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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 Onawa IOOF Opera House

other names/site number Onawa Opera House

2. Location

street & number 1023 Tenth Avenue

not for publication

city, town Onawa

vicinity

state IOWA code 019 county Monona code 133 zip code 51040

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
<u>1</u>	<u> </u> buildings
<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:

N/A

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.

Signature of certifying official

Date

6/23/90

Bureau of Historic Preservation

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.

Entered in the
National Register

Mark J. Baker

August 3, 1990

removed from the National Register.

other, (explain:)

[Signature]
Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Theatre
Auditorium
Music Facility

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/Not in Use

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Late Victorian: Romanesque

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick
walls Brick

roof Other: Tar
other Glass

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

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CFN-259-1116

The Onawa IOOF Opera House (1023 10th Street) is located in the central business district of Onawa, one block south of Iowa Avenue, the main street through town. The surrounding neighborhood is predominantly commercial, with a residential area beginning about one block south of the building. Southwest of the opera house stands the high school. Most of the structures around the opera house were built in the late 19th or early 20th Century; a few are recent additions to the neighborhood, but the historic setting of the building is generally intact.

The opera house was completed on November 1900 by W. E. Hodgin, an Onawa builder and contractor. It is a detached, 2-story, brick structure with a hipped roof hidden behind a slight parapet. The front facade faces west and is divided into 3 bays with a central entry. Its plan is rectangular and the entire building measures 52' wide by 116' deep; from the sidewalk to parapet it measures 45'6" high. Architecturally the opera house falls into the Romanesque category, a style which influenced many other opera houses in Iowa (R. K. Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theater Structures in Iowa and Nebraska 1857-1900...." p. 414-415).

The building rests on a brick foundation approximately 14" thick. Brick piers approximately 14" by 14" support large 10 x 10- or 12 x 12-inch timbers, which in turn support the floor joists. The 6 posts holding up the first floor auditorium ceiling rest on top of these timbers. Walls are laid in 6:1 American Bond, but the facade is covered by a veneer of higher-quality red brick. The bricks forming the side and rear walls may have been produced locally as they are soft and contain relatively large chunks of conglomerate.

The entire building is encased in brick-colored paint (the trim is painted white), which is peeling in spots, especially at the bottom of the south wall. The peeling reveals the soft brick underneath, and occasional spalling of the brick hints that the building may be suffering from a drainage problem. The bank to the south is on a higher lot and water may be unable to drain away from the opera house wall.

The hipped roof is covered with tar and is visible only from the east since the rear (east) wall has no parapet. The parapets are capped by a tile coping. The opera house has four brick chimneys, two engaged in the north wall and two in the south. They are placed near the front and rear of the building, and mirror each other.

Fenestration throughout the opera house is primarily 1- over 1-light double-hung sash. The north, south and rear walls have irregularly placed openings (see photos). All openings on those sides have segmentally arched, brick lintels, and most have brick sills. The south side contains two doors, an auditorium door at ground level toward the center, and a stage door over a basement window near the rear of the building; the latter door has a roughcut stone sill. The auditorium door in the north wall mirrors

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that in the south. All of these doors have a transom overhead, but they have been covered with boards. A wide, off-center door 4' above the ground is in the rear wall, and was used to load and unload theatrical equipment from the stage. The second story had two doors (one on the south side and one on the rear) but the rear door has been bricked in. Two sets of paired windows on the north and south sides slope toward the rear, revealing the raked auditorium floor inside. About half the building's windows have been covered by plywood, but the panes are mostly intact.

All of the opera house's decoration is found on the west, or street, side. Its style is primarily Romanesque, laced with a few features common to most commercial buildings in Iowa towns. The Romanesque features include: round arches over the entry alcove and four windows; masonry walls with rough-faced stone trim; decorative (foliated) plaques framing the entry arch; several beltcourses of stone and brick; paired windows; and rectangular transom windows over six of the standard sized windows (from McAlester, 1989, pp. 300-307).

