

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form

For NPS use only

received JUL 25 1986

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

## 1. Name

historic Rialto Theatre

and/or common

## 2. Location

street & number 117 East Cedar Street

N/A not for publication

city, town El Dorado — vicinity of

state Arkansas code 05 county Union code 139

## 3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
	N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: VACANT

## 4. Owner of Property

name Richard H. Mason

street & number 200 North Washington

city, town El Dorado — vicinity of state Arkansas

## 5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Union County Courthouse

street & number Union Square

city, town El Dorado state Arkansas

## 6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title N/A has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☐ no

date ☐ federal ☐ state ☐ county ☐ local

depository for survey records

city, town state

## 7. Description

### Condition

☐ excellent

☐ good

☒ fair

☐ deteriorated

☐ ruins

☐ unexposed

### Check one

☐ unaltered

☒ altered

### Check one

☒ original site

☐ moved date \_\_\_\_\_

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

#### SUMMARY

Constructed in 1929, the Rialto Theatre in El Dorado, Arkansas, was a response to the demand for expanded cultural opportunities by the oil-boom inflated population. Designed by the local architectural firm of Kolben, Hunter and Boyd, this theatre is one of the best local examples of the Classical Revival style and is executed in red brick and decorative stone. The Rialto occupies a corner lot in El Dorado's downtown commercial district and is located one block south of the Courtsquare. With a seating capacity of 1400 - 900 on the main floor and 500 in the two balconies - the Rialto is easily the largest and, according to newspaper accounts, the most elaborate theatre in South Arkansas.

#### ELABORATION

The Rialto Theatre is basically rectangular in plan, and rises three stories above ground level. A rear basement houses the heating plant, power transformer, switch-board, and dressing rooms. The building, constructed of steel, brick, concrete frame, and tile, was advertised as being "fireproof" upon its completion.

The Cedar Street, or primary, facade is divided into three bays by pairs of stone pilasters with Egyptian-inspired capitals. The larger, center bay projects slightly and is further divided into three sections by single pilasters which separate metal casement windows on the 2nd floor level. The two bays which flank the projecting central bay are symmetrical and feature bands of metal casement windows at the 2nd and 3rd floor levels. The face brick on this facade is laid in a basketweave pattern which further enhances the formality of the Theatre's street appearance. The frieze, cornice, and parapet, all executed in stone, serve to band the three bays and display modest ornamental details. Medallions located on the frieze accentuate the pilasters below. Above the dentilled cornice and centered on the parapet are two decorative stone lyre panels. At the street level the Rialto Theatre has been a victim of "modernization". Carrera glass panels and ceramic tiles have been applied over the original cast stone wall material and transom windows.

Small commercial storefronts occupy each corner of the Cedar Street facade of the Rialto building and flank the recessed Theatre entrance. This outer lobby features a multi-colored tile floor and tile wainscotting. The projecting ticket booth is also roofed in tiles which provide a nice contrast to the four pairs of stained wood entrance doors. These oak doors have nine beveled-glass panes above a single wood panel and all originally featured brushed stainless steel hardware in a curvilinear, deco-like style although only one of these handles remains today. The final decorative element in this outer lobby is a band at the cornice line of plaster swags of garland divided by shields. Highlighting and sheltering the outer lobby is the original marquee. This sign along with the corner sign used 1,500 light bulbs to attract and inform local patrons.

The east, or secondary, facade is relatively unadorned. Stone ornamentation on this elevation is modest, with the exception of a bay at the northeast corner that replicates the Cedar Street window patterns and details. The street level alterations to the

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**National Register of Historic Places  
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Continuation sheet

Item number 7

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front facade were not continued on this elevation, thereby exposing the building's original ground level appearance. The east facade contains four pairs of exit doors in addition to stage and equipment doors. All of these are accentuated by stone or brick arches which encase the doors, exterior lighting fixtures, and decorative basketweave brickwork above the doors.

