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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

OCT - 4 2005

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

historic name: Acme Building
other name/site number: Acme Hotel, Acme Theater, Broadway Theater, Regent Theater

2. Location

street & number: 109 - 111 North Broadway not for publication: n/a
city/town: Billings vicinity: n/a
state: Montana code: MT county: Yellowstone code: 111 zip code: 59101

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.

M. F. J. Jumper / SHPO
Signature of certifying official/Title

9/30/2005
Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal agency or bureau

(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting or other official

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
 see continuation sheet
 removed from the National Register
 see continuation sheet
 other (explain): _____

[Signature]
Signature of the Keeper
Edson H. Boell
Date of Action
11-9-05

Acme Building

Yellowstone County, Montana

Name of Property

County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private

Number of Resources within Property

Category of Property: Building

Contributing

Noncontributing

10 buildings00 sites

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: n/a

00 structures00 objects

Name of related multiple property listing: n/a

10 Total**6. Function or Use****Historic Functions:**

DOMESTIC / hotel

RECREATION & CULTURE/theatre

COMMERCE & TRADE/specialty store

Current Functions:

DOMESTIC/multiple dwelling

COMMERCE & TRADE/restaurant

7. Description**Architectural Classification:**

MIXED:

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY REVIVALS/

Classical Revival/Neo-Classical Revival;

LATE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN

MOVEMENTS/Craftsman;

OTHER: Western Commercial

Materials:

foundation: CONCRETE

walls: BRICK; METAL

roof: SYNTHETICS / PVC membrane

other:

Narrative Description

The Acme is located on a busy commercial street near the core of downtown Billings Central Business district. It is an important anchor in this area of downtown, and associated with a time when the commercial area was expanding north from its origins near the railroad tracks, which are two blocks to the south. Functioning in key roles as retail space, a theatre and a hotel, the building is linked functionally to a range of uses that were critical to the growth of commerce and culture in the city. It stands as a remarkable example of a Western Commercial style building, with vogue Neo-Classical Revival and Craftsman detailing on the façade.

The Acme was recently fully renovated in full accordance with and under the guidance of the National Park Service, Parts 1, 2 & 3 Historic Preservation Certification Application. As a result the building is in excellent condition. The original historic character was preserved, and historically sympathetic corrections were realized where previously remodeled or when in poor condition. As a result, the building retains a high degree of integrity, and clearly conveys its historic and architectural associations.

Building Description:

The Acme Building is a visually strong, rectangular, three story commercial building. The original use was that of a theater flanked by retail on the first level with two floors of hotel rooms above. The structure is 50' wide by 140' deep with three full floors and a basement. The roof gently slopes from front to back and has four skylight penetrations, filled with modern skylights sympathetic to the originals. The roof has a large array of photovoltaic solar energy panels that convert sunlight into electrical energy. These panels are not visible from the street. The building's exterior walls are predominantly constructed of common red brick. It has a wood floor and roof structure as well as a post and beam support system running down the corridor wall line.

(See continuation sheet)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: A & C
 Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): N/A
 Significant Person(s): N/A
 Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Areas of Significance: COMMERCE; ARCHITECTURE
 Period(s) of Significance: 1911 – 1933
 Significant Dates: N/A
 Architect/Builder: Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

The Acme Building, constructed between 1911 and 1912, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A & C at the local level. The building was constructed during the period of exuberant commercial activity, and amidst the northward expansion of downtown Billings, Montana, from its origins near the Northern Pacific Depot two blocks south. Through the period of significance (1911-1933) the building was used as retail space, a theater, and a hotel all of which contributed to the growth of commerce in the city. The building gains additional significance under Criteria C as a example of Western Commercial architecture with Neo-Classical Revival and Craftsman elements. This mix of styles popular at the turn of the twentieth century is especially appropriate for this mixed-use building. It stands as a building simple in form, with tasteful, detailed, decorative elements.

Foundations of Billings

The text in this section is taken from Chere Jiusto's Tales Spun Along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings. Western Heritage Press Billings, Montana, 1998.

