

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 to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" on the appropriate line or by entering the information requested. If an 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 SYLVAN THEATER HISTORIC DISTRICT

other names/site number Greenwood Park Outdoor Theater

2. Location

street & number In Greenwood Park on west side of 45th St., one block south of Grand Ave. N/A not for publication

city or town Des Moines N/A vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Polk code 153 zip code 50312

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this (X 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 (X meets \_ does not meet) the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant (\_ nationally \_ statewide X locally). (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Patricia Miller King, SIMO 6-27-95  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

cloud  
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 the 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)

for  
Signature of Keeper  
Edson H. Beall Entered in the National Register. Date of Action 8/15/95

Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**5. Classification**

**Ownership of Property**  
(Check as many lines as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

**Category of Property**  
(Check only one line)

- buildings(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
1	0	sites
1	0	structures
0	0	objects
3	0	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**

0

**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: outdoor theater

**Current Functions**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: outdoor theater

**7. Description**

**Architectural Classification**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: Outdoor Theater

**Materials**  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation CONCRETE

walls WOOD

roof ASPHALT

other METAL

STONE

**Narrative Description**

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

Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**8. Statement of Significance**

**Applicable National Register Criteria**

(Mark "x" on one or more lines 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" on all the lines 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 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.

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions)

SOCIAL HISTORY

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance**

1931-1945

**Significant Dates**

1931

1933-1934

1937

**Significant Person**

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

**Architect/Builder**

Harland Bartholomew Associates

Francis Asbury Robinson, Landscape Architect

**Narrative Statement of Significance** - (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

**9. Major Bibliography 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):**

- previous determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Record
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

**Primary location of additional data:**

- State Historical Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository

Des Moines Parks & Recreation Department

Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Name of Property

Polk County, Iowa  
County and State

**10. Geographical Data**

Acreege of Property 4 acres +/-

**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1 | 15 | 443310 | 4603220 |

Zone Easting Northing

2 |     |             |             |

Zone Easting Northing

3 |     |             |             |

Zone Easting Northing

4 |     |             |             |

**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 Virginia B. Pearsall; Mary M. Hornday; William C. Page, Public Historian

organization Friends of Greenwood Park date December 1, 1994

street & number 4320 Greenwood Drive (Pearsall) telephone 515-277-5565 (Pearsall)

city or town Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50312

**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 SHPO or FPO.)

name City of Des Moines, Iowa

street & number City Hall, 400 East Grand Avenue telephone 515-283-4141

city or town Des Moines state Iowa zip code 50109

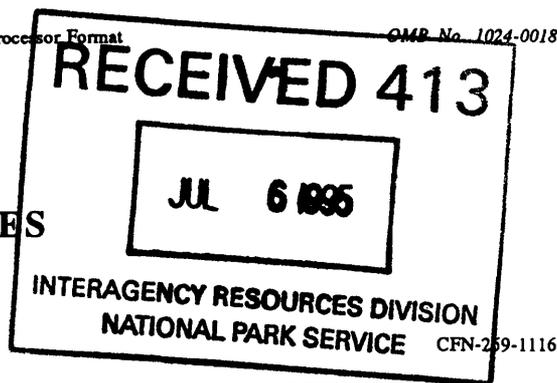
**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including 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 Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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## NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES CONTINUATION SHEET

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

### GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The Sylvan Theater Historic District consists of three contributing elements. These are the natural amphitheater area, which is a site; the theater proper (stage, seating, spectator circulation network, lighting, and entrance steps), which is a structure; and the dressing room, which is a building.

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is located in Greenwood Park, a municipal park in Des Moines, Iowa. The entrance to the theater is on the west side of 45th Street, one block south of Grand Avenue. The area is hilly and wooded, and the surrounding area was built up as residential in the early Twentieth Century.

### RESOURCES

#### Natural Amphitheater

The amphitheater is counted as one contributing site. It consists of the land and water elements and the tree canopy.

#### LAND AND WATER ELEMENTS

The theater is built in a natural amphitheater formed by slopes on either side of a small creek. The creek is tiled under the theater and flows into the Greenwood Lake, also called Greenwood Lagoon. Original plans showed a reflecting pond between the stage and seats. Although implemented, it silted up and is nonextant today.

#### TREE CANOPY

An intrinsic part of this natural amphitheater is an over-story canopy of mature oak trees, native to the woodlands surrounding it and predating the theater.

#### Theater Proper

The theater proper is counted as one contributing structure. It consists of stage, spectator seating, spectator circulation network, lighting, entrance steps, and plantings.

#### STAGE

The stage is of poured concrete, measuring 30 feet front to back and 60 feet across the back. The rounded front measures 101 feet. A two-foot limestone wall lines the back of

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

the stage and encircles a large oak tree at the center back. A set of three stone steps on either side of the tree leads to a grassy terrace at the back of the stage.

#### SPECTATOR SEATING

Spectator seating within the theater proper is arranged in a fan shape, formed by four wedge-shaped sections. Each section is approximately 30 feet on the front, 70 feet on the sides, and 45 feet across the back. The original seats were wooden benches without backs. They were arranged in rows within each section. Space was provided in the plans to add sections to each side and the back if needed. It was reported in the *Des Moines Register* in 1931 that the theater had a possible capacity of 7,000. These benches were replaced in 1934 by seats mounted on metal frames and featuring backrests.

#### SPECTATOR CIRCULATION NETWORK

The spectator circulation network consists of a series of aisles flanking the four seating sections to facilitate the coming and going of patrons. There is one central aisle, leading from the 45th Street entrance to the front of the theater, and two side aisles flanking the central aisle. The central aisle is approximately 10 feet in width and runs east to west. Side aisles are approximately 5 feet in width. These aisles are soft surfaced with earth and grass.

#### LIGHTING

Originally there were electric outlets in the floor of the stage, but these silted in and were replaced by an outlet in a box on the back of the stage oak tree. Lighting for the seating area is now provided by floor lights on two tall poles. A switch box is located on a pole at the back of the seating area.

#### ENTRANCE STEPS

At the entrance to the theater on 45th Street, poured concrete stairs, six feet wide with eleven steps and simple iron pipe hand rails, lead down the bank to the rear of the seating area.

#### PLANTINGS

In his master plan for the Sylvan Theater, landscape architect Francis Asbury Robinson of Des Moines included a planting plan for decorative, non-native shrubs to be placed

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next to the stage. These plans were followed to a large extent. Some of these plantings still survive, including a Nanking Cherry.

Dressing Room

The dressing room is counted as one contributing building.

A dressing room, about 30 feet southwest from the rear of the stage, is a one-room, wood building on a concrete slab measuring 16 feet x 20 feet. It has one double door, two windows, and electricity. The roof is asphalt shingles. A concrete gutter surrounds the building on the ground and deflects rain water down the hill. A concrete path from the dressing room to the stage is obscured from the audience by shrubs.

