sep. 1914 - 25 Sep. 1914.
Surprise Opera House. Surprise site visit. 15 Oct. 1987.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

D. Layne Ehlers (see below)

10. Geographical Data

Acres of property Less than one [1] acre

UTM References

A

1	4
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6	4	8	8	0
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4	5	5	3	3	0
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Zone Easting Northing

C

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B

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Zone Easting Northing

D

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See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description The property is described as a square tract of land commencing at a point at the extreme northwest corner of Tax Lot 16 in the town of Surprise, thence east 150', thence south 150', thence west 150', thence north 150' to the point of beginning, located in the northwest 1/4 of the NW 1/4 in Section 15, T13N, R1E, in Butler County, Nebraska.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary consists of an area which includes the opera house building and its immediate surrounding landscape and excludes any other adjacent real estate that lacks historical association or integrity.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title D. Layne Ehlers, Principal Investigator
organization CHBIN Study date April, 1988
street & number 2302 South 11th telephone 402/435-6946
city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68502

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house era in Nebraska, based on declining numbers of touring companies nationally and rising numbers of movie houses and automobiles. The proximity of the larger towns of Osceola (19 miles), David City (19 miles), and Seward (23 miles), all of which had both large auditoriums able to offer major entertainments and moving picture theatres by 1917, meant that as more Surprise residents bought cars, activities in those nearby cities became a viable option. Limited choices in the Surprise Opera House doomed it to a dwindling number of sporadic events, primarily significant under the category of social history.

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Surprise Opera House
Representative Entertainments, 1913-1917

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

Social History

Oct 1914 Ladies Aid Society dinner
Nov 1916 Ladies Cemetery Beautifying Assn. dinner, supper & bazaar
Nov 1917 Red Cross benefit box social

Entertainment/Recreation

Dec 1913 Moving pictures shown by N. J. Sisty, twice a week
Oct 1914 Inspirational lecture by Mr. Long
Jan 1915 Mr. Woodman, cartoonist
Nov 1915 Lecture by Col. Bob Seeds, humorist
Nov 1917 Unidentified program

Performing Arts

Nov 1913 *A Cheerful Liar*, home talent
Oct 1914 Panama Singers male quartette
Dec 1914 Mr. Hughes, impersonator
Feb 1915 The Old Home Singers
Oct 1915 *Not a Man in the House*, home talent

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Section number _____ Photographs _____
Page _____

The following information is the same for all Surprise photographs:

NAME OF PROPERTY: Surprise Opera House
CITY, COUNTY, STATE: Surprise, Butler County, Nebraska
NeHBS SITE No.: BU14-8
OHBIN SITE No.: 10-15-01
NAME OF PHOTOGRAPHER: Christian H. Ehlers

PHOTO NUMBER: Surprise #1
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 10-15-87 (8710/87:21)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Exterior view, looking east
southeast at the west (front) facade.

PHOTO NUMBER: Surprise #2
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 10-15-87 (8710/87:3)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking east
at the stage.

PHOTO NUMBER: Surprise #3
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 10-15-87 (8710/87:2)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking west
at the auditorium and the balcony (from the stage).