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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 River Inn

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 133 Mill Street South

N/A  not for publication

city, town Fergus Falls

N/A  vicinity

state Minnesota

code MN

county Otter Tail

code 111

zip code 56537

3. Classification

Ownership of Property

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	_____ buildings
_____	_____ sites
_____	_____ structures
_____	_____ objects
1	_____ Total

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register none

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.

*Nina M. Archabal*  
Signature of certifying official Nina M. Archabal

*11/7/88*  
Date

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.  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:)

*Arlene Byrum*

*[Stamp]*

*12/20/88*

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

hotel

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

vacant and retail

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

20th Century Revival: Medieval Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete and granite

walls red brick

roof composition and gravel

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

See continuation sheets 7:1 and 7:2.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

River Inn, Fergus Falls, Otter Tail County, MN

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The River Inn is situated on the north bank of the Otter Tail River facing west on S. Mill Street in downtown Fergus Falls, Minnesota. The south and east facades overlook the river, dam, and a mill pond. This nomination consists of one contributing property.

The 1929 four story structure was designed by Boston architect Vernon A. Wright, in a Medieval Revival style. It is red face brick laid in English bond and trimmed sparingly with Bedford, Indiana, limestone trim at the window sills, coping, slightly projecting center entry bay, second story central window with stone surround, and crenelated caps at each of the building's corners. The panelled end piers project above the cornice and end in crenelation, as does the one story entry into the south tea room on the south end of the west facade. The simple brick cornice features a stone bas relief which spells out the hotel's name along with a pair of tail-entwined otters. Stone ornamentation is generally flat, lending a reserved appearance to the structure. Massing is slightly rectangular with lateral sides slightly longer than the main west and rear east facades. There is an interior elongated light court.

The front facade is symmetrical. At street level, commercial storefronts are paired on either side of the centrally-located hotel entrance. This entrance is articulated by an elaborate wrought iron and glass door set into a classically-styled stone surround incised with geometric designs. Storefront windows are original with multi-paned lights. End shop entrances have entry doors recessed in arched brick openings with wrought iron fretwork filling the arch. Above these end entries, but below the continuous stone sill course of the second story windows are angled stone gable trim. The main facade has a flat stone stylized water table above the granite-faced foundation on the west. Rear and lateral sides have a foundation of reinforced form concrete. The building is of fire proof construction. All full-sized double-hung windows on the upper floors have six-over-six lights. Smaller bathroom windows are four-over-four.

The south facade has an enclosed one story "gallery" supported by reinforced concrete ribs. The roof is a shed type and the walls are composed of large floor-to ceiling windows. This was originally a tea room overlooking the river. It can be entered directly from S. Mill Street through a projecting brick one story entry with crenelated parapet and long narrow arched windows or through the interior of the hotel.

The interior of the hotel underwent extensive alterations, especially to the first floor, after the property was bought by Al C. Kavli of Minneapolis in 1965. The original 96 rooms on the upper floors were converted to 32 apartments and 15 rooms. The banquet and dining rooms were rented out and used for retail and storage. The walnut panelled lobby was reduced in size and the front desk moved. Nonetheless, remnants of the original design remain. Walnut panelling still remains in the lobby as does the marble base, fireplace, original registration desk, some stencilling on the cornice, and

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River Inn, Fergus Falls, Otter Tail Co., MN

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the terazzo floors. A marble staircase to the second floor is intact. The original dining room decor was Inca-inspired, a favorite theme of the architect, Vernon A. Wright. Because the owner in 1965 wanted to cease food service, the dining room was altered and has suspended ceilings and painted plywood infill on the Palladian arched long windows overlooking the river on the rear east side. Half of the basement was used originally for a parking garage.

Only minor alterations have been made on the hotel's exterior. The rear east side windows had three Palladian openings altered with sliding glass and aluminum doors. These are being removed by the current owners, who are restoring the original french doors, which, luckily, were saved. The arches above have been reopened so that the rear looks as it did when built. Some of the basement windows on the east side were also covered with plywood, which is being removed. On the front facade, a modern metal canopy over the storefronts was added and one storefront entry door was replaced with a metal commercial door. Otherwise, the exterior of the building is intact as built.

