

OMB

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

10413

**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 The Avery Theater
other names/site number Erickson's Drug Store/ Iowa Site Inventory Form #41-00095

2. Location

street & number 495 State Street not for publication N/A
city or town Garner vicinity N/A
state Iowa code IA county Hancock code 081 zip code 50438

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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.)

Barron Mitchell, DSHPO Sept. 29, 2008
Signature of certifying official Date
STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF IOWA
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 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
 removed from the National Register
 other (explain):

Signature of Keeper Date of Action
Erickson H. Beall 11.12.08

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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
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.)

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

 0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)
WORK IN PROGRESS

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Deco

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)
foundation CONCRETE
roof WOOD

walls BRICK
 STONE
other _____

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

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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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1931-1958

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.

Significant Dates

1931

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Waldron, Henry E.

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

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 of Additional Data

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

Name of repository: _____

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10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone Easting	Northing	Zone Easting	Northing
1	<u>15</u>	<u>451039</u>	<u>4772165</u>	
2	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
3	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>
4	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>	<u> </u>

 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 Jan Olive Nash/Historian & Architectural Historian, w/ assistance by Jennifer A. Price & research by Jill Blank

organization Tallgrass Historians L.C. date February 2008

street & number 2460 S. Riverside Drive telephone 319.354.6722

city or town Iowa City state IA zip code 52246

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 Jason Johnson, dba Rockledge Holding Co. LLC

street & number 2032A Broadway Blvd. telephone 310-924-5950

city or town Santa Monica state CA zip code 90404-2910

=====
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 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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7. Description

Summary Paragraph

Constructed over the winter and early spring months of 1930-31, The Avery Theater sits on the northeast corner of State and 5th streets, in the community of Garner, seat of Hancock County, Iowa. State Street is this small town's *de facto* Main Street, and 5th marks the southern edge of the town's three-block commercial district. To the north, US Hwy 18 and a set of railroad tracks effectively terminated growth of the town's commercial district in that direction. To the south of the State/5th street intersection, the character of the land use changes and a bit of light industry mixes in with the residential blocks until the Hancock County courthouse square is reached three blocks to the south of The Avery. Across 5th Street from The Avery sits a large yellow-brick creamery of the same vintage as the theater, while City Hall is located diagonally through the intersection. Attached brick one- and two-story storefront commercial buildings sit directly across State from the theater and on its north side. The theater shares its north party wall with the much older, brick, former City Hall. The Avery is two stories tall with a 49- by 93-foot rectangular footprint. Its roof is hidden from view but is gabled with a slight rise. The modernistic Art Deco theater building is clad in mottled brownish wire-raked brick and trimmed with gray stone at the foundation, the window sills and headers, and as roofline coping. The stylish façade is divided into three bays by its fenestration arrangement, the use of pilasters, and a slightly recessed central bay whose rooftop projects above the side bays. Narrow windows, along with the lively pattern of stone at the roofline, and the marquee framework, all herald this building as decidedly *not* a typical Garner storefront. The long south sidewall along 5th Street is devoid of windows, but beltcourses of vertically laid brick just above the sidewalk and, again, at the roofline give some relief to the vastness of the brick wall. The building's rear east wall terminates short of the alley, leaving a small paved area for parking. This rear wall contains the rear patron exit at the southeast corner, a larger doorway at the northeast corner, and a couple of irregularly placed windows high on the wall. Two openings are bricked in; two have plywood covering them. The interior of the movie theater was converted to a store after 1970 and essentially has been gutted of theater features except for the battleship blue, cream, and dusty rose interior paint scheme; remnants of two Regionalist-style wall murals; the coffered plaster ceiling; and parts of the floor plan. Walls of the two tiny shops originally incorporated into the front corners of the building are gone and their shopfront entrances have been replaced by reflective glass windows that sit on concrete block bulkheads. Despite the alterations, this building still exhibits the scale, footprint and form, as well as the essential façade features to easily enable the unfamiliar visitor to "read" it as an early twentieth-century movie theater. In fact, it would be hard to imagine the building's past as anything but a movie theater on small-town Main Street.