**INTEGRITY**

The Sylvan Theater Historic District possesses an unusual degree of integrity in its site and structures. It is still surrounded by some tall oak trees. The stage, spectator seating, spectator circulation network, dressing room, and entrance steps are as originally planned and built, except for changes in the seating in 1934, and some deterioration in that area. The original wood benches were replaced by benches measuring from five to eight feet in length consisting of wood slat seats and backs mounted on wrought iron frames. They were bolted to ten inch concrete blocks, which were set in the ground. Labor and funds for this improvement were provided by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) also called PWA at the time in Des Moines.

In one 1934 historic photograph there is a small wood building, about five feet square and seven feet tall, located near the back of the seating area, which was built as a projection booth for film (see Continuation Sheet page 19)\*. It was not on the original plans and was last recorded on a drawing of the theater by the Des Moines Planning Commission in 1955. It is not extant.

The Bartholomew plan for Greenwood Park in 1930 showed "parking terraces" above and behind the stage, but these were never implemented. Parking has always been along 45th Street and in other parking areas of the park.

The condition of the theater is fair to poor at present. Erosion of soil under the seats makes some seats too high. In 1989 the first three rows of seats were removed and discarded by the Park and Recreation Department because the ground level had been raised by silting. There is also a need to replace the shrubbery around the stage and to enlarge and improve the dressing room facilities.

\* From the Hartsook Photograph Collection, Des Moines Park and Recreation Department. It is marked "PWA Project #72 - Location Sylvan Theater, Greenwood, looking west. Date taken, January 19, 1934."

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

**HISTORY OF USE**

The opening production of the Sylvan Theater on June 26, 1931, was titled "Nights of Romance." It was a musical extravaganza organized and directed through the participation of several music, drama, and dance groups, and performing parts for many prominent citizens. It was a great success and played three nights to capacity crowds. The Community Drama Association then assumed the management of the Sylvan Theater for several years through a yearly contract with the City Council. In July of 1931 the first of the Sunday night Community Sings was held, with 1,000 in attendance. It was originated and directed by Ray Harrison, an Assistant County Attorney. He volunteered his services for the weekly programs, as did Ray Cless, the pianist. There was no admission charge, and it continued to be a very popular program during the Depression years in the 1930s. At one session in 1934, when there was a guest soloist and an accordion band, an estimated 7,000 persons attended. An operetta, "The Flower of Venice," was presented by the Des Moines Civic Opera Association in 1937 with talent provided by two hundred Des Moines musicians. The *Des Moines Register* reported an attendance of over 8,000 for this production.

America's entry into World War II led to a decline in local community dramatics and musical programs, as residents of Des Moines contributed to the war effort. A new era followed the war as the generation of veterans and their families began moving to the suburbs. Television began to dominate leisure time.

In the 1980s, a problem with drug dealers and other rough elements in Greenwood Park contributed to less use of the Sylvan Theater, but it continued to be used for rock concerts, school festivals, organization meetings, and occasional church services. A number of productions entitled "Shakespeare on the Loose" were held in the Sylvan Theater in the 1980s.

Now there is renewed interest in the Sylvan Theater. The environmental movement has focused attention on the nation's natural resources and the enjoyment of them. Health conscious Americans are again patronizing public parks for recreation and exercise. City residents and neighborhood organizations have begun to employ historic preservation as a tool to reclaim the inner city from urban decay. Sylvan Theater Historic District has been rediscovered as an important historic resource. In the summer of 1993 the Iowa Shakespeare Project was formed, which plans to use the theater.

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is still a unique cultural facility for the community, but it needs to be restored and improved to extend its usefulness.

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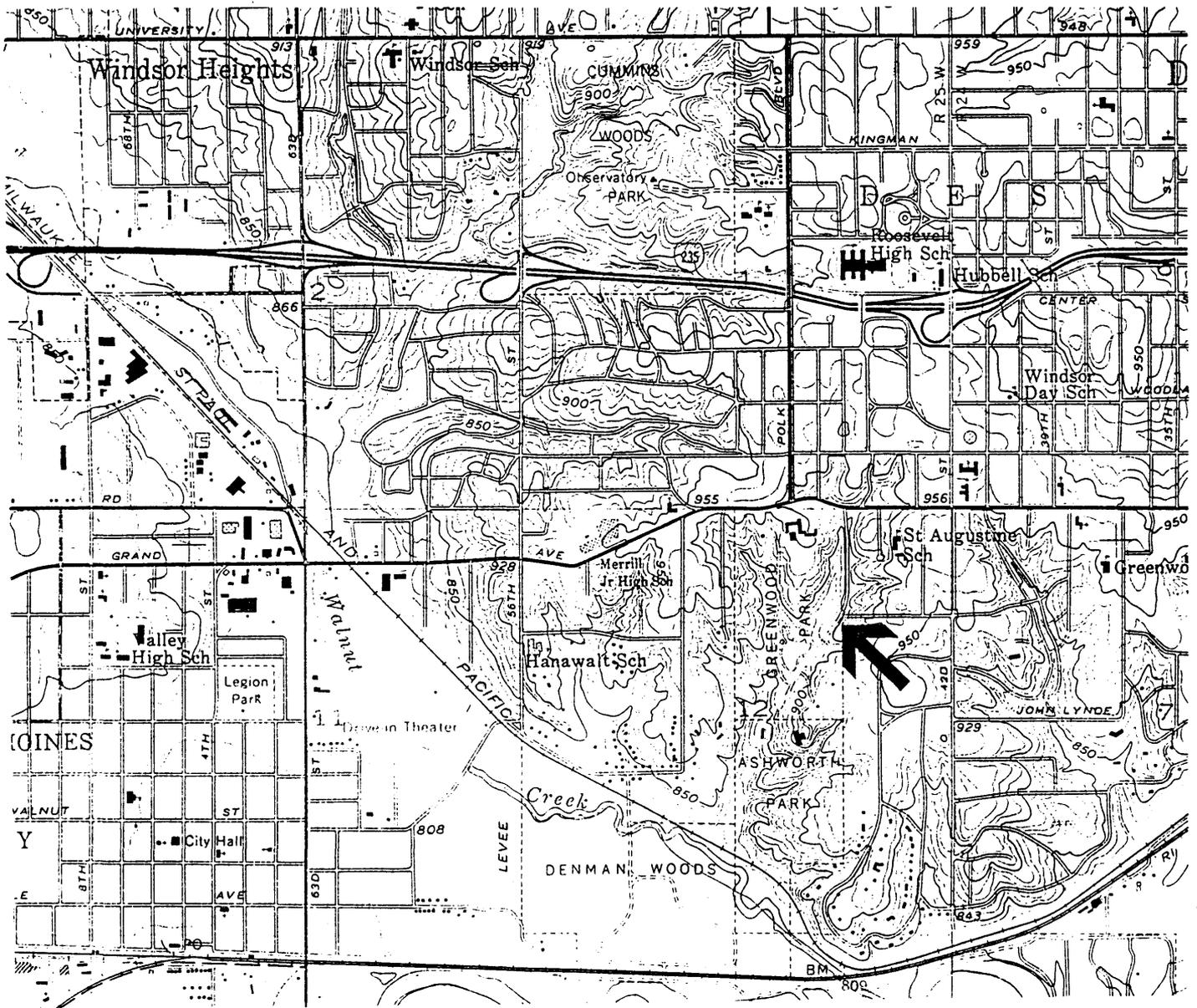
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## VICINITY MAP ARROW INDICATES SITE



Source: U.S.G.S. map, Des Moines SW Quadrangle.