The features typical of most commercial structures include: symmetrical facade with central entry (Romanesque buildings are more likely to be asymmetrical); corbelled cornice; name plaque in the center of the second story; and a raised parapet over the central bay.

The center bay is slightly recessed from the rest of the wall surface, and the entryway is recessed even more, by 5'. The arched portion of the entry is infilled with plywood. A modern glass door and sidelights fill the entrance; a second modern door is in the north side of the alcove, and original double doors to the Odd Fellows rooms are set into the south side. A large stone lintel unites the two sets of paired windows over the entrance, and above this is a metal IOOF name plaque. The letters are flanked by three linked rings, symbolizing friendship, love and truth. The two outside bays of the facade are identical. The first story windows are arranged like the windows over the entrance, and have the same stone lintel. The second story windows are also paired, but have round arched lintels.

As mentioned above, several beltcourses divide the facade horizontally. The sills of both first and second story windows are incorporated into narrow, rough-faced stone courses. These and the brick beltcourses near the roofline are the most noticeable on the building. Other beltcourses are the two brick courses, and the tile egg-and-dart course dividing the first and second stories. Two more brick courses and the course of tile rosettes over the second floor windows, in addition to those just noted, are interrupted by the central bay and are less pronounced.

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INTERIOR

The interior plan of the Onawa IOOF Opera House is complex, given the number of roles it has played since its construction. The first floor is taken up mostly by the old auditorium (see attached sketch plan). From the front door, one enters a vestibule whose floor slopes upward; a wide doorway at the top is the main entrance to the auditorium. North of the vestibule is a small apartment. South of the vestibule are the concession booth and stairways leading to the projection booth and the Odd Fellows apartments upstairs.

The auditorium is a utilitarian room with a flat floor, soundproof panelling on the walls, and a panelled, coved ceiling of pressed tin. Six posts and two massive steel I-beams support the ceiling. The stage is gone, but the proscenium is still evident in a 12" wall remnant attached to the ceiling. All windows in the auditorium have been covered with plywood on the inside as well as the outside. Two wall pilasters on the west wall of the auditorium separate the western entrances to the room. The projection booth is actually located between the first and second floors. It occupies the central bay of the building, and its floor descends into the entry arch, which is why the arch is infilled.

The second floor of the building is home to the Oddfellows. Their apartments include an anteroom, a coat room, lounge, meeting room, dining room, robe room, kitchen and bathrooms (see attached sketch plan). The floors of these rooms are hardwood and the walls mostly plastered. The meeting room has soundproof panelling and a dropped ceiling which may obscure a skylight, according to the owner. Ceilings in the rear rooms are of false-bead tongue-in-groove boarding; woodwork is simply molded and appears original. All fixtures in the rooms and kitchen appear to date from c. 1935.

ALTERATIONS, EXTERIOR AND INTERIOR

In its 90 years the Onawa IOOF Opera House has undergone many alterations. The first occurred as a fire on December 24, 1900, only one month after the theatre opened. The fire caused \$6,500 in damage and totally destroyed the opera house interior, including the new opera chairs. The interior was repaired in early 1901 to look "about the same as before the fire" (Monona County Gazette, January 3, 1901).

In 1910 the Onawa Sentinel reported that the Odd Fellows contemplated "changes and improvements" to the playhouse (Sentinel, January 20, 1910), but the nature of these changes is unknown. In 1917 the Odd Fellows hired George Hegwood and George

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Messing to build a movie projection booth measuring 18' long by 8' wide by 8' tall in the lobby area. What exactly the booth looked like and where it was located are unclear, however.

In 1926 the Onawa Democrat reported a second disastrous fire in the opera house. Typical of theatre fires the blaze started in the stage area and spread into the auditorium and lodge rooms above, ultimately causing \$7,000 in damage. Following the fire the stage was completely rebuilt (Democrat, November 11, 1926). One year later, the theatre's new owner had the auditorium interior redecorated and the walls covered with soundproof material (Onawa Weekly Democrat, April 8, 1937). Once again, the papers give only vague descriptions of the work.