**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    N/A

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Commerce

Architecture

Period of Significance

1929-1938

Significant Dates

1929

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Wright, Vernon A., architect

Lauritzen Construction Company, builder

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

See continuation sheets 8:1 to 8:4.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

River Inn, Fergus Falls, Otter Tail Co., MN

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The River Inn is significant in Fergus Falls' commercial hotel history and for its contribution to the economic health of the city during the Great Depression. It fulfilled the original intent of its backers and the citizens of Fergus Falls by insuring that the U. S. District Court sessions were not removed from Fergus Falls to Detroit Lakes during and after the late 1920s by providing adequate accommodations for judges, jurors, lawyers, and court visitors. This helped the economy substantially during the Depression. When completed, it also became the center of civic and social life in the city, replacing the older Kaddatz Hotel. Architecturally, it is the only example of Medieval Revival architecture in the business district, due in part, to the fact that it was the only major building project in the downtown during the decade between the erection of the Beaux Arts County Courthouse (1921) and the erection of the two story Zigzag Moderne Benson Building in 1932 and only the second major downtown project following the 1919 tornado.

The River Inn had a distinct role in hotel history in Fergus Falls. It was the last of only three grand and large hotels in the history of the city. For most of its history, Fergus Falls had small frame hotels and boarding houses for the travelling public, but accommodations were generally inadequate. The first hotel of any size in Fergus Falls was Bell's Hotel, built in 1871 and destroyed by fire in 1893. It was a gabled frame structure with 60 rooms, but was not considered a first class hotel when it was superceded by the masonry 100 room Grand Hotel built at the corner of Lincoln and Vine in 1883. This was the city's first large hotel and it drew travelling men to stay in the city instead of hurrying on to the Grand Pacific Hotel in Moorhead. The owner, a Mr. Chamberlain, was not particularly hospitable to his clients, mostly drummers and railroad men, and word quickly spread that travellers should avoid the place. Nonetheless, for 35 years, the Grand, with its large dining room and banquet facilities, was the social headquarters of Fergus Falls despite its financial problems during the boom years of the 1880s and 1890s.

The Grand was destroyed in the 1919 tornado, but not before it had been replaced in the minds and hearts of its citizens by the Kaddatz Hotel, built in 1915 in Beaux Arts style from plans by the regionally well-known Hancock Brothers architectural firm in Fargo, North Dakota. The Kaddatz, with its large rear annexes, renamed the Barkley, was billed as the longest hotel in the world. It became the social and civic center of town in 1915 and was tremendously popular with the citizenry and travelling salesmen.

By 1927, demand for hotel space in Fergus Falls had outstripped the supply. Between 1919 and 1923, the city had lost not only the Grand, but also two other somewhat smaller hotels: the Hotel McCutcheon on S. Mill Street and the Metropolitan Hotel on Court Street. Since the erection of the Post Office and Federal Building in 1903-04 on S. Mill Street, the terms of the U. S. District Court had been held in Fergus Falls. In 1928, however, the Court's winter term had been moved to Detroit Lakes, a development which alarmed the Fergus Falls Commercial Club (an early form of the Chamber of Commerce). The Club's

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secretary wrote to Judge Sanborn asking him why this had happened and received the disconcerting reply that it was because the presiding judge in January, 1927, the last time court had been held in Fergus Falls, had taken a poll in open court and discovered that many jurors had not been able to find a place to sleep in Fergus Falls. One of the judges, by 1928 a State Senator, had had to stay up all night in a hotel lobby for lack of available rooms. Some of the lawyers had similar experiences. Judge Sanborn called the hotel accommodations "the poorest of any place we are required to hold court..." and declared his unwillingness to hold court in Fergus Falls again until more adequate accommodations were available (Fergus Falls Daily Journal, January 14, 1928, p. 3).