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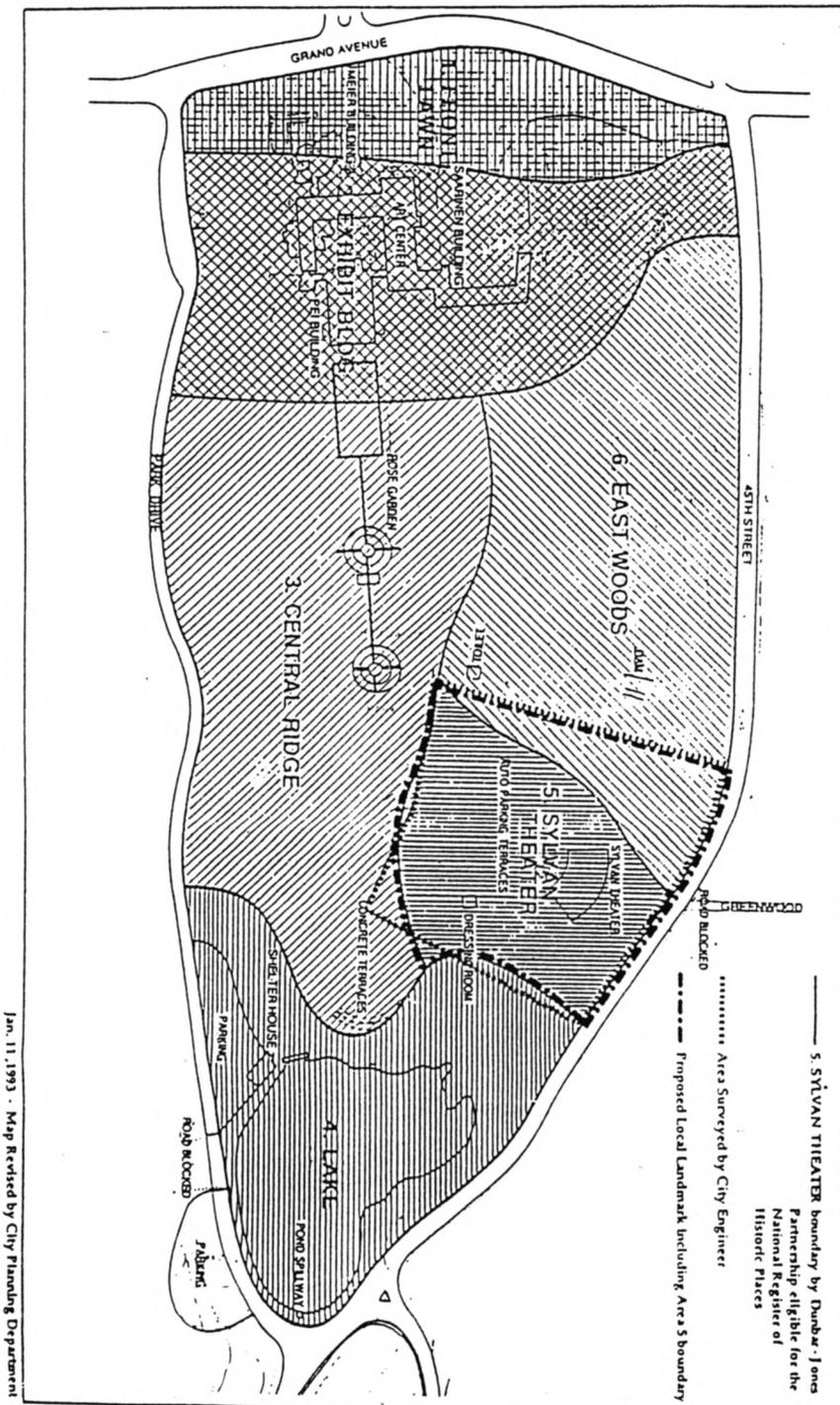
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

GREENWOOD PARK  
LAND USE AREAS



Source: Dunbar/Jones Partnership and City of Des Moines.



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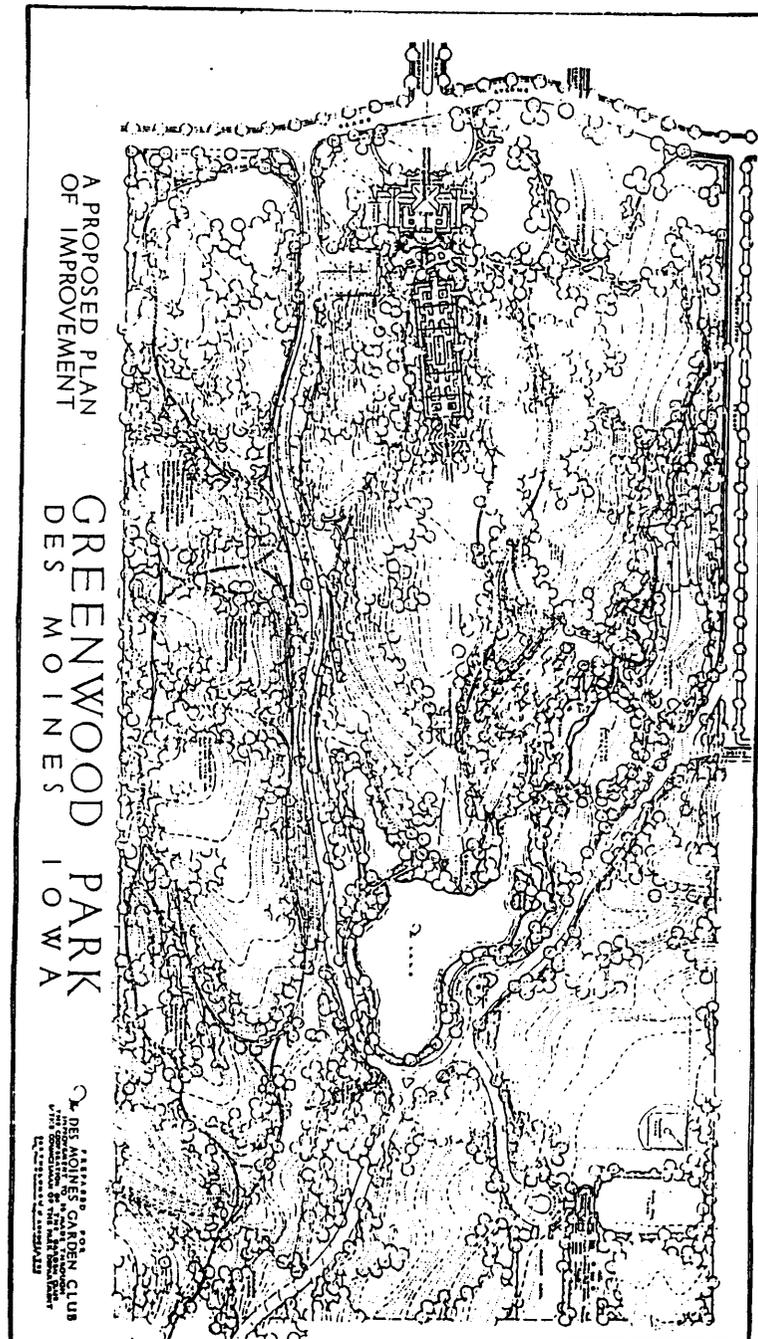
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## GREENWOOD PARK CONCEPT PLAN HARLAND BARTHOLOMEW AND ASSOCIATES