Billings is situated on the north bank of the Yellowstone River, at a point on the Northern Pacific railroad 915 miles west of St. Paul and about midway between that city and the terminus of the road at Puget Sound. The town is located upon a gently sloping plain at the eastern extremity of the most beautiful of Montana valleys – the Clark Fork bottom – north of the town a line of rugged cliffs, the bank of a once wide Yellowstone, divides the bottom lands along the river from a higher plateau.¹

Born in 1882, the city of Billings was a rail hub founded by the Northern Pacific Railroad on a site originally known as Clark's Fork Bottom. Eclipsing the earlier settlement of Coulson just to the northeast, the town of Billings was laid out around the rail line by the Montana and Minnesota Land & Improvement Company. With land holdings on both sides of the tracks, the city was laid out with the rail line running down the center, and the main streets of Montana and Minnesota fronting onto the rails.

Heman Clark, agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, arrived in Billings on April 1, 1882. Detailing the creation of the Billings townsite to hopeful settlers, he announced the railroad's plan for a townsite envisioned to hold 20,000 inhabitants. The railroad would develop eight or nine sawmills, a 16-mile irrigation system and rail spurs to nearby mines, and name it all in honor of past NP president, Frederick Billings. Clark's arrival "lit the fuse of a crazed land boom"² as buyers competed to purchase town properties. By May 1882, the first three buildings were erected in town – a railroad headquarters, H. Clark's townsite office and mercantile, and a lone residence.³ In August 1882, when the NP line was completed to Billings many new residents had already arrived. Buildings to house new arrivals were hastily constructed south of the tracks, while commercial buildings and hotels were located close to the hub of railroad activities. By the end of the following year, the newspaper reported some 400 buildings, occupied by over 1500 citizens. Downtown occupied an area of about nine blocks, split evenly north and south of the railroad tracks. First log and frame, and later, brick and stone business buildings were built along the rail corridor in late Victorian styles.

In 1893, Billings was named county seat of Yellowstone County and by the turn of the twentieth century, the town included "a water works, electric lights, graded streets, efficient fire department, excellent schools and churches, good society, [and] an intelligent class of people."⁴ The population spread into the flats north of the downtown and the north side neighborhood became increasingly attractive with frame and brick homes of a number of prominent citizens scattered through the area. In 1900, the U.S. census counted a population of 3,221 Billings residents.

1 D. Leubrie, Chicago Inter-Ocean, Nov. 19, 1888.

2 Van West, Capitalism on the Frontier, p. 180.

3 Hendry & Fell, Billings Directory 1883; History of the Yellowstone Valley, p. 292.

4 D. Leubrie, Chicago Inter-Ocean, Nov 19, 1888.

Acme Building

Yellowstone County, Montana

Name of Property

County and State

9. Major Bibliographic References

(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:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: less than one

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	12	694033	5072756 (NAD27)

Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s)): NW ¼ NW ¼ NE ¼ of Sec. 3, T1S, R26E, Billings West Quadrangle (MPM)

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 19 & 20, Block 92, Billings Original Townsite

Boundary Justification

The boundary is drawn, according legally recorded property lines, to include the land historically associated with the Acme Building.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Don Olsen AIA
organization: O2 Architects (formerly Olsen Architecture) date: 8-5-2005
street & number: 208 N Broadway #350 telephone: 406 259 7123
city or town: Billings state: MT zip code: 59102

name/title: Kate Hampton
organization: MTSHPO date: 9-27-2005
street & number: 1410 8TH Avenue telephone: 406 444-3647
city or town: Helelna state: MT zip code: 59620

Property Owner

name/title: Acme Limited Partnership
c/o homeWORD (Ren Essene or Heather McMilin)
street & number: 127 N Higgins #307 telephone: 406 543 3550
city or town: Missoula state: MT zip code: 59802

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Page 1

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

The primary (west) elevation fronts North Broadway and is faced with brown and gold brick and cast stone. The street level is comprised of retail storefronts flanking the centered main building entrance. An ornate, decorative cast stone surround enhances the entry, which consists of a wood-framed, one-light door surrounded by four-light sidelights and a one-light transom. Additional light filters into the foyer through a wide, four-light fixed transom set above the door and sidelights. A projecting canopy once identified and covered this entrance to the building, but is no longer extant. Smaller in size and tucked just off-center to the south is the original entrance to the upper floors. This door is also a modern, wood-frame, one-light style with a one-light transom. The three-light sidelight space to the south has been filled with glazing at the top, a metal intercom/lock system at the middle, and brass mailboxes below. To either side of the entries, the retail storefronts have been rehabilitated with materials sympathetic to the original design, including the restoration of prismatic glass in the upper portions of the south storefront. The first floor is capped with a horizontal cast stone sill piece that aligns with the neighboring building to the south. Cast stone decorative "brackets" highlight the sill, punctuating the even fenestration pattern of the upper floors, as well as the bases of the pilasters.