The Commercial Club members were galvanized into action, issuing a resolution and open invitation to interested hotel builders and operators for a new first class hotel in the city. They received three serious proposals: one from a hotel man in Breckenridge; the second from an equally experienced duo in Winona; and the third from Vernon A. Wright, a Boston architect whose father, George B. Wright had been an early founder of the city. After considerable discussion, Wright's proposal was accepted. Wright was well-known in Fergus Falls, although he did not live there. He is best remembered for being one of the founders of the Otter Tail Power Company in 1907 with partner F. G. Barrows. During the 1920s, the power company was growing by leaps and bounds supplying wholesale power to towns from northern and western Minnesota into central North Dakota. The members of the Commercial Club not only trusted Wright's reputation and ability to carry forward the finance and construction of the new hotel, but they were especially pleased that the parcel of land Wright proposed was on S. Mill Street directly across from the U.S. Post Office and Federal Building where all court sessions were held.

Wright drew up his own architectural plans for the new hotel, and helped finance it through the sale of \$25,000 of preferred stock to local people. Wright took all of the common stock for himself, thus assuming the greater risk. The new four-story hotel was hailed as the "highest in this part of the state" and the "largest and most expensive building erected here since the County Courthouse was built" in Fergus Falls in 1921 (Fergus Falls Daily Journal, May 17, 1928, p. 2).

The River Inn opened on February 2, 1929 under the management of the Roberts Hotel Chain of Winona as the twenty-first hotel in the chain. It employed about 40 people with an annual payroll of \$24,000, nearly all of them from the city, and purchased most of its supplies locally, as was the Roberts practice. By February 5th, the new hotel was full to capacity, as were all other hotels in town, with crowds of people attending the current sessions of the U. S. Court and District Court. The newspaper reported one hundred jurors and great numbers of lawyers, witnesses, and litigants in town (Fergus Falls Daily Journal, Feb. 5, 1929, p. 7).

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For the next two weeks in February, 1929, the newspaper was full of articles about the numbers of cases before the court, many of which involved liquor law violations during this period of Prohibition. Within the first month of opening its doors, the River Inn also began to draw business away from the older Barkley (formerly Kaddatz) Hotel: the Rotary Club decided to move to the new hotel, as did the Kiwanis. The Women's Club held its annual mid-winter luncheon in the new River Inn ballroom. Like the earlier Grand Hotel and Hotel Barkley, social and civic activities in Fergus Falls gravitated to the new River Inn, a role it was to play for many years. But its most important role was in insuring that there was no more talk of moving the U.S. Court sessions from Fergus Falls. The River Inn contributed to the generally sound economy of Fergus Falls during the Depression, together with other factors like the city's advantageous location and nearby summer resort reputation.

Vernon A. Wright (April 23, 1862-October 29, 1938) was the architect and principal owner of the River Inn from 1929 until his death in 1938. He was the son of George B. Wright, "the founder of Fergus Falls" and an early developer of a mill site and dam in the city, who, in 1864, bought up much of what is now the town's center. The father had hoped to build a hotel in Fergus Falls before his death in 1882, a dream that was realized by his son in 1929. Vernon Wright attended the University of Minnesota, M.I.T., and took a course of study in architecture at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He practiced architecture with the Boston firm of Coolidge and Wright, which firm designed some of the buildings at Harvard. Vernon sometimes divided his time between his east coast practice and working with his father in Fergus Falls. He is known to have worked with Cass Gilbert on the Endicott Building in St. Paul. After his father's death in 1882, Vernon hired an agent to manage the family interests in Fergus Falls, but he continued to live in Boston and practice architecture there until 1900. After the turn of the century, Vernon Wright started several major projects in Fergus Falls: the repair of his father's dam, construction of a two story office building called the Telephone Building, and another building, according to his friend and contemporary, Elmer Adams. He apparently gave up his architectural practice around 1905 and became increasingly interested in generating electric power.