The projection booth may have been suspended into the entry arch as early as 1929 with the installation of a sound motion picture machine, or as late as c. 1945; it is difficult to tell. In 1935 the Odd Fellows redecorated their upstairs lodge rooms; light fixtures and the kitchen stove, sink, and cupboards all date to that year (Democrat, June 27, 1935). A new cooling system was also added to the building in the same year (Democrat, June 20, 1935). The brick finials atop the center bay parapet and on the corners of the facade were removed sometime after 1937, according to a newspaper illustration (Democrat, April 8, 1937).

In the 1960s the opera house underwent a substantial change when it was converted from a theatre to a roller skating rink. The stage and proscenium were removed, and the raked floor covered with a flat floor. The theatre's front doors were probably replaced and the alcove re-sided when it became a grocery store in the 1970s. The box office in the center of the vestibule may have also been removed at this time. In 1973 the opera house was "restored to its original appearance," but what that means is unclear (Democrat, December 27, 1973).

Several alterations are difficult to date at all. The second story door in rear wall was infilled with brick at an unknown date; the fire escape was probably moved from this door to the south side door at the same time. The four dressing rooms in basement were apparently removed quite a few years ago since the owner remembered no one taking them out. Basement windows on the north and east sides were infilled with brick at some time. The most recent change was the infill of the basement window beneath rear stage door with brick in 1983 after a truck damaged the wall there (G. B. King, interview).

Despite numerous modifications the Onawa opera house retains a surprising amount of its exterior design integrity. Its facade is intact with the exception of the replacement entry doors and partially infilled entry arch. Compared to most commercial structures

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in Onawa the theatre looks much as it did in 1900. The auditorium has lost its interior integrity due to extensive remodelling, but the Odd Fellows' rooms still possess historic integrity. The structure is in fair to good condition, and has great potential to house another business or some kind of offices by virtue of its size and proximity to the downtown area.

