

**United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

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



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

1. Name

historic Windego Park Auditorium

and/or common Open Air Theater

2. Location

street & number Between South Ferry Street and Rum River not for publication

city, town Anoka vicinity of congressional district 8th

state Minnesota code 22 county Anoka code 003

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture <input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial <input type="checkbox"/> park
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational <input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment <input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government <input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial <input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: not in use

4. Owner of Property

name City of Anoka

street & number 2015 First Avenue

city, town Anoka vicinity of state Minnesota

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Anoka County Courthouse

street & number

city, town Anoka state Minnesota

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Statewide Survey of Historic Resources has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date 1978, 1979 federal state county local

depository for survey records 240 Summit Avenue -- Minnesota Historical Society

city, town St. Paul state Minnesota

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Open Air Theater, constructed in 1914, is located in a hillside on the west bank of the Rum River. The Anoka theater was planned to seat 1600 people. Like a Greek Theater, it was part of a semi-circular, steep stepped plan built into a thirty foot hillside. The seventeen steps and seats are of reinforced concrete. The curved wall, about eight feet high at the rear of the seating along South Ferry Street, was interrupted only by the ticket offices at the center and the exits at each end (this "retaining" wall has been partially destroyed). It was broken by other windows or openings. Along the wall, and braced by it, were a series of steel posts which supported a horizontal frame. Small rails run parallel to the stepped aisles and contained small electric bulbs which provided light during performances. An orchestra pit was placed in front of the concrete stage, beneath which were dressing and storage rooms (the orchestra pit is extant). The stage, which was supported by a low wall, was semi-circular and repeated the curve of the seats. The projecting area of the stage was planted in grass. David Gebhard, in his Master's Thesis, states that ". . . the feeling of this structure was one of gaiety and color with bright reds, blues, and greens being used for the poles, walls and doors. The theater was certainly one of Purcell and Elmslie's most successful ventures, and it is to be regretted that it was partially torn down."

The felling of gaiety that Gebhard refers to was largely the result of the multi-colored canvas awning system and support posts designed by Purcell and Elmslie. Purcell, in his 1953 "para biography," details the design of the theater's canvas awning, designed with ". . . some idea of how the canvas awnings of the Coliseum of ancient Rome might have been swung from the masts about which there has never been a really satisfactory explanation." In 1953 Purcell wrote,

"The way we did it was as follows: Strips of canvas a yard wide and long enough to reach from the back of the theater to a point back of the stage, a distance of twenty yards, were fitted with galvanized metal rings on both edges, spaced at one foot intervals. We then stretched pairs of galvanized wires spaced thirty-six inches apart with a slight slope toward the stage. Alternate widths were set over and under so that they lapped a couple of inches at the outside of the edge of the circle at the back of the seats, and of course, as they converged, the lap was very much greater. In some places there were even three thicknesses of canvas over the stage, one above the other. This was practical because as the water ran down these canvas troughs there got to be more and more of it so that the tendency for leakage and the danger of the water spilling over became greater, and this generous overlap at the low point gave more protection where needed. The water poured out of the ends of the canvas trough over the back of the stage and into the river. Of course, it was not assumed that this would afford protection in a very severe storm, as there was not a way of holding these long widths of canvas in strong wind. When not in use awning cords attached to the lower corners, and run through the rings, enabled the canvas to be quickly drawn back when it naturally gathered in neat folds over the back rows of seats."²

(see continuation sheet)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

FOR NPS USE ONLY	
RECEIVED	NOV 06 1979
DATE ENTERED	JAN 8 1980

Windego Park Auditorium/Open Air Theater

CONTINUATION SHEET

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Although features of the original design have either been destroyed or have deteriorated, the city of Anoka plans to restore the theater to its 1914 appearance. The Landscape Architecture Department of the University of Minnesota is currently preparing a "restoration" study for the theater.

¹Purcell, W.G., "Anoka Open Air Theater, Anoka, Minnesota, February, 1915," Work of the Ninth Year, 1915, page IX-13.

²Ibid.

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/ humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		

Specific dates 1914

Builder/Architect Purcell and Elmslie (awning system)

Builder: Star Sidewalk Co.

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

Anoka's Open Air Theater is significant for historical and architectural reasons. Historically, it is significant as a local example of the last wave of "City Beautiful" projects that spread across the United States after the Chicago Exposition of 1893. In addition, it was the scene of a number of locally planned, written, and produced plays and pageants, as well as a community meeting place. Architecturally, the theater represents a picturesque and unique design incorporating a man-made theater into a natural setting. The well-documented Purcell and Elmslie design of the theater's canvas awning system, although largely destroyed, provides an invaluable record for the city's imminent restoration plan for the theater.

This theater, a rare example of the semi-circular open-air theater in Minnesota, was constructed in 1914. The cost of constructing the theater was advanced by twenty-four Anoka citizens. According to a 1953 "para biography" written by W.G. Purcell, who designed the canvas awning for the theater, "Thaddeus Philander Giddings decided to do something in the way of creative entertainment for his town during the summer, and a Greek theatre of concrete, built into a natural hollow in the bank along the shores of the Rum River was the answer. Most of the work was done by the citizens."¹ Giddings later became co-founder and director of the famous National Music Camp of Interlocken, Michigan.

When completed, the theater served as a meeting place of citizens for amateur plays, historical pageants, "moving pictures," operettas, community meetings, and bazaars. Local pride in the theater was enormous. An article in the August 11, 1914 edition of the Anoka Herald summed up this local sentiment. The article stated that "this auditorium is the only one of its kind in the state that we know of and it would be hard to find one in any state that has the advantage of its lovely situation. This auditorium will not only be the best advertisement the town could possibly have but it will be the general meeting and entertainment centre of the citizens. There is no end to the number of good things this auditorium should bring to our people. There is a great 'get together' wave sweeping over the country. This brings the people together in a common interest, brings out the latent talent, and from the unity of feeling thus engendered, the other community interests are served."²

This theater was extensively used until 1938. Although it has not been used for over forty years, its presence has not been forgotten. The city of Anoka is currently planning the restoration of this theater for a variety of community uses.

¹Purcell, W.G., "Anoka Open Air Theater, Anoka, Minnesota, February, 1915, Work of the Ninth Year, 1915, page IX-13.

²"Grand Opening of the First Section of Anoka's New Outdoor Auditorium to be Held Soon," Anoka Herald, August 11, 1914, page 1.

PLEASE NOTE: The manuscript for this nomination was prepared before the one paragraph limit for significance statements was stipulated.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number _____ Page _____

**Note: These changes apply to
Windego Park Auditorium in Anoka
County, Minnesota.**

REFERENCE NUMBER: 80001934

STATE: MINNESOTA

COUNTY: Anoka

RESOURCE NAME (HISTORIC): Windego Park Auditorium/Open Air
Theatre

CITY:

VICINITY OF:

ADDRESS:

CERTIFICATION DATE:

REMOVED DATE:

COMMENTS:

Nina M. Archabal

**Nina M. Archabal
State Historic Preservation Officer**

JUN 17 1988

Date