Vernon Wright co-founded the Otter Tail Power Company which was incorporated in 1907 and bought out his original partner, F. G. Barrows, in 1921 with the aid of Elmer Adams and others. The company sold both power and light to businesses and began to expand greatly into North Dakota cities as far west as Jamestown and other cities in northern Minnesota in the 1920s. In 1909, he moved his family back to Boston, and in 1913 directly to Minneapolis. He never stayed long in Fergus Falls, although he had many business interests there. The power company fared very well during the Great Depression because of its diversified client base. This is probably one reason he was able to hold ownership in the River Inn after it was completed in 1929. Wright's

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architectural work outside Fergus Falls, and especially in Boston, is unknown according to files in the Northwest Architectural Archives in Minneapolis. Vernon Wright is known to have designed the small two story former Otter Tail Power Company offices at 125 S. Mill Street directly adjacent to the north of the River Inn in 1922. He also designed the Wright Hospital in Fergus Falls on the site his father, George, had wanted to build a hotel in the early 1880s. Vernon Wright and Elmer Adams also donated the land for the new city hall, built in Colonial Revival style in deference to Wright's New England connections from designs by William Ingemann in 1929.

The River Inn is the only commercial structure in downtown Fergus Falls designed in Medieval Revival style. As such it is a unique example of a sub-theme in the nationally popular resurgence revival styles of architecture during the late 'teens and throughout the 1920s, as determined by the 1980-2 state inventory of standing structures and a 1985 publication, Building From the Past, by the Fergus Falls Heritage Preservation Commission. The majority of downtown Fergus Falls' commercial and governmental structures are brick or stone examples of commercial Italianate and Classical Revival styles of architecture.

**9. Major Bibliographical References**

See continuation sheets 9:1-9:3.

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 # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data:

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

Specify repository:

Minnesota Historical Society

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of property less than one acre

UTM References

A 

1	4
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7	2	5	4	2	0
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5	1	2	9	4	0	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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N/A  See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

see continuation sheet 10:1

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

see continuation sheet 10:2

See continuation sheet

**11. Form Prepared By**

name/title Dr. Norene A. Roberts, President  
organization Historical Research, Inc. date 2-2-88  
street & number 7800 Tessman Drive telephone (612) 560-4348  
city or town Minneapolis state Minnesota zip code 55445-2734

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"Building a New Hotel is Urged by Club." Fergus Falls Journal. January 14, 1928, p. 3.

"Business, Hotels and Inns." file. Otter Tail County Historical Society.

J. A. A. Burnquist. Minnesota and Its People. Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1924. Vol 4, pp. 631-32.

"Citizens Get Together on Hotel Proposition." Fergus Falls Daily Journal, April 14, 1928, p. 3.

"Discuss Plans for New Hotel in This City." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. September 8, 1927, p. 3.

"Doors, Frames to Be of Steel." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. July 27, 1928, p. 11.

Fergus Falls city directories, 1919, 1923-24.

James Gray and Marjorie Barton. Building from the Past. Fergus Falls: Fergus Falls Heritage Preservation Commission, 1985.

"T. H. Harvey Plans to Erect Five Story Hotel Here." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. April 9, 1928, p. 3.

Hotel Kadditz National Register nomination. On file: Minnesota Historical Society, Ft. Snelling History Center, 1982.

"Kiwanis to Meet at New River Inn." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. February 22, 1929, p. 7.

"Local Hotels are Filled Full." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. February 5, 1929, p. 7.

John W. Mason, ed. History of Otter Tail County, Minnesota. 2 Vols. Indianapolis: B. F. Bowen, 1916, pp. 482-486.

"New Hotel to be Real Fireproof." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. August 8, 1928, p. 7.

"New Hotel Here Will Be Called The River Inn." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. July 14, 1928, p. 7.

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"New Hotel Will Be Attractive." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. June 28, 1928,  
p. 4.

"Ninety Attend Club Luncheon At River Inn." Fergus Falls Daily Journal,  
February 16, 1929, p. 8.

Obituary of Arthur L. Roberts." Rochester Post Bulletin. October 27, 1952,  
p. 1; Winona Republican Herald, October 27, 1952, p. 1.

Obituary of Vernon A. Wright. Fergus Falls Daily Journal. October 29, 1938,  
p. 1.

Obituary of Vernon A. Wright. Minneapolis Journal. November 1, 1938, p. 9.

"Otter Tail Power Company's Start Dates Back to 1902." The Daily Journal.  
Fergus Falls Centennial, 1972-1972.