Source: Original drawing by C. A. Baughman, Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

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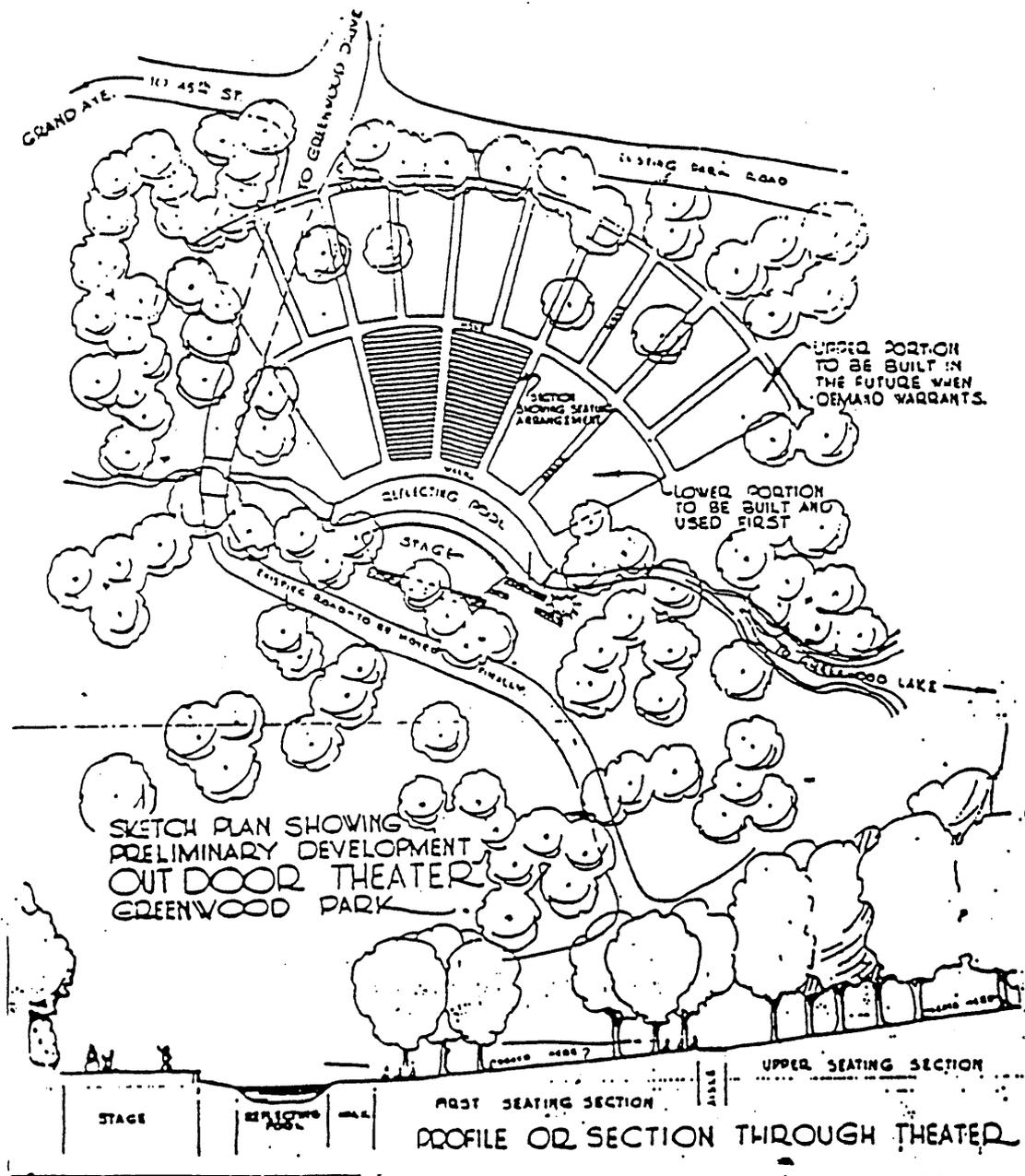
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## SYLVAN THEATER ROBINSON MASTER PLAN

### *City Plans an Outdoor Amphitheater for Dramatic and Religious Programs*



Source: *Des Moines Register*, January 25, 1931.



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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is significant under Criterion A as representative of the outdoor theater movement of the 1930s. In her book, *The Politics of Park Design*,\* Galen Cranz describes four periods in the history of parks in America:

The Pleasure Ground, 1850-1890  
The Reform Park, 1900-1930  
Recreational Facilities, 1930-1965  
The Open Space, 1965-present

Cranz also defines open space as fenced and functional use of parks. Built in 1931, the Sylvan Theater Historic District falls into the Recreational Facilities period. Cranz states that the Reform Park era ended abruptly and that a major change occurred in the early 1930s toward what became known as the "recreational facility." The new purpose of parks after 1930 was to provide pleasure and entertainment for leisure time. Services expanded and recreational facilities came to include pageants, festivals, open air concerts, park choral groups, theater, social dancing, and a general catch-all called "community service."\*\* The Sylvan Theater was an example of this expanded view of recreation. As one expression of the outdoor theater movement in America, it came as a completely new type of park facility in Des Moines.

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is also significant under Criterion C for its landscape architecture. As a designed historic landscape, Sylvan Theater calls attention to the firm of Harland Bartholomew Associates, noted city planners and landscape architects of St. Louis, Missouri; Francis Asbury Robinson, landscape architect of Des Moines; and J. Haslett Bell, civil engineer of the Des Moines Planning Commission. The theater also calls attention to a cooperative effort among these professionals in its planning and implementing. In submitting a concept plan for the Sylvan Theater to the City of Des Moines, the example of the Harland Bartholomew Associates firm illustrates how professional landscape architects disseminated the idea of outdoor amphitheaters across America and promoted the outdoor theater movement. The Sylvan Theater Historic District is also significant as a designed historic landscape because it introduced a new type of environment in Des Moines--the outdoor amphitheater.

The period of significance for the Sylvan Theater Historic District, under Criterion A, is 1931-1945, the time it served as an outdoor theater. This significance continued following World War II; however, the 1945 date reflects the National Register's 50-year threshold of historic significance. The period of significance, under Criterion C, is 1931, the year the theater was built. Significant dates include 1931, its year of construction; 1933 and 1934, when spectator seating was replaced; and 1937, when one production attracted over 8,000 spectators, probably the largest gathering at the site.