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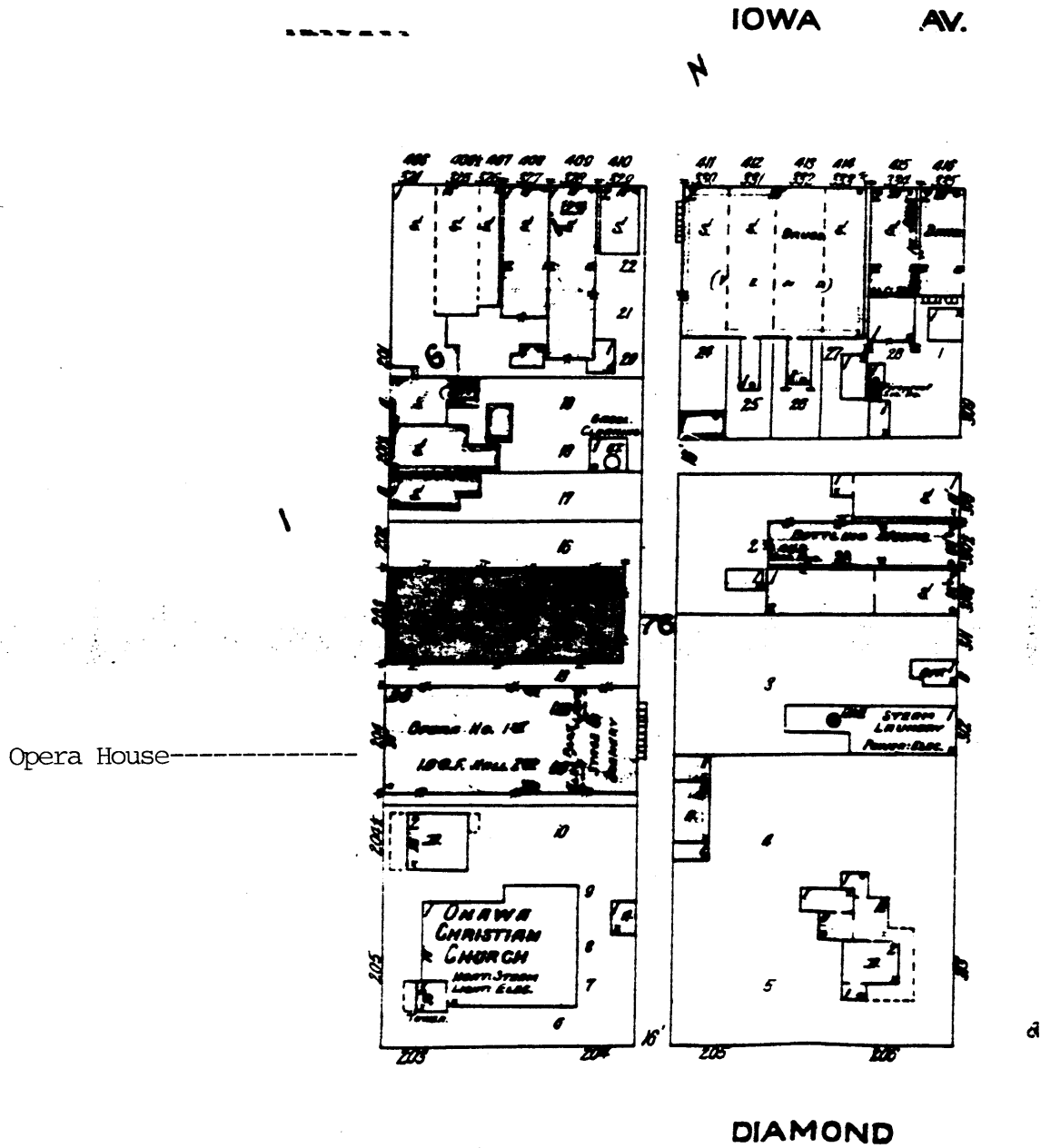
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Onawa IOOF Opera House
1023 Tenth Avenue, Onawa, Iowa

From the 1924 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Onawa
Scale 100 feet per 1 inch



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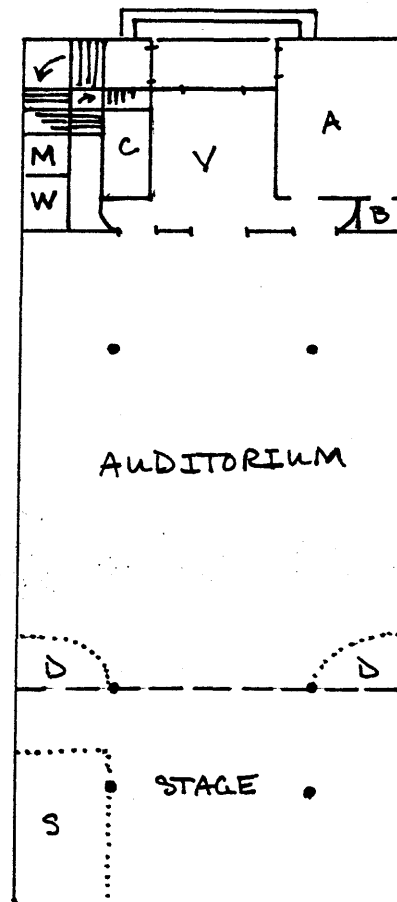
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→ Z

- A = apartment
- B = bathroom
- V = vestibule
- C = concession booth
- M = men's toilet
- W = women's toilet
- D = dressing room
(non-extant)
- S = bicycle shop
(non-extant)

Proscenium →



Onawa IOOF Opera House - 1st Floor

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

Significant Person

N/A

Period of Significance

1900-1926

1900-1937

1900-1937

Significant Dates

1907, 1916

Cultural Affiliation

None.