Exterior-State Street Façade

The State Street façade of The Avery Theater is the most complicated elevation and the only one that received a self-conscious program of style and decoration (Figs 1-2). The same brickwork seen on the façade was carried on around to the south wall because it was another public side, but the west-facing front wall was clearly the most architecturally important. The theater's façade was meant to be noticed by the movie-going patron both day and night and, within the context of movie theater architecture, it functioned as advertising, stage-setting, and public entrance.¹ The fancy brown and yellow-brown bricks that clad the surface of the theater's structural tile blocks and concrete are rough in texture and have ironspots (dark flecks). Bricks used in the southwest corner, where the façade and south sides meet, have a rounded edge from sidewalk to rooftop. Courses are laid in a pattern of five stretcher-brick rows to one row of alternating stretcher and headers—a decorative variation of the Flemish pattern—and bonded with a thin, deeply raked pinkish-gray mortar. At the street level, large plates of stone veneer form the base for each pilaster or vertical column between windows and doors. The façade's three bays, arranged as a wide recessed central bay flanked by two smaller bays, have lost their original sidewalk fenestration. The theater entrance's six doors have been replaced by a modern metal-framed and glass double-door flanked by wide glass sidelights.

¹ See generally, Maggie Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theater* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), especially Chapt. 5. The Movie Theater Takes Shape.

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The small shops originally incorporated into either side of the theater entrance now contain reflective glass display windows that are angled, from top inward to bottom (perhaps to reflect the harsh light of the setting sun) instead of entrances.



Figure 1 This undated historic photograph of The Avery is probably from the 1940s and shows the operating theater during its heyday. Note the vertical name signage above the canopy marquee. Patrons had peace of mind knowing the fire station was next door. Collection of Jill Blank.



Figure 2 Today the theater building is vacant, but, with the exception of the two corner shop entrances and the theater entrance itself, the building's outward appearance is little changed. Tallgrass Historians L.C. photograph, 2007.

Above the sidewalk level are extremely narrow and closely-spaced original windows that suggest banded windows. There are three such windows, each with a flat header, above each corner storefront. The central bay contains seven tall narrow windows with curved headers that rise in height toward the center so that an arch is formed. As originally contemplated by architect Henry Waldron, the woodwork around the windows was dark, which emphasized the vertical brick mullions that

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terminate in stone caps at the rooftop and enhanced the theater's Art Deco appearance (Fig. 3). According to the local newspaper, one of the later owners applied the cream color to the window trim in 1945, thereby establishing the tradition of stone-colored paint for the trim but also diminishing the strength of the Art Deco styling.² The framework for the essential canopy marquee is still in place, though its signboard and covering are gone. The vertical signage that bore The Avery's name and hung from the rooftop down the face of the building (seen in the photo in Figure 1) is also gone.

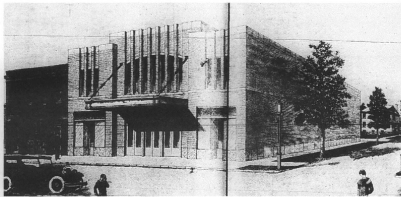


Figure 3 The architect's rendering for the new theater was printed in the local paper about the time of its completion. This image was first published by the newspaper on November 26, 1930. *Garner Leader*, March 11, 1931.

Exterior – Other Elevations

In comparison to the State Street façade, the 5th Street side is severely plain (Fig. 4). Because it aligns with the interior auditorium—where darkness and shelter from the hot summer sun were essential—there are no windows or doors. The long wall terminates at the roofline with stone coping. With the rear exit and few openings, nearly all filled, the rear eastside alley wall of the theater is strictly utilitarian. Its walls are of an irregular common brick laid in a common bond pattern. The patron exit in the southeast corner contains a modern metal and glass door and a brick chimney rises from the roof near this southeast corner. Tile coping appears at the rooftop on this wall and around the corner on the north wall. While the north wall is a party wall, shared with the older and taller former City Hall and fire house, the older building is not as deep into its lot as the theater. About half of the theater's north wall is exposed and appears to be similar to the south wall in construction. It has no windows, again, because the auditorium is on the wall's interior.