Although the stylistic details on the exterior of the Rialto Theatre are somewhat less than elaborate, the same does not hold true for the interior. Here ostentation and creature comfort were the standard. A double stairway leads from the inner lobby to the balconies. Theatre offices, as well as an elaborate lounge with men's smoking room and ladies' restrooms, occupy a portion of the 2nd floor. Inside the main auditorium velour draperies, originally red but now blue, are hung in arched panels and intended to deaden noise. Underlying the draperies of each wall panel is a layer of Ozite, which is a padding said to prevent reverberation of sound. The lower part of the auditorium walls are finished in travertine stone and separated from the balustraded upper panels by a band of wave molding. The vaulted ceiling is covered with Celotex to further insure proper acoustics and is painted blue. Plaster arches span the ceiling and lighting fixtures are suspended from plaster rosettes. The proscenium opening is decorated with classically-inspired plaster moldings and details. Ornate screens which mask the sound amplification system flank the stage. The stage itself measures 32 feet deep by 63 feet across - ample room for the presentation of larger road shows. The original theatre seats, which have been removed, featured leather upholstery and air-cushioned seats with 12-inch springs.

## 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1929

**Builder/Architect** Kolben, Hunter and Boyd

### Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

#### SUMMARY

The Rialto Theatre, completed in September 1929, stands today as a testament to the cosmopolitan atmosphere found in El Dorado during the oil boom era. The Rialto Theatre is architecturally significant as one of the few remaining examples in Arkansas of the lavish entertainment palaces built during the prosperous 1920s. In addition to the Rialto's unusually elaborate interior details, it was also noted as "one of the most modern, sound perfect playhouses in the Southwest". State-of-the-art heating, cooling, sound, and projection systems were purported to be second to none in the entire state. The locally prominent McWilliams family, major stockholders in the Arkansas Amusement Enterprises, which was a statewide chain of 30 movie theatres, decided to give El Dorado the best possible theatre that money could buy. At a construction cost of \$250,000, the Rialto Theatre is evidence of their success.

#### ELABORATION

The El Dorado oil boom, which dramatically and inalterably changed the city's future, began on January 10, 1921, when the Busey Well blew in. News of the discovery started a stampede of people who hurried to south Arkansas to "find their fortune". As described in one account, "the streets of the town were thronged with a seething mass of conglomerate humanity....diamonds and costly furs rubbed elbows with oil-spotted khaki...". Within six months the population had jumped from 3000 to nearly 20,000. By the close of the second year of the boom, there were 56 wells producing a total of 50,000 barrels of oil a day. During the following decade the construction industry in El Dorado flourished in an attempt to accommodate the greatly increased population. Buildings that were erected in response to the local demand for services included: City Hall (1927), the Union County Courthouse (1927), the Federal Building (1931), Exchange Bank Building (1927), First Methodist (1922), First Baptist (1922), and First Presbyterian (1926) Churches, several brick school buildings, and a large commercial district that included five movie theatres. The influx of a large number of out-of-state oil industry executives and laborers created a demand for more sophisticated cultural and entertainment opportunities. The Rialto Theatre met this demand.

The Clark-McWilliams Theatre Company commissioned the local architectural firm of Kolben, Hunter and Boyd to design the flagship theatre of their chain. Kolben, Hunter and Boyd practiced as a firm for only two years but are credited with having designed several commercial buildings, among them the Rialto and the El Dorado Baking Company building. While the general contractor for the theatre was W.B. Smith of El Dorado, many of the sub-contracting specialists were brought in from outside of Arkansas. King Studios of Dallas, Texas, specified and supervised the installation of acoustical features. Heating and cooling systems were provided by St. Louis and Dallas firms, respectively. All of the exterior trim stone was supplied by the Wright Cast Stone Company of Jackson, Mississippi. The finished project, representing an investment including site, building,



## 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one

Quadrangle name El Dorado West, AR

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UTM References

A 

1	5	5	3	1	4	0	0	3	6	7	4	5	0	0
Zone			Easting				Northing							

B 

Zone			Easting				Northing							

C 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

D 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

E 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

F 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

G 

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H 

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Verbal boundary description and justification