\* Cranz, Galen. *The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America*.

\*\* Acrea, Kenneth C., and Lowell J. Soike. *Iowa Conservation/Parks Movements Report*.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

**OUTDOOR THEATER MOVEMENT IN AMERICA**

The outdoor theater is rooted in the ancient Greek theater where clement weather and natural beauty blended to provide an ideal setting. In America, outdoor sites for pageants and festivals had enjoyed popularity on college campuses throughout the nation during the 1910s and 1920s. Interest in outdoor amphitheaters also emerged during this period, as evinced by the construction of such a facility at Forest Park in St. Louis, Missouri.

Increased construction of outdoor theaters in the early 1930s received added impetus from federal funds that were made available for public works in an effort to create jobs during the severe economic depression of the time. An editorial in *Recreation Magazine* in August 1935 states:

The increasing emphasis on outdoor production has resulted in wide interest in the construction of municipal and school outdoors theaters. In the past few years the allocation of funds for ERA and PWA project which serve the cultural interests of the people has done much to increase the number of outdoor theaters. And so today from coast to coast there are to be found theaters ranging from the "Little Lattice Playhouse" in Oakland, a simple stage erected in an old olive orchard and embellished with lattice work, to the elaborate amphitheater in Oklahoma City where, when the project is completed, 14,000 people will be accommodated. Between these two extremes of planned and constructed theaters are to be found innumerable woodland and garden theaters created by nature. Most of these are beautifully located in county and municipal parks.

Monroe H. Clark, head of the English Department at the University of Southern California, wrote in *School Arts Magazine* in June 1935:

Pageants and outdoor plays, historical for the most part, form an important element in the cultural life of our county. Natural amphitheaters are dotted about our Pacific states and throughout other sections of our glorious land. While most of these natural stages are formed by hill slopes, with trees and shrubs utilized as wings and settings, the Red Knolls Desert theater is a notable exception.

(This theater, in a natural desert rock formation, was founded by Gila Junior College in Thatcher, Arizona, in 1938.)

Some of the outdoor theaters which were built in or near the 1930-40 decade are listed below. In addition to these, two outdoor theaters in Iowa have been thus far discovered in addition to the Sylvan Theater--Grandview Park Amphitheater in Sioux City and the Pilot Knob State Park Amphitheater near Forest City. Both of these were built with the help of federal work relief funds in the 1930s. By way of contrast, Sylvan Theater in Des Moines was mostly constructed through funds provided by local government and the private sector, although some federal monies were used to improve the facility.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

SOME OUTDOOR THEATERS OF THE 1930S  
CONSTRUCTED WITH FEDERAL ASSISTANCE

Name	Location	Date of Construction	Notes
Outdoor Theater	Frank Newhall Look Memorial Park Northampton, MA	1934	Built with ERA funds and labor.
Lincoln Park Outdoor Theater	Lincoln Park Oklahoma City, OK	1934	Constructed by Civilian Conservation Corps.
Outdoor Theater	Grandview Park Sioux City, IA	1935	Built by Civil Works Administration.
Amphitheater	Pilot Knob State Park Forest City, IA	1935	
Greek Amphitheater	California Junior College San Bernadino, CA	1937	Constructed by WPA.
Open Air Theater	Pastorius Park Philadelphia, PA	1937	WPA project.
Griffiths Outdoor Theater	Griffiths Park Los Angeles, CA	-	-
Outdoor Theater	Nibley Park Salt Lake City, UT	-	-
Little Lattice Playhouse	Oakland, CA	circa 1935	-
Red Knolls Desert Theater	Gila Junior College Thatcher, AZ	1928	-
Garden Theatre	White Sulpher Springs, VA	1937	-
Amphitheater	Flagstaff Mountain State Park Boulder, CO	1935	-
Old Faithful Amphitheater	Yellowstone National Park	1935	-
- Sunken Garden Theater	San Antonio, TX	1937	-
Sylvan Theater	Monument Grounds Park Washington, D. C.	1917-1944	Built in phases.

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<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Construction</u>	<u>Notes</u>
Amphitheater	Forest Park St. Louis, MO	1920s	-
Duluth Outdoor Theater	Duluth, MN	-	-
Park WPA Theater	Minneapolis, MN	-	WPA project
Outdoor Theater	Ravinia, IL	-	-
Outdoor Theater	Baton Rouge, LA	1934	-
Outdoor Theater	Matoaka State Park Williamsburg, VA	1935	-
Outdoor Theater	Cain Park Cleveland Heights, OH	1939	-

The City of Flint, Michigan, took particular interest in the construction of outdoor theaters through Economic Recovery Administration (E.R.A.) funds and labor. In 1933, four outdoor theaters were constructed, at Whaley Park, Bassett Park, Farnumwood Park, and Mott Park. These theaters had raised stages covered with turf, orchestra pits, turf slopes for seating, and trees and shrubs to screen the performers.

**LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE**

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is significant as a designed historic landscape because it represents the work of master landscape architects, calls attention to one example of how these professionals popularized the outdoor theater movement in America, and embodies distinctive characteristics of a new type of environment in the City of Des Moines--the outdoor amphitheater.

Concept Plan

The concept plan for the Sylvan Theater in Des Moines originated with the firm of Harland Bartholomew Associates, noted city planners of St. Louis, Missouri. In 1927 this firm had prepared a comprehensive plan for the city's park system. Two years later, the Des Moines Garden Club engaged Mr. Bartholomew to prepare a more detailed plan for Greenwood Park.

Drawn by C. A. Baughman of the Bartholomew firm and unveiled in 1930, this concept plan proposed a variety of new land uses for Greenwood Park and a series of improvements related to them. Included among them was a sylvan theater to be located on the eastern edge of the park where the topography formed a natural bowl. According to the concept plan for the theater, 45th Street

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

would provide vehicular access to the theater area, spectator seating would face west, the stage would be located near the foot of a natural swale, and the hill and tree canopy behind the stage would provide a picturesque and natural backdrop. A master plan and construction drawings to implement Des Moines' sylvan theater followed quickly.

The idea for this theater was modeled after a successful outdoor theater in Forest Park in St. Louis, which was built in the 1920s. According to Rodowe H. Abeken, who directed a production at the Forest Park amphitheater in 1930 and was interviewed by the *Des Moines Register* after construction of Des Moines' Sylvan Theater in 1931, the Des Moines project followed identically the design of the St. Louis amphitheater. The Bartholomew proposal for a sylvan theater in Des Moines can thus be seen as an example of how professional landscape architects promoted the outdoor theater movement across America through the dissemination of ideas concerning outdoor amphitheaters.

Although other improvements recommended in by Bartholomew's concept plan for Greenwood Park, such as a rose garden and redesigned vehicular drives--were also implemented, other planned improvements, such as a conservatory, never materialized.

#### Master Plan

In 1931 the city announced plans for an outdoor amphitheater in Greenwood Park for "dramatic and religious productions." Francis Asbury Robinson, landscape architect of Des Moines, fleshed out the Bartholomew firm's concept with a master plan for this facility.