Architect/Builder

Unknown.

W. E. Hodgkin, Onawa

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

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

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:

Iowa Site Inventory

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Less than one acre.

UTM References

A

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

C

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B

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

 Zone Easting Northing

D

--	--

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

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

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

The Onawa IOOF Opera House is situated on Lots 11-13 of Block 76, Onawa original town plat.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

This nomination includes only the above-named opera house and the narrow alley that lies directly north of the building.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Tracy Ann Cuning, with research assistance by Ariel Wonder
 organization date 31 May 1990
 street & number 805 Moreno Road telephone 805-965-2357
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INTRODUCTION:

The Onawa IOOF Opera House is locally significant under Criterion A as the building most closely associated with live-stage theatre in Onawa. Between the late 1880s and the mid-1920s Onawa boasted a strong tradition of liveness entertainment, an important facet of the town's social life. The history of this tradition stretches back through three structures, two of which still stand in the community today. The first building to house live entertainment was the Norton Hall (non-extant), a utility hall that operated c. 1885 to c. 1895. The second was the Whiting Building on Iowa Avenue which housed the Colby Opera House, a second floor hall, from 1893 to c. 1899. The third building to house live entertainment is the Onawa IOOF Opera House, the subject of this nomination. This structure was built on the site of the Norton Hall in 1900 and it offered a variety of theatrical productions to residents for twenty-five years. After 1926, the opera house functioned solely as a movie theatre, the largest of its kind in Onawa for ten years. The IOOF Opera House is the physical manifestation of the long association between entertainment in Onawa and this particular site, as well as the best evidence of the live-stage tradition in the town.

The opera house's period of significance as an opera house begins with its construction in 1900 and ends with the devastation of the auditorium by fire in 1926. Its period of significance as a movie theatre begins in 1927, when the refitted auditorium became Onawa's primary cinema, and ends in 1937, when a new movie theatre relegated the older structure to second-class status.

BACKGROUND:

The history of the Onawa IOOF Opera House actually begins well before its construction in 1900. As mentioned above, it is the third structure in Onawa to have housed live stage productions. A fourth structure, now gone, at the northeast corner of Tenth and Iowa Avenues was to have had a large opera hall on its third floor, but the third floor was never constructed. Despite the absence of this hall, Onawa had at least one playhouse in operation during the period c.1885-c.1925.

The first structure in Onawa known to have afforded theatrical entertainment was Norton's Hall, also known as the Norton Hall, Norton's Rink or the Town Rink. It was located on West Broadway Avenue (Tenth Avenue) and occupied the western half of Lot 12, Block 76, the site of the present IOOF Opera House. Norton's Hall was probably a one-story, frame utility hall with a flat floor. People applied the generic term "opera house" to this building, although it was not technically an opera house.

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A man named Norton had this frame building erected sometime around 1885. In 1886 the Monona County Gazette announced that the "Onawa Dramatic Society will present the 3-Act drama entitled "Dearer Than Life" concluding with the laughable farce "The Obstinate Family" at the hall (Gazette, February 25, 1886). In 1890, the Gazette reported that the hall offered fare similar to the old stage shows in Omaha, in addition to plays, orchestras, and soloists.

When Norton had no stage productions booked he arranged for wrestlers and boxers to match their strength and quickness in the old hall. He probably also rented his hall for various social club and school functions, as well as for town meetings and political rallies. Norton's hall may have earned the nickname "Town Rink" because of the ice rink he created in front of the building each winter for the amusement of Onawa children. The nickname may also have originated with indoor skating at the hall during the roller skating craze of the mid-1880s (Davis, "Opera Houses in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas: 1870-1920," p. 14). The building offered something for everyone, typical of utility halls.