The second and third stories display an identical fenestration pattern, each with six evenly spaced, one-over one, double hung, metal-clad wood replacement windows with cast stone sills. Raised brick pilasters with cast stone caps and bases divide each of these levels into three bays; the outer bays half the width of the central bay. The central bay contains four, while the outer bays each contain two windows. Multi-tonal, patterned brick panels, associated with Craftsman style detailing, separate the windows vertically between the stories. Finally the building is capped with a bracketed metal cornice above a brick panel and crowned by a stepped brick parapet bearing the name "ACME". This detailed cornice and peaked parapet wall, together with the pilaster caps and bases and highly decorated entry, belie the influence of Neo-Classical Revival design.

The side elevations are engaged with the neighboring buildings, except at the central portion of the upper stories, where there are recessed light wells. These recessed light wells feature seven pairs of one-over-one light double-hung windows at each story. Single window openings are also located at the west and east ends of the wells. Diamond-shaped transite (asbestos containing) originally sided the well walls. The transite has been replaced with a diamond shaped prefinished metal siding. Prior to the 2003-2004 restoration, the original windows were in an accelerated state of decay and were approved (NPS) for replacement with visually similar new metal clad wood double hung windows.

The rear of the building faces east and is painted brick. Windows and doors on this side have arched brick heads and brick sills, and are set in an asymmetrical pattern due to an interior exhaust stack. Each arch consists of four brick courses. A rear fire escape historically served the building. This has been modified to maintain the former landings as balconies but the stairs have been removed. From the rear alley, access to the east elevation is gained through two doorways. A single wood pedestrian door pierces the brick at the north side of the elevation. The other entry, located just off-center to the north, consists of a pair of modern two-light doors beneath a wide rectangular transom. Also at the alley level, the elevation features two multi-paned windows: one at the south side and the other between the door openings. A third opening is not arched, and appears to have been used during the historic period as another entry. It now contains a single one-over-one double-hung window. This is located just south of the central entry. At the second and third stories, the fenestration pattern features new metal clad wood double hung windows: two pair to the south, and another pair plus a single to the north. Both upper levels also feature centered, single, transomed doors that lead to landings/balconies.

Interior: The building currently has a sports bar / restaurant in most of the first floor with a portion exposing the original theater. There are also two apartments off the alley on this floor. The upper two floors have been renovated into apartments. The basement serves as a storage area. The building has no elevator.

Following is a description of the actions taken as part of the restoration project:

Exterior Front – The upper two stories are basically original. The only exception being the windows, which had been previously replaced with inexpensive vinyl windows. The new windows are a metal clad wood double hung type visually similar to the original. The upper brick was cleaned and patched where required. The original street level storefront had been replaced in the 1960's and 1970's with an unsympathetic combination of brick infill and aluminum doors / windows. This has now been replaced with a new

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 7

Page 2

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

aluminum storefront system that restored the proportion and general appearance of the original including the installation of new prismatic glass at the south storefront, similar to the original, in the upper portion of the glazed area.

Exterior Sides – The sides are visible above the roofs of the adjoining buildings. The general configuration is an area of brick wall directly on property line at the front and rear areas of the side wall with a recessed light well in the central portion. Original transite was recently replaced with modern metal siding, but is visually very similar to the transite, with its unique diamond-panel design. The windows were original but were in an accelerated state of decay / destruction and were approved (NPS) for replacement with new metal clad wood double hung windows visually similar to the original. The areas of brick were previously painted and were repainted as part of the restoration.