A Bostonian by birth, Francis Asbury Robinson (1887-1953) was educated at Dartmouth College and Harvard University, where he received a Master of Arts degree in landscape architecture. Robinson served in the U. S. Army during World War I and relocated to Des Moines in 1917 or 1919. Retaining his associations with the military, Robinson served as a Captain in the Engineering Reserve Corps during the 1920s and was later employed by the army during World War II in such jobs as chief site planner for Fort Leonard Wood, as well as for Camp Crowder in Missouri and the Des Moines Ordinance Plant, among others. In 1936 Robinson entered into partnership with Harold J. Parnham, operating their landscape architecture firm from offices at 6015 Grand Avenue in Des Moines. This business remained in operation until Robinson's death in 1953. Significant commissions for the firm included the Des Moines Water Works Park (Obituary).

Francis Asbury Robinson is significant for the Sylvan Theater Historic District because his master plan fleshed out Bartholomew's concept plan; because Robinson provided professional direction on the local level to keep the project moving; and because his master plan was mostly implemented.

Robinson's master plan for the Sylvan Theater Historic District called for two phases of implementation. As published in the *Des Moines Register* in 1931, seating was to be arranged in a "lower portion," constructed near the stage in phase one. Phase two called for construction of an "upper portion" for seating (which was never implemented). A reflecting pool stood between the stage and seating.

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Robinson's contribution to the Sylvan Theater also holds force of significance because of his known participation in local dramatic groups and promotion of the facility for these purposes. On opening night of the Sylvan Theater, Parker L. Crouch, Mayor of Des Moines, "commended Francis Asbury Robinson, president of the drama association, Gregory Foley, director, and Ed Breen, jr., business manager, for their work in promoting the theater. . ." (*Des Moines Register*, June 27, 1931.)

Construction Drawings

In 1931, J. Haslett Bell, civil engineer for the Des Moines City Planning Commission, prepared construction plans for the Sylvan Theater. Construction began immediately and was completed in that year.

**SUMMARY**

Built in a public park in 1931, the Sylvan Theater Historic District reflects a movement that took place throughout the United States in the 1930s. It was a movement to expand the facilities of parks beyond the passive enjoyment of natural and cultivated landscape, and playground and sports activities; to include facilities for pageants, drama, music, and other cultural interests. The outdoor theater was the natural solution to providing such facilities to all citizens at minimum cost, and many, like the Sylvan Theater in Des Moines, were built in this period. In Des Moines, as elsewhere, its outdoor theater was very popular and attracted large crowds in the time of its flourishing in the 1930s and early 1940s.

The Sylvan Theater Historic District is also representative of the outdoor theater movement in that federal funds through emergency relief programs aided in the construction of the theater (replaced seating in 1934) and in programming (the operetta in 1937). Many authorities agree that the federal relief agencies, which were initiated to relieve unemployment, also resulted in a great stimulus to public arts programs and the development of outdoor theaters in the 1930s.

As a designed historic landscape, the Sylvan Theater Historic District represents an implemented concept plan and master plan, prepared by professional landscape architects, whose work introduced a new type of landscape architecture in Des Moines--the outdoor amphitheater.

The three categories entered on this form as areas of significance--social history, entertainment/recreation, and landscape architecture--are all relevant to the outdoor theater movement in America. The changing social attitudes toward entertainment and recreation in parks, the federal assistance to fund the construction of such facilities, and the ability of landscape architects to promote and design inviting environments for these activities, brought about the outdoor theater movement in the 1930s, and ultimately the Sylvan Theater Historic District in Des Moines.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH AND REGISTRATION**

Francis Asbury Robinson played an important role in civic history of Des Moines during critical years between the two world wars. This period saw formation of the City Planning Commission and comprehensive studies to plan the city's future. Robinson served on this commission for many years, sometimes as its chair. In this role, as in his role as a landscape architect, Robinson's contributions deserve study and assessment. His designs and that of his firm--Robinson and Parnham, landscape architects, which was established in 1936--should be included in this evaluation.

The Francis Asbury and Alice A. De Puy Robinson House, located at 1124 - 44th Street in Des Moines, should be surveyed and evaluated for National Register eligibility in association with Francis' career. Other residences and/or property types might also be associated with him.

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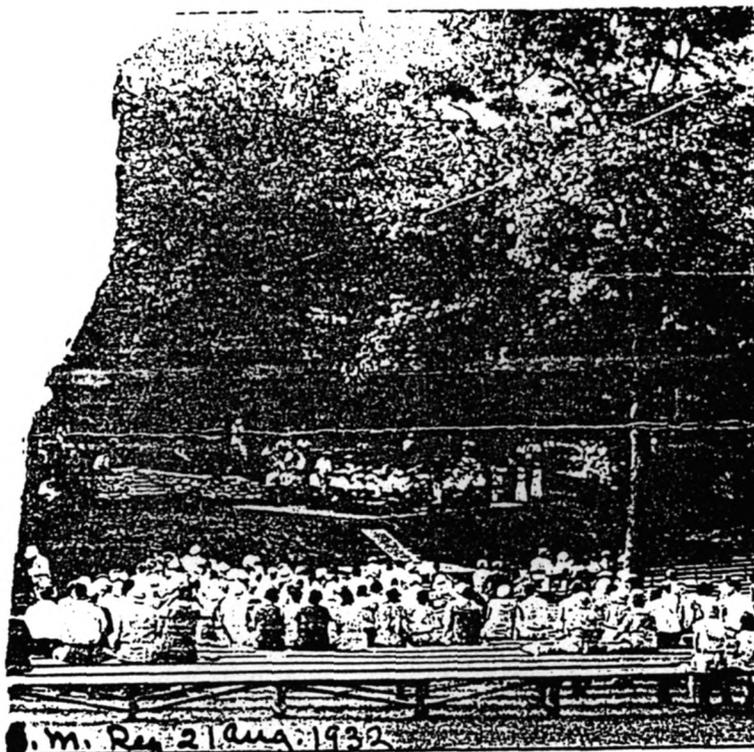
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## SYLVAN THEATER IN 1932 Looking West NOTE EARLY BENCHES WITHOUT BACKS.



THE SYLVAN THEATER IN GREENWOOD PARK  
an interesting sight for state fair visitors.