The second structure to house stage productions in Onawa is the Whiting Building (Miller's Furniture) on Iowa Avenue, about one block north of the present opera house. Frank E. and E. W. Colby ordered the construction of this two story brick building in 1893. On the first floor they operated a hardware, implement and tin shop, while the second floor was devoted to an opera hall and lodge rooms. With the construction of the new hall the Norton Hall faded into memory, and for the next five or six years Colby's Opera House provided local citizens with such popular programs as "Pirates of Penzance" and "Uncle Tom's Cabin." Band concerts, lectures, minstrel shows, and even a demonstration of "The Edison Projecting Trioscope" were also standard fare in the late 1890s (Democrat, May 6, 1897).*

In 1900 the Odd Fellows (Monona Lodge No. 380) announced their intention to have a third playhouse built in Onawa. The lodge met in rooms over various stores after its organization in 1878, and by 1900 the members felt they needed their own quarters, which would be housed in the theatre. The exact reasons for building a theatre are unknown, but it is likely that it was to help defray the cost of construction and to give the lodge a continuing source of revenue.

* A photo taken between 1893 and 1907 shows the words "OPERA HOUSE" lettered on the paired windows in the center of the building's second story. The hall was reached by two wooden stairways on the east side descending from a single, second floor landing, which caused some worry among community members about fire exits.

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The Odd Fellows soon purchased Lots 11, 12, and 13 of Block 76, the site of the old Norton Hall. W. E. Hodgins, an Onawa builder and contractor, won the contract for the new IOOF Opera House in June 1900. The Gazette stated proudly that excavation was to commence immediately, and actual construction to begin as soon as materials arrived. Five months and \$17,000 later, the theatre was ready for business, although the upstairs lodge rooms were still unfinished.

Unlike Norton's and Colby's halls the new playhouse was an opera house in almost every sense. It was a ground floor auditorium with multiple exits, seated 600 people, had a raked floor, was illuminated by electricity, and heated by a coal furnace in the basement. What really defined it as an opera house, however, was that "business enterprises...were planned around the theatrical function of the building and were placed in portions of the structure inessential to theatrical function" (R. K. Allen, "Nineteenth Century Theater Structures in Iowa and Nebraska 1857-1900...." p. 232). Attorney J. W. Anderson practiced in an office at the northwest corner of the building, and the Odd Fellows met in the second floor rooms.

Compared to some Iowa opera houses built around the same time, the Onawa IOOF Opera House was a relatively small structure. It was narrower than other opera houses (only 52' wide), contained only six dressing rooms, had no fly space over the stage, and apparently possessed no balcony. The dimensions of the auditorium, stage and proscenium all fall within the range for opera houses that Allen identified, but at the smaller end of the scale.

In the last week of November 1900, the Odd Fellows opened their new playhouse to the public with the drama, "A Bunch of Keys," which earned them \$850. Onawa citizens must have been slightly dubious of the theatre since a Gazette article in November encourages the town to attend it and the house management to book good productions. In December the newspaper states that "the town is interested in the opera house" and their patronage pleasantly surprised the lodge (Gazette, November 29, and December 27, 1900).

Before the playhouse was open one month, however, a raging fire nearly destroyed the building. The fire almost broke through the "steel ceiling" and all the new opera chairs were lost; attorney Anderson saved his library at the last minute. Damage was estimated at \$6,500, only part of which was covered by insurance (Gazette, December 27, 1900). In January 1901, workmen began to return the opera house to its pre-fire appearance (Gazette, January 3, 1901).

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Over the next five years the Odd Fellows provided a variety of entertainment in the theatre for Onawa to enjoy. Crowd-drawing light operas such as "Mikado," "Bohemian Girl" and Gilbert & Sullivan's "H.M.S. Pinafore" were interspersed with plays, comedies, concerts and lectures. In October 1901 William Jennings Bryan spoke to a packed auditorium. Eugene Moore, Edward Perry, Albert Armstrong, and Helen McGowan were among the widely popular performers who appeared, sometimes regularly, at the opera house.