Exterior Rear – The rear was originally full brick construction with numerous windows (with arched tops on this façade only) and a metal fire escape. Numerous remodels had infilled or patched previous openings and a new central opening had been cut through the wall with little consideration for harmonizing with the original. The renovation of the ground floor of this façade saw previous openings partially restored, the central opening was reconstructed to have an arch top and two new arch top windows were added. The upper floors received new metal clad wood windows. The fire escape saw the stair portions removed but the landings were preserved as balconies for the upper floor apartments. The brick had been previously painted and was repainted.

Exterior Roof – The roof is a very slope design and thus unseen from the ground. The renovation saw a previous re-roof removed and replaced with a new white PVC membrane over rigid insulation. The original skylights were in very bad condition with extensive rust and a layer of sprayed on foam. Over the years numerous air vents and plumbing vents had been cut through both the glass and the metal framed portions. These skylights were replaced with new aluminum and glass skylights with a similar form as the original. The original cast in place concrete parapet cap on the perimeter brick walls had generally failed and was replaced with a precast concrete cap of similar form and appearance.

Interior Ground Floor – Most of the ground floor retail space had been extensively remodeled over the years with little or no original finishes left. The exception to this was in the original central entry, which was restored, preserved and incorporated into the ground floor restaurant. Beyond this entry area the ground floor displays essentially all new finishes. A portion of the original theater was also exposed and restored. Specifically, there are remnants of some of the original stage rigging on the mechanical mezzanine, and in the basement portions of the sloped concrete floor are visible. During the period of significance, the theatre ceiling was a series of vaults with smooth, unornamented rounded coffers. These vaults ran uninterrupted from side to side of the building. This fifty-foot clear span structure was accomplished through the use of large steel beams and a self-supporting concrete deck, which was then plastered to form the rounded coffers. Portions of the ceiling are visible at the rear of the present restaurant/bar space.

Interior Upper Floors – every attempt was made to preserve the look and feel of the original hotel. Public Corridors, grand staircase, etc were all restored and preserved. Original transoms were restored. Doors not needed for the new apartment function were retained in a non-operable condition in an attempt to preserve the visual rhythm of the original hallways. The original hotel rooms were reconfigured to be successful as apartments but all doors and trim were salvaged and reused or reproduced to match the original where required.

Integrity:

The building retains a high degree of integrity, and clearly displays its associations with the commercial development in Billings and architectural design trends of its era. Its location, setting, and feeling are intact. Restoration efforts, though resulting in the replacement of some historic material, are in keeping with the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation. As a result the overall integrity of design, workmanship, materials is excellent.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Page 3

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

Billings rapidly took the lead as a transportation hub for the large agricultural region in surrounding eastern Montana and northern Wyoming. Livestock was the keystone of the local economy, and cattle ranching and sheep growing dominated the high plains country around Billings. In addition, the railroad linked by spur lines to mining districts in the nearby mountains. Silver from the Judith Basin, White Sulphur Springs and Cooke City mines flowed through Billings, along with coal from the Red Lodge coalfields.

These extractive and agricultural industries supported a solid business community in Billings, and growth of the downtown reflected the brisk pace of commerce. The commercial heart of town remained centered on Montana and Minnesota Avenues but began to stretch on a perpendicular course up Broadway. This was first evidenced by substantial retail development along the railroad tracks and several hotels near the first railroad depot several blocks east of Broadway Street. The original railroad depot was judged to be an inadequate stop by the railroad companies. Therefore, passengers were redirected to disembark at the Headquarters Hotel at the foot of Broadway Avenue. This combined depot and street blockade caused commercial expansion to extend north on Broadway. The north side of the tracks became a finance, shopping, hotel and office district while the rail yards, warehouses, manufacturing and the Yegen Brothers' mercantile establishment concentrated south of the tracks and to the east of the Montana Avenue businesses. And on the expanding north end, a substantial granite courthouse and a new city hall and firehouse were built during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The year 1909 was a momentous one in Billings' history. That year, the Great Northern Railway built through Montana to Billings and beyond, Congress passed the Enlarged Homestead Act, and the Fourth Annual Dryland Farming Congress was held in Billings that year. In the heartland of dry farming, Billings' population boomed as hopeful homesteaders flooded the plains. By the 1910 census, Billings was ranked the sixth-fastest growing community in the nation and the population bulged at 10,031. During the decade that followed the population swelled to almost 18,000 before dropping back to 15,100 in 1920.