Source: *Des Moines Register*, August 21, 1932.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

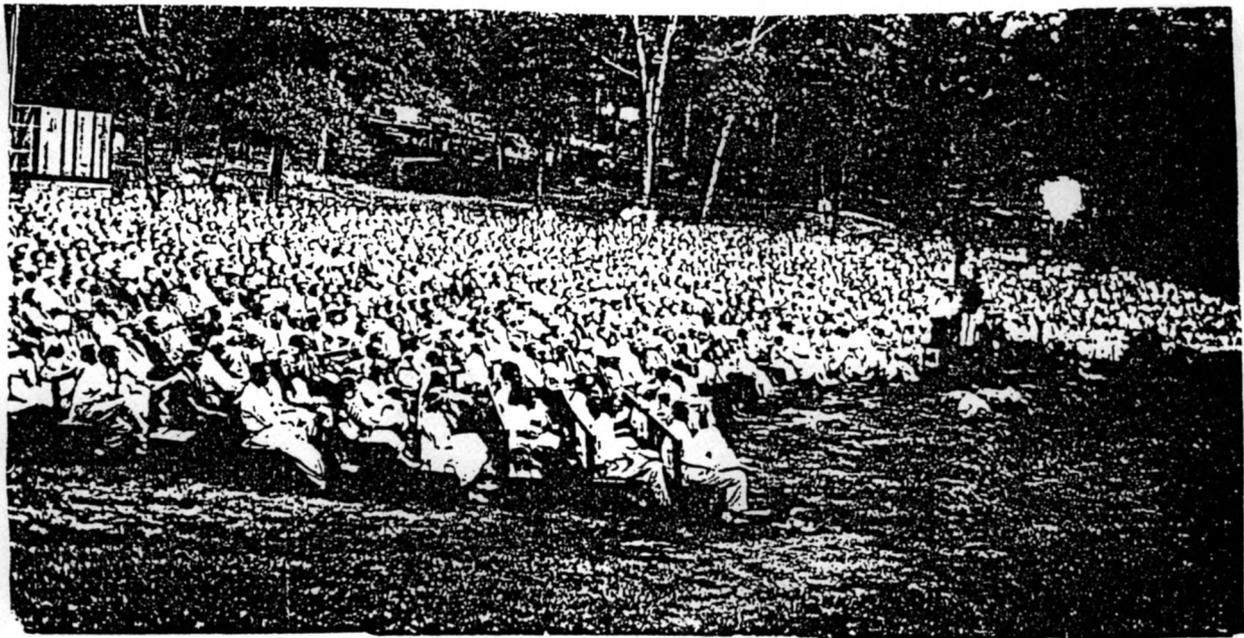
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## SUNDAY NIGHT SING CIRCA 1933 Looking South A POPULAR ACTIVITY OF THE OUTDOOR THEATER MOVEMENT IN DES MOINES



Source: Unlabeled photograph, files of the Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

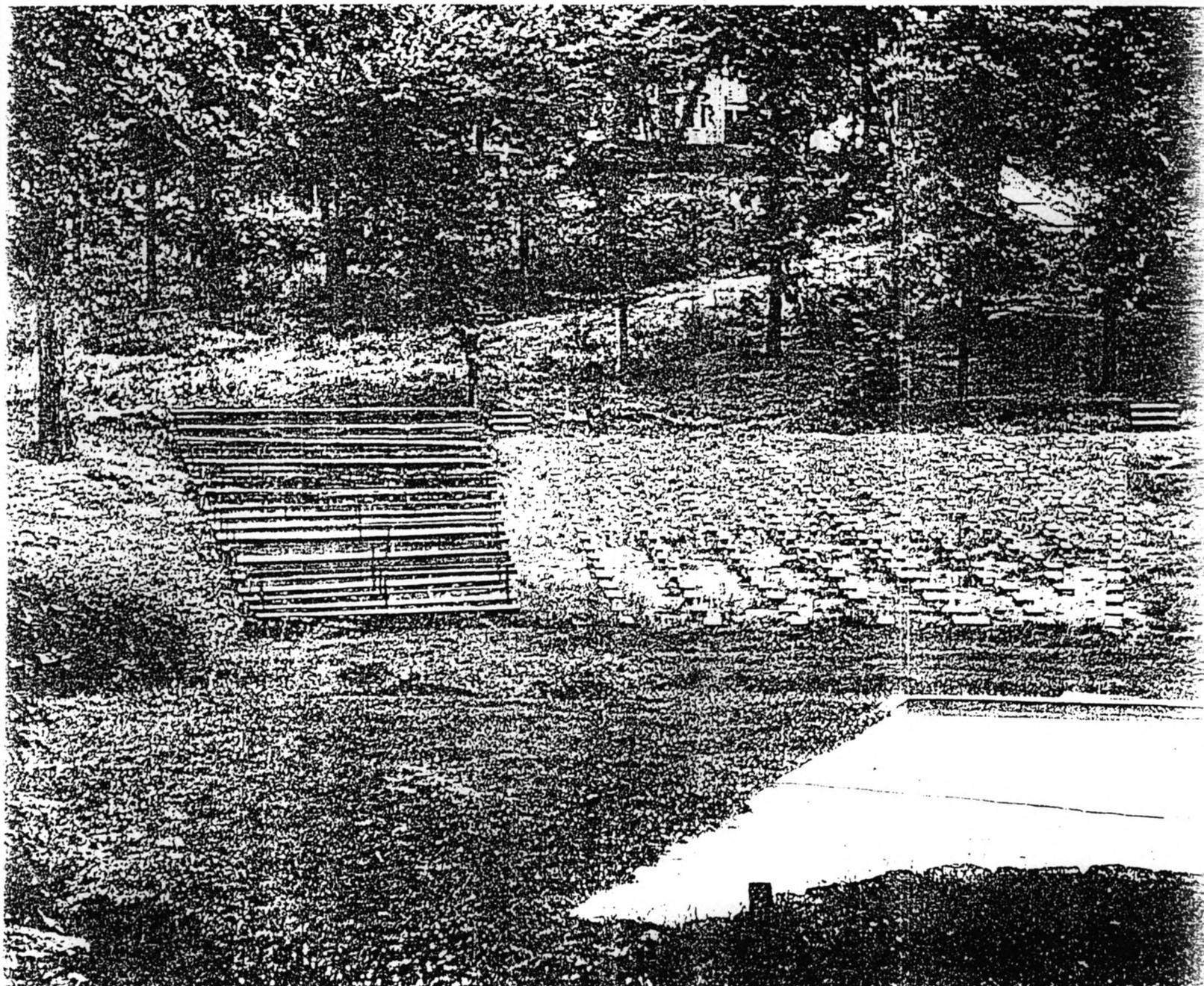
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## INSTALLATION OF NEW BENCHES IN 1933 Looking East



Source: Unlabeled photograph, files of the Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## SYLVAN THEATER IN 1934 Looking Southwest NONEXTANT PROJECTION BOOTH IN FOREGROUND



Source: Hartsook Photograph Collection, Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

United States Department of the Interior  
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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

## SYLVAN THEATER IN 1934 Looking Northwest SHOWS NEW METAL FRAME BENCHES



Source: Hartsook Photograph Collection, Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

### BOOKS, SURVEYS, MINUTES, PHOTOGRAPHS, REPORTS

Acree, Kenneth C., and Soike, Lowell J.  
*Iowa Conservation/Parks Movements: A Historic Context Report.* Des Moines: State Historical Society of Iowa, 1987.

Granz, Galen  
*The Politics of Park Design: A History of Urban Parks in America.* Cambridge, MIT Press, 1982.

Des Moines Department of Parks and Recreation  
*Board Meeting Minutes 1925-1945.*

Hartsook, Robert  
Hartsook Collection of Photographs. Des Moines Department of Park and Recreation.