² "Theater Front Repainted," *Garner Leader*, June 27, 1945. This small news item says that G.B. "Gil" Kirchner (owner 1942-1946) "had the front of his Avery theater painted in red and cream colors."

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Figure 4 Current view of The Avery's long south side wall along 5th Street (left) and the narrower rear wall and parking area. Tallgrass Historians L.C. photograph, 2007.

Interior

After the movie theater shut down, the building was converted to a drug store. Alterations made for this purpose include removal of the movie screen, stage, theater seating, and ticket box office; removal of the interior walls that enclosed the corner shops and the "fight wall" between the auditorium and the inner lobby; leveling the auditorium floor; application of a surface cladding over the walls; and installation of a dropped ceiling, which necessitated an adhesive on the walls and small, regularly spaced holes in the ceiling plasterwork and beams. Today, some of these changes have been reversed. For the first 10 to 12 feet inside the front door, the ceiling overhead is low because the upper floor, which once held the women's and men's lounges, the "cry room" where fussy babies were taken, the projection booth, and a very small manager's office, is still extant. The north stairway to the women's lounge is gone, as is the original stairway to the men's lounge and projection booth on the south side. Access to the second level is by a set of rough wood construction stairs located approximately where the south staircase was located. The rest of the interior is basically the auditorium space, now completely open except for a small framed cubicle at the south end of the auditorium.

Because walls and some surface treatments are missing, the interior structure is exposed and available for examination. Fireproofing the building was a prime concern for the building's original Minnesota owners, for obvious general reasons, and this was surely appreciated by the community, which had recently witnessed the Lyric Theater go up in flames.³ This concern led to the use of steel beams and riveted steel trusses to hold the roof structure and create the clear span needed in the auditorium. Concrete was used for the floors, both in the auditorium and the lounge/projection booth on the second floor. Brick and tile blocks were used in the walls. Later, a steel beam also was used to support the north party wall, when a large opening was created between the theater and its neighbor, the former City Hall building.

Remarkably, the second historic paint scheme dating to December, 1939, which included two sidewall murals, survives

³ The Lyric had ceased operating as a movie theater but had been remodeled for indoor golf and skating. "Livemore sells Lyric to Be Used for In-Doors Golf," *Garner Leader*, October 15, 1930; "Night Fire Destroys Landmark, Recently Golf Course and Rink," *Garner Leader*, January 21, 1931.

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today.⁴ Also, the coffered ceiling has now been uncovered after many years as well. The present interior decorative treatment replaced the original surface treatments installed by "artists" hired by Charles Marks, the first manager, in 1931.⁵ Research has discovered that the person responsible for the 1939 remodeling was Donald Gran, who took over operation of the theater in November, 1939, and two current Garner residents remember the murals being added to the theater walls.⁶ Evidence of the first decorative scheme executed by Marks' artists is found in both historic photos and the physical fabric of the building itself. An undated photo of the inner lobby (Fig. 5) reflects the initial surface treatments. Woodwork is quite dark, while the cloth curtains are light in color and are hanging on the lobby side of the light wall. The beams of the coffered ceiling appear to have



Figure 5 The foyer, or inner lobby, undated but circa 1930s. The interior design was described at the time as "modernistic." The angular, abstracted shapes of the wallpaper on the lower wall panel are of typical of Art Deco treatments.⁷ Collection of Jill Blank.

⁴ "Grand Opening of Avery Theater to be Saturday Night," *Garner Leader*, December 13, 1939.