During the boom years of the 1910s, the streetscape of the city was transformed. Increasingly, older buildings and empty lots on the edges of the downtown gave way to larger, multi-story commercial blocks and hotels, including the Acme Building. The new downtown Union Depot to serve the expanding rail services, the Northern and Grand Hotels, a new Billings Opera House, an expanded Babcock Theater, the Bank of Montana and the Masonic Temple are among the other impressive buildings erected during this era.

Toward the end of the homestead boom, oil production began on the outskirts of town. The Elk Basin oil field on the Montana-Wyoming border was located in mid-1915, and by the following year, the first well near Billings was drilled. Soon the Montana-Wyoming Oil Journal was in print to report on the latest developments from the oil fields. Just 6 years later, natural gas was also discovered in the basin, and plans for a pipeline to the city were discussed. This industry helped pull Billings through the "bust" end of the homestead cycle and through the 1940s and 1950s became a lynchpin of the local economy.

It is over a century since Billings took root on the dusty alkali flats of Clark's Fork Bottom. Now a bustling metropolis, it has lived up to the promises of town founders and railroad boosters. Billings still remains the state's largest city and a market hub for eastern Montana and northern Wyoming. Tall buildings and the business district of downtown Billings reflect the prosperity of the present, but continue to tell the older tales as well. The legacy of this past is what gives the town its own unique personality, and shapes its future.

Commercial Development in Billings

Constructed during Billings' most expansive period of development, the Acme's ideal location in the core of the commercial district made the hotel attractive to travelers. With banks, restaurants, and the train depot found near the combined hotel and theater, the traveling businessman was able to take care of all his needs, whether business or pleasure. The Acme Hotel was also popular because it was not quite so close to the noise and smoke of the railroad. The original Acme Building is a testament to the commercial development of Billings at the turn of the century. Housing a theater on the main floor, flanked by retail on the sides, and topped with two floors of boarding rooms, the building supplied a visitor with all the necessary commodities. It offered rest and entertainment

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Page 4

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

without forcing the visitor to travel far from the source of his business transactions or the railroad. Located next to Woolworth's, the local department store that included a millinery, a visitor did not need to stray far from their hotel to get anything they needed. These sunny, clean, and attractive rooms with their comfortable beds and individual phones made a visitor's stay more relaxed and carefree. Advertised with a sign painted on the brick on the alley side of the building, the Acme Hotel boasted to be the "most homelike hotel." Originally operated by Lena B. Fulton, the hotel continued in operation including being used as housing for workers on the Colstrip Power plant in the late 1980's. It was shortly after this that the hotel function closed.

The ground floor retail has seen a variety of uses. The theater closed in the early 1930's and was converted to the Old Heidelberg bar by 1933. This famous watering hole was legendary - attracting politicians, businessmen and the working class for nearly five decades. When it closed in the early 1980's it rivaled the Mint Bar in Butte as the longest continually operating bar in one location. Following the Heidelberg the space remained in continuous operation first as a relocated "Casey's Golden Pheasant" bar which was followed by two Asian restaurants. The two smaller street front retail spaces have also remained in continuous operation seeing a variety of uses including Forester the Jeweler, Elite Dress Shop, Tressman Millinery, State Fur, Fuch's Women's Clothing. There was a period beginning in the early 1960's and most of the 1970's during which the neighboring Woolworth's store expanded into the south and rear portion of the first floor by removing the lower portion of the southerly demising wall between the two buildings. Today Hooligan's Sports Bar and Barley's Casino occupy the first floor.

For over ninety years the retail spaces of the Acme have served the varied needs and tastes of downtown Billings and it continues to serve this function today. This cultural cross section ranging from a theater to a legendary drinking establishment to high tech sports bar combined with the retail transition from millinery to fine women's clothing to furrier to Woolworths is a clear and continuing indication of the Acme's prominent position in the retail fabric of Billings.