Lot 1, Block 19, Original City of El Dorado

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code
N/A			

state	code	county	code
-------	------	--------	------

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title W.L. Cook, II & Anne Hammond (edited by J. Wiedower, AHPP staff)

organization South Arkansas Historical Foundation date February 1, 1983

street & number 303 First National Plaza telephone 501-863-7047

city or town El Dorado state Arkansas 71730

## 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

☐ national ☒ state ☐ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

*Wilson*

title Arkansas Historic Preservation Officer date 7-15-86

For NPS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

Entered in the  
National Register

date 8-21-86

*for Melores Byers*  
Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

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date entered

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and equipment of \$250,000, rivaled any of its contemporaries in luxury and patron comfort. The Saenger Theatre of Texarkana, Texas (now the Perot) was built in 1924, and with a seating capacity of 1600, was certainly the premier facility of this type in the entire region. Another grand theatre in south Arkansas, the Pine Bluff Saenger was completed in 1924 at a cost of \$180,000.

State-of-the-art equipment and mechanical systems were cited as factors in making this "theatre perfect for sound films". An abundance of velour draperies, Celotex ceilings and Ozite wall panels were installed at a cost of \$13,000 in an effort to provide the proper acoustical field. The latest in talking picture equipment, two Western Electric projecting machines that could handle both Movietone and Vitaphone films, were part of the Rialto's original equipment. A washed-air ventilating system devised by the Buffalo Engineering Company of Buffalo, N.Y. was installed. Air entering the theatre was carried through cold running water to two distributors on each side of the house, where it was then forced into the auditorium.

Perhaps the best explanation for its virtually unaltered condition is that, during its 57 year history, the Rialto Theatre has remained in the hands of the McWilliams family of El Dorado. The McWilliams family was well established in the commercial and business community of Union County through their successful real estate, automobile, hardware, and retail furniture ventures. They were also majority stockholders in the Arkansas Amusement Enterprises, which was a statewide chain of theatres. During construction of the Rialto, W.F. McWilliams and his business partner L.B. Clark acquired sole ownership and control of the five El Dorado theatres and Mr. Clark was designated as active manager of the group. At the time of his death, L.B. Clark was cited by the Arkansas Democrat newspaper as a "pioneer in the Arkansas theatre industry". Although the Rialto Theatre finally closed its doors during the 1970s, it continues to serve as a reminder of the luxury and grandeur of El Dorado's earlier days.

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El Dorado Daily News. September 29, 1929; October 28, 1971; December 9, 1979.

El Dorado Evening Times. September 29, 1929, p. 9.

Green, Juanita Whitaker, The History of Union County, N.P., 1954.  
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Holmes, G. B., "Drama - Union County - Chief Movie Houses", 1935, (article  
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Sanborn Fire Insurance Company Maps - El Dorado, Arkansas.

86001888

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
EVALUATION/RETURN SHEET

Rialto Theatre  
Union County  
ARKANSAS

Working No. JUL 25 1986

Fed. Reg. Date: 2/3/87

Date Due: 8/21/86 - 9/8/86

Action: ☒ ACCEPT 8-21-86  
☐ RETURN  
☐ REJECT

Federal Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

- ☐ resubmission  
☐ nomination by person or local government  
☐ owner objection  
☐ appeal

Substantive Review: ☐ sample ☐ request ☐ appeal ☐ NR decision

Reviewer's comments:

Recom./Criteria \_\_\_\_\_  
Reviewer \_\_\_\_\_  
Discipline \_\_\_\_\_  
Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ see continuation sheet

Nomination returned for: \_\_\_\_\_ technical corrections cited below  
\_\_\_\_\_ substantive reasons discussed below

1. Name

2. Location

3. Classification

Category	Ownership Public Acquisition	Status Accessible	Present Use
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4. Owner of Property

5. Location of Legal Description

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

Has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☐ no

7. Description

Condition

- ☐ excellent ☐ deteriorated  
☐ good ☐ ruins  
☐ fair ☐ unexposed

Check one

- ☐ unaltered  
☐ altered

Check one

- ☐ original site  
☐ moved date \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

- ☐ summary paragraph  
☐ completeness  
☐ clarity  
☐ alterations/integrity  
☐ dates  
☐ boundary selection



---

**8. Significance**

Period      Areas of Significance—Check and justify below

Specific dates      Builder/Architect

Statement of Significance (*in one paragraph*)