In spite of the big name productions Monona Lodge No. 380 experienced financial difficulties, perhaps due partly to the expensive fire repairs in 1901. The opera house was sold at the Sheriff's sale in 1906, but two years later the Odd Fellows purchased the building back for \$4,500 (Democrat, March 12, 1908).

The opera house appears to have seen fairly continuous use during the 1900s and early 1910s. Theatrical troupes travelling between Omaha and Sioux City found Onawa a convenient stop along the way, but when these professional shows were unavailable, local residents put on amateur productions. Fred W. Wonder, the playhouse manager from 1912 to 1917, and later its co-owner, sometimes directed the homegrown theatricals. Hypnotists, mind-readers and spirit mediums also appeared at the opera house year after year.

In late 1907 motion pictures, a rival of live-stage theatre, arrived in Onawa. Movies were shown at a new movie theatre on Iowa Avenue and in the opera house. For the next two years the opera house managers tried to provide movies in addition to "regular shows," but found it difficult to compete against the "Scenic" and later the "Royal" movie houses. S. B. Ross leased the opera house in September 1909 to show both entertainment forms, but gave up a few months later. The Odd Fellows resumed management of the theatre in 1910 and decided to show only the "strictest high class moral entertainment." The lodge also made a few unidentified "changes and improvements" to the building (Onawa Sentinel, January 20, 1910).

Operation of the play house continued to be problematic over the next five years. In 1912 it was reopened by a new manager, Fred W. Wonder (later editor of the Democrat) after a short closure. He employed a different marketing strategy to persuade patrons to return to the older theatre. "Rules of the house will be printed on the program and...will be strictly enforced....A mother's room and cloak room [are also] being fitted up." This reassured people that the entire family could attend performances without encountering vulgar behavior. Patrons might also order their tickets by mail, a convenience designed to appeal to rural Monona County families. Finally, productions were coordinated with those of the "Majestic" cinema so that show times of the two did not conflict and people could easily see both (Sentinel, October 3, 1912).

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The success of motion pictures in Onawa was overwhelming despite the opera house manager's tactics. In 1916 the older theatre was equipped with the "latest model simplex motion picture machine [which] throws a fine steady picture on the screen" in an attempt to remain competitive with the movie theatre (Democrat, May 4, 1916). One year later managers Kregstin and Wonder hired local contractors to install a projection booth in part of the opera house lobby. The booth housed two projectors enabling them to show films uninterrupted by a reel change (Democrat, January 25, 1917). Later in 1917 the two managers purchased both the opera house and the Royal movie theatre; films were shown at the Royal three nights a week and at the opera house every night because of its larger seating capacity (Democrat, August 8, 1917). Movies were in the opera house to stay, and with the exception of a temporary closure during the influenza epidemic of 1918, the theatre offered primarily movies interspersed with the occasional operetta, drama, or high school theatrical until 1926.

In 1926 a second disastrous fire destroyed the stage and part of the auditorium, thus ending even the sporadic live productions in the opera house. Muriel Frandsen bought the damaged building in 1927, totally redecorated its interior, and operated it solely as a movie theatre. In 1929 she had "talkie" projectors installed, which made the old opera house an even more popular place in Onawa.

The Onawa opera house was the town's primary cinema until 1937, when Frandsen and her manager, Bob Oliver, had the Iowa Theatre built. The newcomer occupied a site on Tenth Avenue only a few blocks north of the opera house. From then until its close in 1953 the opera house, dubbed the "Onawa," played comedies, serials, lesser westerns, "shorts" and newsreels several times a week, while big productions played daily at the Iowa.

CONCLUSION:

Between the late 1880s and the mid-1920s a theatre consistently provided Onawa with dramatic, musical or educational entertainment. Of the three structures that housed such entertainment the Onawa IOOF Opera House served for the longest period of time (1900-1937), and is significant under Criterion A. The fact that the town's first known hall, Norton's Hall, was also located here (Lot 12) strengthens the association between entertainment in Onawa and this site (Lots 11-13, Block 76).

