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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

Historic name Brenizer Library
Other names/site number CU12-006

2. Location

Street & number 430 West Center Avenue Not for publication
City or town Merna Vicinity
State Nebraska Code NE County Custer Code 041 Zip code 68856

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Michael J. Ant
Signature of certifying official

May 17, 2007
Date

Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. 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): _____

Edson H. Beall 7-3-07

for
Signature of Keeper

Date of Action

Brenizer Public Library

Name of Property

Custer County, Nebraska

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)

- Private
- Public-local
- Public-state
- Public-federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)

- Building(s)
- District
- Site
- Structure
- Object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		Buildings
		Sites
		Structures
		Objects
1		Total

Name of related multiple property listing
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION/library
SOCIAL/meeting hall

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION/library
SOCIAL/meeting hall

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19th and 20th CENTURY AMERICAN
MOVEMENTS/Prairie Style with Classical Revival
elements

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

Foundation Brick
Walls Brick
Roof Clay tile
Other _____

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- A** Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- B** Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- C** Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- D** Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A** Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- B** Removed from its original location.
- C** A birthplace or a grave.
- D** A cemetery.
- E** A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- F** A commemorative property.
- G** Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

EDUCATION

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1917-1957

Significant Dates

1917

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Claude W. Way, Architect

C. H. Empfield and Bert Elder of Elder Construction Company in Anselmo, Nebraska

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 for additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other
- Name of repository: _____

Brenizer Public Library

Name of Property

Custer County, Nebraska

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property Less than one

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	436428	4592591	3.			
2.				4.			

[] See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Jill E. Dolberg
organization Nebraska State Historical Society date March 12, 2007
street & number 1500 R Street/Box 82554 telephone (402) 471-4773
city or town Lincoln state Nebraska zip code 68501-2554

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title Kilfoil Township
street & number _____ telephone (308) 643-2268
city or town Merna state Nebraska zip code 68856

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Brenizer Public Library

Name of Property

Custer County, Nebraska

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Merna, Nebraska is located in the north half of Custer County, which is located in the center of the state. Merna is found in the dissected plains of Nebraska, characterized by hilly land with moderate to steep slopes, sharp ridge crests, and remnants of the old, nearly level plain. The current population of Merna is 391 people, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, however the population was a bit larger, 553 people, circa 1920, three years after the library entered service.¹ The library is located along West Center Avenue, Merna's Main Street, and adjacent to the Central Business District. Its location made it accessible for all in Merna, but also highlighted its civic underpinnings.

This Prairie style library is a rectangular shaped, one and a half story, brick veneer structure with a clay tile hipped roof. It has a Kasota limestone foundation. The façade contains a central entrance in a projecting vestibule entry under a pedimented gable with a large fluted Doric column of Kasota limestone on either side of the door, evoking elements of the Classical Revival style. The door itself has been changed to glass. Carved into the pediment and frieze of the entrance is the date, "1916", and the words "PVBLIC LIBRARY," along with carved vertical lines in groups of four at intervals along the frieze. A limestone cornerstone is found on the southeast corner of the building, and says "Building Donated by JG Brenizer, 1916" on the south and "Laid by the Schoolchildren of Kilfoil Township Sept. 15, 1916" on the east. A broad limestone base approximately two feet in height surrounds the building.

The fenestration on the main façade of the library is quite elaborate, with sets of windows in groups of three, canted and projecting a bit from the face of the building. The windows are all original one-over-one, double-hung windows with fixed transoms, set on a sill of Kasota limestone with brackets. The east and west elevations of the library each have three separate one-over-one, double-hung windows with transoms and limestone sills. On the rear of the building, four smaller double-hung windows provide light while not taking up wall space for bookshelves. One larger double-hung window with a transom provides light to the librarian's office. There is also a broad, unadorned chimney in the middle of rear elevation. Double-hung windows approximately the size of the smallest of the windows on upper story of the rear elevation provide light and ventilation to the basement meeting space.

Upon entering the building through its projecting vestibule entry, a set of stairs leads up to the main library space, while another set leads to the basement. At the top of the stairs, two oak and glass French doors admit entry into the library space. An oak, canted librarian's desk sits right in front of a small oak paneled office space. Oak bookshelves have been set along all the outside walls, as well as some freestanding shelves in the middle of the room, to maximize space for books. The library still utilizes the original oak tables and chairs, both child and adult size, that were provided to the library when it opened, including one rocking chair. The library has a tin ceiling and cornice.

The downstairs space has a meeting room that fills approximately one half of the west side of the building. The room has a tin ceiling, oak floor, and a trifold door of five-paneled oak. There is a restroom with paneled oak stalls, and a furnace room along the back of the building. An additional space, described as a "Rest Room" on the original plans, sits in the southeast corner of this floor. An exterior stair on the east side of the building leads into this space as well.

The historic integrity of the Brenizer Public Library is excellent, the only substantive change being the replacement of the front door with a modern glass door.