National Park Service  
*Park Structures and Facilities.* United States Department of the Interior, 1935.

Page, William C.  
*Historical, Architectural and Archaeological Survey of Greenwood Park.* Des Moines: Dunbar/Jones Partnership, 1990.

Francis Asbury Robinson Biographical Sketch  
*Who's Who in Des Moines, 1929*

### MAGAZINE ARTICLES

"World at Play." *Recreation*, February 1934.

"Nature Carves a Theater and Sets a Stage." *School Arts*, June 1935.

"Sioux City's New Amphitheater." *Recreation*, August 1935.

"A Few of America's Outdoor Theaters." *Recreation*, August 1935.

"The Federal Children's Theater in New York City." *Recreation*, 1936.

"Curtain at 8 P.M." *Recreation*, January 1937.

"A New Summer Theater." *Theater Arts*, June 1937.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

"New Outdoor Theaters." *Recreation*, July 1937.

"San Antonio Opens Elaborate Garden Theater." *Architectural Record*, September 1937.

"Cleveland Hts., Ohio Enthusiastic for Open Air Theater." *American City*, July 1939.

NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

"Des Moines Garden Club Votes to Finance Preliminary Park Survey: \$400 Set Aside by Resolution." *Des Moines Tribune*, October 8, 1929.

"City Plans Outdoor Amphitheater for Dramatic and Religious Productions." *Des Moines Register*, January 25, 1931.

"Sylvan Theater to Open June 26; Outdoor Stage in Greenwood Nears Completion." *Des Moines Register*, May 10, 1931.

"1,500 Enjoy First Night of Sylvan Show." *Des Moines Register*, June 27, 1931.

"Public Song Fests Planned." *Des Moines Register*, July 19, 1931.

"7000 Attend Outdoor Sing." *Des Moines Register*, July 30, 1934.

"More Than 8,000 Witness Opera in Sylvan Theater." *Des Moines Register*, August 21, 1937.

"Sylvan Sings to Get Organ." *Des Moines Register*, May 15, 1941.

"Annual Sing Starts Sunday." *Des Moines Tribune*, June 12, 1943.

"[Francis Asbury] Robinson, 66, Dies at Home/Landscape Architect Widely Known."  
Unidentified local newspaper clipping dated October 8, 1953.

PLANS AND MAPS

*Bartholomew Master Plan for Greenwood Park.* C. A. Baughman, L. A., Bartholomew & Associates, City Plan and Landscape Engineers, Saint Louis, 1930.

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Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

*Greenwood Park Land Use Areas.* Page, W. C., in *Historical , Architectural and Archaeological Survey of Greenwood Park.* Des Moines: Dunbar/Jones Partnership, 1990.

Sketch Plan for Sylvan Theater. Francis Asbury Robinson, L. A., 1931. Source: *Des Moines Register*, January 25, 1931.

*Boundaries of the Sylvan Theater as Surveyed by the Des Moines Planning Department and Approved by the City Council on January 4, 1993.* Office of the Des Moines City Clerk.

*Boundaries of the Sylvan Theater as Surveyed by the Des Moines Planning Department.* The same as those for January 4, 1993 but with straightened boundaries. Approved by the City Council on January 18, 1993. Office of the Des Moines City Clerk.

**PHOTOGRAPHS, HISTORICAL**

1. View, looking west, showing early benches without backs. *Des Moines Register*, August 21, 1932.
2. A Sunday night sing. View, looking south, showing benches with wood backs. Undated, probably 1933. Photo from files of Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.
3. Installation of new benches with iron frames anchored to concrete blocks. Photo taken 1933. Looking east. From photo collection of Des Moines Park and Recreation Department.
4. View to the west showing projection booth. Taken January 19, 1934. Hartsook Collection at Des Moines Park and Recreation Department office.
5. View to north showing four sections of seats and new metal frame benches. Taken January 19, 1934. Hartsook Collection at Des Moines Park and Recreation Department office.

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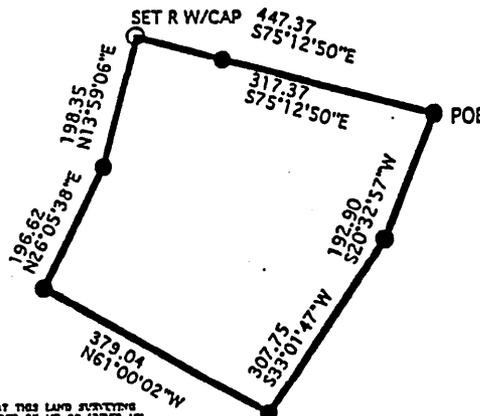
Sylvan Theater Historic District, Polk County, Iowa.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

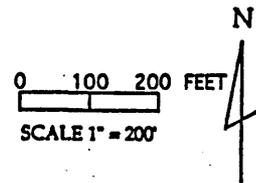
Verbal Boundary Description

A parcel of land in the Northeast 1/4 of Section 12, Township 78 North, Range 25 West of 5th P. M., locally known as Greenwood Park, described as follows:

Commencing as a point of reference at the Northwest corner of said Northeast 1/4; thence North 90° (degrees) 00' (minutes) 00" (seconds) East 1324.18 feet; thence South 0° 00' 00" East 1140.89 to the point of beginning; thence South 20° 32' 57" West 192.90 feet; thence South 33° 01' 47" West 307.75 feet; thence North 61° 00' 02" West 379.04 feet; thence North 26° 05' 38" East 196.62 feet; thence North 13° 59' 06" East 198.35 feet; thence South 75° 12' 50" East 447.37 feet to point of beginning, all now included in and forming a part of the City of Des Moines, Polk County, Iowa.



I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS LAND SURVEYING DOCUMENT WAS PREPARED BY ME OR UNDER MY DIRECT PERSONAL SUPERVISION AND THAT I AM A DULY REGISTERED LAND SURVEYOR UNDER THE LAWS OF THE STATE OF IOWA. MY REGISTRATION EXPIRES DECEMBER 31, 1994.  
Jan. 8, 1994  
Michael E. Klapp  
MICHAEL E. KLAPP, L.S. IOWA REG. NO. 4481



Sylvan Theater boundaries passed by the Des Moines City Council January 18, 1993.

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire portion of Greenwood Park historically associated with the Sylvan Theater.

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**LIST OF PHOTOGRAPHS**

1. Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Greenwood Park  
Des Moines, IA 50312  
Entrance - steps to 45th Street.  
Looking southeast  
Virginia Pearsall, Photographer  
June, 1994
  
2. Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Greenwood Park  
Des Moines, IA 50312  
Center aisle. Shows large oak at back of stage.  
Looking southeast  
Virginia Pearsall, Photographer  
June, 1994
  
3. Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Greenwood Park  
Des Moines, IA 50312  
Dressing room  
Looking southeast  
Virginia Pearsall, Photographer  
June, 1994
  
4. Sylvan Theater Historic District  
Greenwood Park  
Des Moines, IA 50312  
Tree canopy and benches.  
Looking southeast  
Virginia Pearsall, Photographer  
June, 1994