The opera house survived so long in Onawa showing both stage and screen productions for several reasons. First, the town was a county seat served by two railroads, a natural congregating place for people around Monona County. In addition Onawa was a convenient stop on the main line between Omaha and Sioux City for theatrical troupes.

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Second, the opera house remained economically viable as an entertainment facility because of its smaller size and its plan. It is relatively small as Iowa opera houses go, but was easier to heat and maintain because of its size. It is also a ground floor auditorium with several exits, and it therefore complied with modern fire codes, unlike the previous halls. Third, the Onawa opera house was managed by several capable, dynamic individuals. The Odd Fellows appointed Fred Wonder manager repeatedly between 1912 and 1917, and he and Kregstin later purchased the building themselves. They adopted competitive policies, updated the theatre interior and advertised heavily in Onawa's two newspapers. [The opera house probably also survived as a movie theatre from 1927 to 1953 because of Frandsen's, and later Oliver's, extensive marketing program.]

The Onawa IOOF Opera House represents the culmination of an active live entertainment tradition in Onawa, and it attests to the town's cultural maturation in the early years of the 20th century. Until the mid-1920s operettas, plays, concerts and lectures at the opera house formed an integral part of the social life of the community and when no professional productions were engaged, amateur theatricals and musical programs by high school students or citizens groups became major social events (Democrat, December 12, 1963). Even after the opera house closed to livestage theatre, it remained the focus of entertainment in Onawa for ten years as a movie theatre. Although fewer residents now remember the opera house during its heyday, the community continues to identify the building with its former role.

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History of Monona County, Iowa. Chicago: National Publishing Co., 1890.

King, George B., IOOF Opera House Owner, Onawa, Iowa. Personal Interview, 1 November 1989.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps for Onawa, Iowa.

Wonder, Ariel, Onawa Resident. Personal Interview, 19 September 1989.

ALSO: Miscellaneous Historic Photos in the Monona County Public Library, Iowa Avenue, Onawa.

Newspaper Sources:

Monona County Gazette, February 25, 1886, and the following issues:

August 2, 1888.
September 5, 1889.
October 9, 1890.
March 16, 1893.
March 30, 1893.
April 27, 1893.
April 30, 1894.
November 19, 1900.

Onawa Sentinel, January 20, 1910, and the following issues:

October 3, 1912.
August 9, 1917.
July 7, 1926.
April 8, 1937.
April 15, 1937.

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Onawa Weekly Democrat, February 13, 1896, and the following issues:

February 20, 1896.

January 7, 1897.

May 6, 1897.

March 29, 1900.

November 29, 1900.

October 31, 1901.

August 28, 1902.

October 9, 1902.

January 7, 1904.

Onawa Weekly Democrat, January 4, 1906, and the following issues:

January 11, 1906.

January 18, 1906.

January 25, 1906.

March 15, 1906.

August 16, 1906.

September 20, 1906.

October 4, 1906.

November 1, 1906.

December 27, 1906.

January 17, 1907.

April 25, 1907.

Onawa Weekly Democrat, May 16, 1907.

July 4, 1907.

July 17, 1907.

July 24, 1907.

September 5, 1907.

September 26, 1907.

October 24, 1907.

October 31, 1907.

Onawa Weekly Democrat, November 7, 1907.

November 28, 1907.

December 5, 1907.

March 12, 1908.

June 11, 1914.

August 6, 1914.

August 12, 1915.

May 4, 1916.

January 20, 1921.

March 10, 1921.

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Onawa Weekly Democrat, March 17, 1921, and the following issues:

January 24, 1929

August 22, 1929.

January 2, 1930.

April 10, 1930.

May 22, 1930.

October 16, 1930.

June 20, 1935.

June 27, 1935.

April 8, 1937.

March 2, 1955.

Onawa Weekly Democrat, July 19, 1962.

December 13, 1962.

December 12, 1963.

March 12, 1964.

December 27, 1973.