¹ 1920 U.S. Census.

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Brenizer Public Library

Name of Property

Custer County, Nebraska

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The Brenizer Public Library is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. It is significant under Criterion A for its significance in education, as well as under Criterion C for its architectural significance. Its period of significance is from 1917, the year the building's construction was complete, to 1957, fifty years from the writing of this nomination. The library has been in continuous service since 1917, and has had only eight librarians since 1917.

Dr. James G. Brenizer

James Brenizer was born January 21, 1857, at Rockgrove, Illinois. He moved to Nebraska in 1873, settling in Nebraska City. He moved to Hamilton County in 1879, where he practiced medicine for five years. In 1880, he married Isabel Duncan. In 1884, they moved to a homestead near Merna in hopes the Custer County environment would relieve his asthma symptoms, and finally moved into Merna in 1888.² In 1892, they moved to Broken Bow, and resided there for the remainder of their lives, "becoming an integral part of the community and an important factor in the progress both of the town and of the county."³ The *Custer County Chief* eulogized him by saying,

"With the death of J. G. Brenizer, Custer County has lost one of its most loved and respected citizens. Mr. Brenizer believed in Custer county, and worked for its best interests at all times. In him, every worthy cause has found a loyal supporter during the entire forty-five years of his residence here and in him innumerable people have found a sincere friend. His kindness, his unselfishness, his generosity, and his sterling qualities made for him a circle of friends not limited by geographical or social bonds."⁴

Dr. Brenizer was well regarded in Custer County in part as a result of his philanthropic gifts, most significant of which was his gift of \$6500 toward a library to be erected in Kilfoil Township in Merna in February 1916. His only stipulation was that the voters approve a small annual mill levy for its maintenance. The *Merna Postal Card* advocated for accepting his gift with any stipulations he may request.

"It is a proposition which comes once in a lifetime to a small town the size of Merna. How very foolish it would be to overlook such a fine educational chance, as a library."⁵

That spring, voters approved the levy, 156 to 15. C. H. Empfield and Bert Elder of Anselmo were the contractors for the project. On September 25, 1916, the schoolchildren of the township participated in the laying of the cornerstone. The rural schools participating in the ceremony included Dale, East Table, Pleasant Valley, and Thomas, and thirteen girls representing the original thirteen colonies laid bouquets of flowers on the stone. One thousand people attended the celebration.⁶ With the rural schools represented at the ceremony, and more than twice the number of people in attendance as the current population of Merna, it is clear that this library was intended to serve not just Merna, but the surrounding area as well.

Dr. Brenizer also planned for the library's future growth and success in his will. When he died in 1929, Brenizer's will stipulated that \$5000 be invested in securities with only the interest used by the library for future repairs and purchases. In 1972, Dr. Brenizer's niece, Elizabeth Brenizer Abbott of Minden, Nebraska left another generous bequest to the library

² *Tumble-Weed Tales*, unpublished.

³ *Custer County Chief*, 11 July 1929.

⁴ *Custer County Chief*, 11 July 1929.

⁵ *Merna Postal Card*.

⁶ *Merna Postal Card*, 20 October 1916.

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that helped provide for new book and magazine purchases.⁷ She had been raised by James and Isabel Brenizer, and must have felt the importance her uncle placed on the library.⁸

Education and Libraries

Although the Brenizer Public Library is not a Carnegie Library, constructed with monies donated by entrepreneur and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, it was built during the era in which Carnegie's gifts were being most prodigiously constructed, and was built for the same reasons. The desire on the part of communities to have their own public libraries was influenced by many factors, including the philosophy of progressivism, the spread of free public education, the growth of democracy, industrialization, urbanization, and rising prosperity.

Progressivism was not an organized movement; it was a general spirit of reform embraced by Americans with diverse goals and backgrounds during the first decades of the early twentieth century. Progressives sought the advancement of humanity through the liberation of human energies and potential from both the restraints of the past and the new restraints imposed by modern life.⁹ With every citizen deserving of a free public education, a free lending library would extend the possibilities of education to all classes and all ages of citizens. Libraries were free to all, regardless of status, and illustrated the best of what a democracy could provide. The population of the United States burgeoned during this period, and as cities and towns grew, their desire to have vibrant, lively communities with the best of all that urban areas had to offer both fostered pride in community on the part of residents, and encouraged people to move to communities with ample amenities, such as libraries. A quote from the *Merna Postal Card* indicates the expected outcome of having a public library in Merna, and illustrates the Progressive leanings of the era.

"How much good, real moral teaching can be gotten from books of the right kind! It will need the co-operation of every noble-thinking, high-minded citizen to secure the location of the library. We need it for the betterment of our homes, the enlightenment of our people, an assistant in keeping our children together and moral effects of good books."¹⁰

By the year of Brenizer's death, 1929, the library in Merna was circulating one thousand books a month to local readers, an average of two books per citizen in town.