- ☐ summary paragraph
- ☐ completeness
- ☐ clarity
- ☐ applicable criteria
- ☐ justification of areas checked
- ☐ relating significance to the resource
- ☐ context
- ☐ relationship of integrity to significance
- ☐ justification of exception
- ☐ other

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**9. Major Bibliographical References**

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**10. Geographical Data**

Acreage of nominated property \_\_\_\_\_

Quadrangle name \_\_\_\_\_

UTM References \_\_\_\_\_

Verbal boundary description and justification \_\_\_\_\_

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**11. Form Prepared By**

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**12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification**

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

\_\_\_\_ national      \_\_\_\_ state      \_\_\_\_ local

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

title      date

---

**13. Other**

- ☐ Maps
- ☐ Photographs
- ☐ Other

Questions concerning this nomination may be directed to \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_



Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado  
Union Co.

Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by A. Jones  
February 1983  
Negatives on file at AHPP  
Viewed from North







Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado  
Union Co.

Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by A. Jones  
February 1983  
Negatives on file at AHPP  
Viewed from Southeast





Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado  
Ark.

Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by A. Jones  
February 1983  
Negatives on file at AHPP  
Exit doors - East elevation





Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by A. Jones  
February 1983  
Negatives on file at AHPP  
Detail-Outer Lobby Entrance Doors



Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by Alice Jones  
February 1983  
Negative on file at AHPP  
Interior