Motion Picture and Vaudeville Theaters in Billings

With the invention of the Vitascope by Thomas Edison in 1896, the popularity of moving pictures grew rapidly. Entertainment of prizefighters, dancing girls and ocean waves in Billings' first theaters amused town residents and weary visitors alike. Before moving picture shows were made available to the masses, live theater performances were attended only by Billings' aristocracy and wealthier visitors. The popularity of less expensive picture houses grew with the young city. Although Billings had no motion picture houses in the early 1880s, their number grew to about half a dozen by the time the Acme was developed. In the early years there were also vaudeville acts at the Acme including Charlie Chaplin on December 4 & 5, 1912. William Enright, the first president of the Acme Theater, cooperated with C.C. Leonard, the first manager, to make the theater a success. Leonard balanced his time between managing the Acme and the nearby Family Theater at 18 N 27th Street. The Acme Building had three names for the theater during its existence. It was the "Acme Theater" during 1912 then renamed the "Broadway Theater" until 1916 when it was renamed the "Regent" until it closed in the 1930's.

Eugene C. O'Keefe operated the Regent Theater (formerly Broadway / Acme) along with several other theaters in Billings. In 1918 he sold half of his interest to Rolla Duncan, the former county commissioner. Together they formed the Theater Operating Company with O'Keefe as president and Duncan as vice president and treasurer. Duncan managed the theater while O'Keefe traveled selling theater equipment. On July 1, 1923, Rolla Duncan was appointed United States Marshall for the District of Montana and was relocated to Helena. In 1923, O'Keefe and Duncan leased the Babcock Theater at 120 N Broadway and in 1925 they remodeled the Regent (formerly Broadway / Acme) and added the Lyric at 14 N Broadway) to their expanding theater empire. Under the direction of this group, the theaters offered a plethora of entertainment. The Babcock offered vaudeville and Vitaphone acts; westerns were shown at the Lyric; and the Regent (formerly Broadway / Acme) played a variety of melodrama, comedy, news and curiosity.

Film history was made in 1927 when Warner Brothers added sound to the motion picture experience with the making of "The Jazz Singer." Within 15 months, all motion pictures, even those that had begun production as silent films, were converted to "talkies." Fox Theaters, founded in 1913, did not open a theater in Billings until 1931. This opening was accompanied by festivities such as a parade and street dance; the Fox Theater at 302 N Broadway was then christened with a showing of "Merely Mary Ann" starring Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell. In 1935, Fox Theaters merged with 20th Century, creating a rivalry so fierce that smaller private theaters

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Page 5

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

had to close. The Regent Theater (formerly Broadway / Acme) was one of the many private theaters to close in the early 1930's during this competitive era.

Architectural Significance

The Acme Building stands as an important architectural anchor along Billings' historic central business corridor. Predominantly Western Commercial in style, the building displays significant influences from the Neo-Classical Revival movement as well as elements drawn from Arts and Crafts/Craftsman trends.

Western Commercial buildings are generally two to four stories in height, masonry in character, with relatively plain symmetrical facades. The simple, rectangular plans take full advantage of the lot width and are usually attached to neighboring buildings. Stamped sheet metal cornices that recreate the carved stone styles of their European predecessors, are common. Others might simply use the wall material, stepping or corbelling out brick or stone, to create decorative elements. The Acme Building is an excellent example, and displays each of these identifying characteristics – it fills its building lot, displays balanced fenestration, has raised brick pilasters, and a metal cornice.

The Acme's Western Commercial style can further be characterized as a two-part commercial block. A horizontal division into two distinct zones characterizes this type, and reflects the difference in use inside. Architectural Historian Richard Longstreth explains: "The single-story lower zone, at street level, indicates public spaces such as retail stores...or a hotel lobby. The upper zone suggests more private spaces, including office spaces, hotel rooms, or a meeting hall."⁵ The legacy of the Industrial Revolution provided the means to create large expanses of glass, and the mastery of cast iron as a structural material made it possible to create storefronts that exhibited goods in the windows to entice customers into businesses.

Longstreth goes on to explain that prior to the advent of ornate movie houses in the 1920s and 1930s, and where lot size permitted, theater space was often relegated to the rear of the retail space, so that "little indication of its presence is given save an embellished entry area and signs."⁶ This late 19th and early 20th century design trend is well represented in the Acme building, as its highly decorated stone entry lead to the auditorium at the rear of the building. Manufactured or prefabricated building pieces such as stamped metal cornices, decorative terra-cotta, and other embellishments that could not be manufactured locally flooded into Billings with the arrival of the railroad. This influx of material allowed businessmen to adorn their otherwise simple buildings.