In addition to providing a supply of books for local readers, libraries also provided a meeting place to foster discussion and dialog. Libraries of this era were designed to provide facilities for other educational activities such as lectures, meetings, and other cultural and educational activities.¹¹ The Brenizer Public Library was no different from any other library of this era, having a sizeable meeting space available on the lower level of the library for all kinds of meetings. By 1929, the *Merna Postal Card* in eulogizing Dr. Brenizer and expressing appreciation for his gift to Merna described the meeting room.

"An assembly room on the lower floor has been nicely outfitted by local organizations and is used regularly by the Woman's Club, Legion Auxiliary, American Legion, Camp Fire Girls, and as a meeting place by other organization and other public gatherings."¹²

⁷ *Merna Heritage Memories*, 51.

⁸ *Tumble-Weed Tales*, unpublished document from 1964.

⁹ <http://spider.georgetowncollege.edu/htallant/courses/his225/progmovt.htm>. Viewed March 21, 2007.

¹⁰ *Merna Postal Card*.

¹¹ *Carnegie Libraries in Nebraska, 1899 to 1922*, Multiple Property Documentation Form dated 17 May 1991.

¹² *Merna Postcard*, 11 July 1929.

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These spaces were particularly important in smaller communities where these kinds of activities might not have been offered otherwise for lack of a meeting space.

Claude W. Way, Architect

A Michigan native, Claude W. Way arrived in Hastings, Nebraska, at the age of thirty-six in 1906. He established an architectural practice that led to contracts for most of the prominent buildings in the city within the next generation. The range of his designs provides evidence of his versatility as an architect: he directed construction of everything from the towering Clarke Hotel (NRHP, December 7, 1987) to gas stations in Hastings. Other projects undertaken by C.W. Way included Dutton-Lainson's Victory Building (NRHP, March 31, 1987), the City Auditorium, St. Cecilia's Catholic Church and the Strand Theatre, all integral buildings to the historic fabric of downtown Hastings.

Way designed buildings in other communities as well. Way designed the Elm Creek School in Buffalo County, as well as two Carnegie libraries in Clay County, in Clay Center and Harvard. His experience in designing Carnegie libraries in 1914 and 1915 no doubt explains why the Brenizer Public Library is so easily mistaken for a Carnegie library. It has the typical configuration of a vestibule entry leading to split stairs to the basement and second floor, symbolizing the effort one must undertake to reach enlightenment through education.

Claude W. Way designed the Brenizer Public Library in 1916, following the generally accepted standards of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy. The main purpose was to provide shelter for books, not necessarily to be visually stunning with an excess of architectural detail. For the most part, the Brenizer Library follows this stricture, except for the Classical Revival temple-like entrance vestibule on the main façade. There certainly would have been simpler ways architecturally to allow entrance into this building. Perhaps the architect selected the Classical Revival elements for the building to evoke the temples and lyceums of classical Greece, symbolizing the Greeks pursuit of knowledge. Certainly, the substantially built brick and Kasota limestone building demonstrates the importance that was placed on the building by both designer and benefactor, and indicates the magnitude of the responsibility preserving and making available information and knowledge on behalf of the public.

With the exception of the front door alteration, the library looks inside and out much the way it did when it was built. All of the furniture that was provided to the library by Dr. Brenizer is still present. The bookshelves are still there, although perhaps are a bit more crowded, and one of the elegant oak tables is used to hold computers available for patron use, another indication that time has passed. Otherwise, everything that was intended to be present in this building still is.

Conclusion

The Brenizer Public Library in Merna, Nebraska is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C. It is eligible under Criterion A for its association with the promotion of education in Merna and the surrounding area. It was built during the Progressive Era, a time of reform when citizens were learning to expect the best from its government, whether that is an invigorating democracy with an excess of citizen participation, or the amenities of a modern city in small towns, such as public libraries. The library is also eligible for listing in the National Register under Criterion C for its architectural significance. It was built in the Prairie Style with Classical Revival elements to demonstrate its importance and permanence, and, perhaps, to inspire.

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Brenizer Public Library

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Bibliography:

Custer County Chief, 19 October 1916.

Custer County Chief, 11 July 1929.

Lincoln Star, 3 July 1929.

McAlester, Virginia and Lee McAlester. *A Field Guide to American Houses*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997.

Merna Postal Card (newspaper), October 1916, July 1929.

Merna Heritage History Committee. *Merna Heritage Memories*. Callaway, Nebraska: Loup Valley Queen, 1989.

Business and Professional Women of Broken Bow, Nebraska, eds. *Tumble-Weed Tales*. Unpublished document dated 1964, available at the Custer County Historical Museum, Broken Bow, Nebraska.

Way, C. W. Original Blueprints and Specifications for the Brenizer Public Library. 1916. Available at the Brenizer Public Library.

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Brenizer Public Library

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Verbal Boundary Description:

Lots 1 and 2, Block 5, 1st Addition to the City of Merna in Custer County.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries of the Brenizer Public Library include all of the property historically associated with the library.