"Painters Busy in New Hotel." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. December 21, 1928,  
p. 9.

"Reminiscences of Vernon A. Wright" by Elmer Adams. Fergus Falls Daily  
Journal. October 31, 1938, p. 2; February 20, 1939, p. 1.

"River Inn" file. Otter Tail County Historical Society.

"River Inn Hotel." historic photograph ca. 1930. On file: Audio-Visual  
Department, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

"River Inn Hotel." Fergus Falls Historic Sites Survey. September 30, 1980.

"River Inn Leased to Roberts Company." Fergus Falls Daily Journal, November  
19, 1928, p. 3.

"River Inn, New Hotel Opens for Business Today." Fergus Falls Journal.  
February 2, 1929, p. 4.

"River Inn Will Have Payroll of \$24,000." Fergus Falls Daily Journal, January  
29, 1929, p. 7.

"Rotary to Meet in New River Inn." Fergus Falls Daily Journal, February 14,  
1929, p. 8.

"Sell Stock in New Hotel." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. April 16, 1928, p. 4.

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"16 Plasterers Are Employed." Fergus Falls Daily Journal. October 3, 1928,  
p. 7.

"Work Starts on New Four Story Wright Hotel. Fergus Falls Daily Journal. May  
17, 1928, p. 2.

"Vernon Wright is Preparing Hotel Plans. Fergus Falls Daily Journal. April  
12, 1928, p. 4.

Thomas C. Wright. Otter Tail Power Company From Its Origin Through 1954.  
Fergus Falls: Victor Lundeen and Co., Printers, 1955.

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10:1 VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:

Parcel 1. Lot Nine (9), of the Subdivision of Reserve Sixty-Seven, except the North one hundred dighteen feet (N. 218 ft.), according to the Plat of Reserves of the City of Fergus Falls, Minnesota, now on file and of record in the Office of the Register of Deeds in and for said County and State.

Subject, however, to the Right of Ottertail Power Company, its successors or assigns, to overflow or flood the above described tract, as may be expedient, convenient, or necessary, in the operation of its dam or dams, as they are now or as they may be in the future constricted, all as set forth in a flowage easement to Ottertail Power Company dated December 1, 1944.

Parcel 2 Beginning at a point on the West line of Lot Nine (9) of the Subdivision of Reserve 67, in the City of Fergus Falls, situated five (5) feet eight inches South of the Northwest corner thereof, thence East 105 feet, to a point on the East line of said Lot Nine (9), situated five (5) feet eight inches South of the Northeast corner thereof, thence South along the East line of said Lot Nine (9), 112 feet, four inches, thence West 105 feet, to a point on the West line therof, situated 112 feet, four inches South of the point of beginning, thence North along the said West line 112 feet, four inches to the point of beginning, according to the Plat of Lots One (1) to Nine (9) inclusive, of said Reserve 67, recorded in the office of the Register of Deeds in and for said County in Book G of Plats, on page 5, and the Plat of Reserves in the Original Town and North Division of Fergus Falls on file and of record in said office.

Also the perpetual right of the first part, its successors and assigns, to the use as a party wall of the South wall of the building located on said Lot Eight (8) and the North five (5) feet, eight inches of said Lot Nine (9), said South wall being constructed in part on said five (5) feet eight inch strip and in part on the remaining portion of said Lot Nine (9).

Parcel 3 Beginning five feet eight inches (5 ft. , 8 inches) South of the Northeast corner of Lot Nine (9) of Reserve 67; thence East twenty-five feet; South one hundred twenty feet to the north shore of the river; southwesterly along the shore to the east line of Lot Nine (9); thence north along east line to beginning, being a part of Reserve 67, Amendment to the Original Plat in the City of Fergus Falls, according to the Plat now on file and of record in the office of the Register of Deeds in and for said County and State.

10.2 VERBAL BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:

This nomination includes three parcels: 1) the terrace from the building down to the meander line of the Otter Tail River on the south side of the hotel; 2) the parcel on which the actual building itself sits; and 3) a strip of land behind the building on the east side which includes the driveway which leads to the basement. These three parcels are listed separately in Item 10:1.