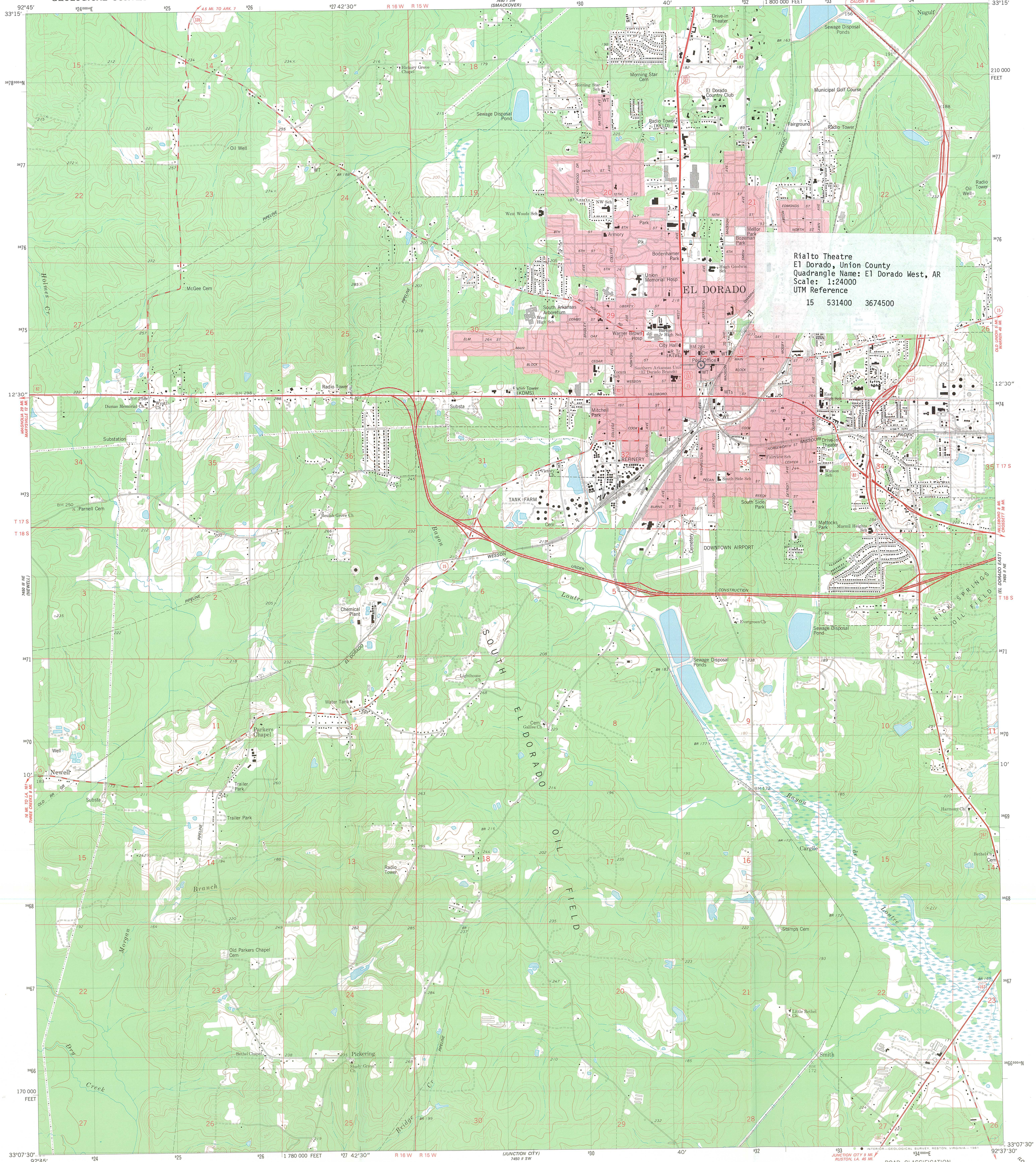


Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Photographed by Alice Jones  
February 1983  
Negative on file at AHPP  
Interior



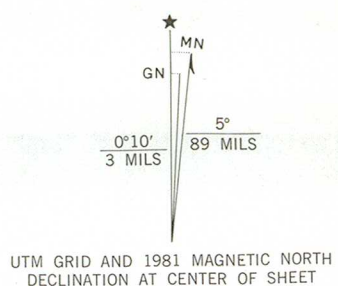
UNITED STATES  
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

EL DORADO WEST QUADRANGLE  
ARKANSAS—UNION CO.  
7.5 MINUTE SERIES (TOPOGRAPHIC)



Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County  
Quadrangle Name: El Dorado West, AR  
Scale: 1:24000  
UTM Reference  
15 531400 3674500

Mapped, edited, and published by the Geological Survey  
Control by USGS and NOS/NOAA  
Topography by photogrammetric methods from aerial photographs  
taken 1976. Field checked 1978. Map edited 1981  
Projection and 10,000-foot grid ticks: Arkansas coordinate  
system, south zone (Lambert conformal conic)  
1000-meter Universal Transverse Mercator grid, zone 15  
1927 North American Datum  
To place on the predicted North American Datum 1983  
move the projection lines 11 meters south and  
15 meters east as shown by dashed corner ticks  
Red tint indicates areas in which only landmark buildings are shown  
Fine red dashed lines indicate selected fence and field lines where  
generally visible on aerial photographs. This information is unchecked



SCALE 1:24 000  
1 1000 0 1000 2000 3000 4000 5000 6000 7000 FEET  
1 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10  
1 KILOMETER  
CONTOUR INTERVAL 10 FEET  
NATIONAL GEODETIC VERTICAL DATUM OF 1929



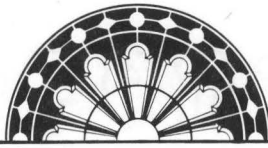
ROAD CLASSIFICATION  
Primary highway, hard surface  
Secondary highway, hard surface  
Unimproved road  
Light-duty road, hard or improved surface  
Unimproved road  
Interstate Route U.S. Route State Route

EL DORADO WEST, ARK.  
NW/4 EL DORADO 15' QUADRANGLE  
N3307.5-W9237.5/7.5

1981

DMA 7450 II NW-SERIES V884





ARKANSAS  
HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION  
PROGRAM

July 14, 1986

Carol D. Shull  
Chief of Registration  
United States Department of the Interior  
National Register of Historic Places  
National Park Service  
1100 "L" Street, N. W.  
Washington, D. C. 20240

Re: Rialto Theatre  
El Dorado, Union County

Dear Carol:

We are enclosing for your review the nomination for the Rialto Theatre. The Arkansas Historic Preservation Program has complied with all applicable nominating procedures and notification requirements in the nomination process.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Sincerely,

Wilson Stiles  
State Historic Preservation Officer

WS/JW/do

Enclosure/s



JUL 25 1986