Adornment on the Acme Building is reflective of both Neo-Classical Revival embellishments and Craftsman commercial design. Neo-Classical Revival architecture came into favor in the late 1890's following the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The theme of the fair was the Classical World and the buildings constructed for the fair were designed to reflect this theme. The American public became familiar with the style through photos and news stories and soon the style was appearing all across the country in institutional, commercial and residential structures.

Neo-Classical Revival architecture, most commonly executed with masonry construction, represented an appearance of strength and stability. This return to the classic forms of Greek and Roman temple design was reflected in the characteristic features of Neo-Classical Revival buildings. Neoclassical buildings often feature a porch, usually full height; with large prominent columns with decorative caps supporting the porch roof. A variation of this eliminated the porch and placed the columns on either side of the entrance; square blocks called modillions decorated the underside of the roofline.

An offshoot of the Neo-Classical Revival style was applied to commercial structures. Due to space constraints and a "façade" approach these elements were incorporated in a flatter, almost two-dimensional, concept. This type of classically influenced design tended to be applied only to the street façade. These compromises were typically made to reduce costs and maximize usable space.

⁵ Richard Longstreth, *The Buildings of Main Street: A guide to American Commercial Architecture* (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1987), p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Page 6

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

The fact that these design elements were incorporated into “ordinary” commercial architecture is a testament to the popularity of the style at the time.

The Acme Building is a very good example of early 20th century Neo-Classical Revival architecture as applied to urban commercial façades. The façade of the Acme is strongly influenced by classical design principles including a clear albeit slightly abstracted reference to classic temple design composition. The façade is organized in a tripartite (three part) manner with a base, a mid section and a pediment. There is also a strict symmetry to the organization of windows and architectural elements.

The base consists of the ground floor retail storefront and a thoroughly ornamented major entry (in lieu of a porch). The mid section includes projected ornamental columns with decorative caps harking all the way back to Greek influences. The pediment consists of a heavily detailed projected metal cornice with modillions and crowned with a sloping brick (temple) parapet. The clarity of the Neo-Classical Revival influence on the Acme is very strong.

The third architectural style present on the Acme Building is the Craftsman. Specifically, the multi-tone brick panels between the second and third stories are a common feature to commercial Craftsman buildings. The geometric designs emphasize the horizontality of the building, but also speak to the workmanship required of the masons on assembling the pattern.

For a time following the Industrial Revolution, machine-made objects were regarded as superior to handmade ones. Yet eventually, social critics such as England's John Ruskin managed to reawaken the public to the beauty of items fashioned by hand, whose innate sense of life no machine could ever match.

The resulting counter-reaction ushered in the Arts and Crafts movement in England, as well as its American counterpart, the Craftsman style. Craftsman architecture showcased...materials...pointedly worked by hand, directly refuting the Victorian machine aesthetic.⁷

Clearly, the Acme Building is a significant representative of multiple style trends available to commercial building designers during the first part of the 20th century. The building is predominately a Western Commercial two-part commercial block, embellished with Neo-Classical Revival and even Craftsman elements. Its layers of design influence are particularly appropriate to this mixed-use building, enticing customers to its retail, entertainment, and domestic spaces.

⁷ Aroll Gellner, “Self Expression, a Record of Human Passing, and Architecture’s Greatest Gift,” Distributed by Inman News Features, 2005, <http://doityourself.com/nonresarc/selfexpression.htm>.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 9

Page 7

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Section number 9

Page 8

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT

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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Page 9

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT



2005 photo looking north from neighboring building onto Acme Building roof and south sidewall.



2005 photo of south sidewall. The north sidewall is identical in materials and fenestration pattern.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Page 10

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT



"Forester the Jeweler" retail establishment in first floor of the Acme building, c. 1911 or early 1912.
Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings.

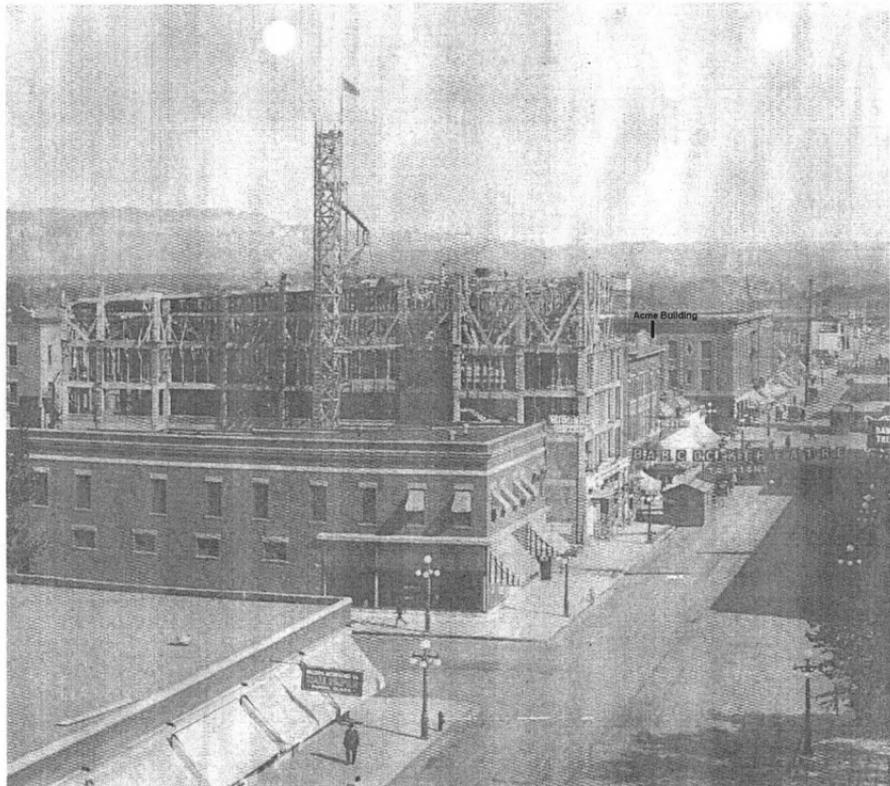
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Page 11

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT



Looking south southeast down Broadway in 1912. The Electric Building, immediately north of the Acme, is under construction.
Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings.

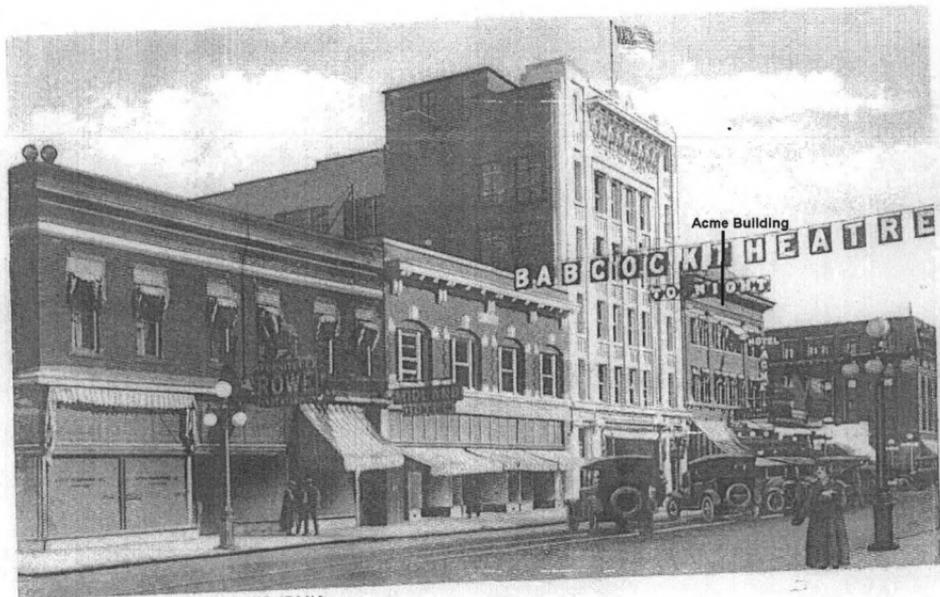
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Page 12

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT



THE HEART OF BILLINGS, MONTANA.

1910s-era photo titled "The Heart of Billings." Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center, Billings.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Photographs

Page 13

Acme Building
Yellowstone County, MT



Detailed drawing of the Acme Building Façade, 2005.