⁵ According to the local newspaper, the interior was being finished by "artists" hired by the original manager of the new theater, Charles Marks. Their efforts were critiqued in February, 1931 by a visiting Minneapolis decorator, H.M. Shelton, with whom Marks had a "strong personal friendship." H.M. Shelton, of Shelton Decorating Company, was said to be of national repute and an expert in "atmospheric" and "modernistic" theater interiors. Indeed, at the time he was working on three theater projects, all in small, remote towns (Milbank and Donald, South Dakota, and Calumet, Minnesota). A "Google" Internet search returned no results on Shelton or his company. *Garner Leader*, February 25, 1931.

⁶ Marj Finn, interview with Jill Blank, July 14, 2007; Clark Pollack, interview with Jill Blank, undated but ca. August, 2007.

⁷ *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931; Theodore Menten, compiler, *The Art Deco Style in Household Objects, Architecture, Sculpture, Graphics, Jewelry* (New York: Dover Publications, 1972).

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two colors, while the plasterwork between the beams is a third, lighter color. Walls are divided into three horizontal panels. The highest panel near the ceiling is the lightest in tone, the middle panel is the widest and a mid-range tone, while the lowest panel has a multi-tone pattern of either paint or wallpaper. This pattern, an angular patchwork of several colors, is consistent with the Art Deco motif. Also consistent with the Art Deco style, the lobby carpet appears to be a stylized floral pattern with perhaps a 20-inch repeat.

While the original colors employed in this decorative scheme are unknown, one former projectionist during the 1940s recalls red tile in the foyer, or outer lobby, and there are strips of a dark red paint visible in a few places that seem incongruous with the present paint scheme.⁸ A bit of medium-tint green can be seen in spots near the ceiling beams, in places once hidden behind molding that is now missing. The lounge floors are painted in a mustard gold (men's) and pink (women's), a color scheme that could date to either decorative program. Generally, deep saturated colors distinguish the palette of Art Deco interiors of the 1920s and early 1930s, with high contrast one of the goals, achieved through the use of black or dark accents. As the 1930s wore on, these bold or exotic colors were used more and more frequently against a background of pastel colors.⁹

The historic color scheme dating to 1939 and seen in the theater today is distinctly muted and consists of a battleship blue (contains strong gray tones) in both light and dark tones, gray and cream, and a dusty rose. These colors have been applied to the long auditorium walls in horizontal bands. The ceiling is monochromatic gray, though some of this color may simply be a coating of grime from being hidden behind a dropped ceiling for 40 years. Most remarkable are the decorative swirls painted on the walls. These swirls are seen in two historic photographs (Figs. 6-7) as well as in numerous places on the walls today.



Figure 6 Undated (but probably 1940s) photograph taken in the auditorium, looking back at the audience, the projection booth light, and the "light wall" separating the auditorium from the inner lobby. Note the painted swirls on the walls, the light trim work, and the dark curtains that hang on the inside of the auditorium. Collection of Jill Blank.

⁸ Wayne Rasmus, interview with Jill Blank, July 13, 2007.

⁹ "What is Art Deco?" Antique Home (accessed at <http://www.antiquehome.org/> on February 9, 2008). Homer Laughlin's popular line of ceramics called "Fiestaware" is a good example of the color palette used in Art Deco furnishings.

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Figure 7 Painted swirls enhance the screen and stage in this undated photograph of the auditorium. The proscenium is framed by light-colored trim work. The muted paint tones and curved trim work are consistent with popular interior decoration motifs and "Early American" furnishings of the late 1930s and 1940s. Collection of Jill Blank.



Figure 8 Current photo of the north wall (party wall), looking through an opening made between the former theater auditorium and the old City Hall next door in order to join the two spaces for a past retail use. Note the steel I-beam header installed between two interior pilasters. The decorative painted swirls may be inspired by the modernistic plaster waves appearing at the top of the pilasters just below the ceiling. Note also the wall mural to the right of the opening. Tallgrass Historians L.C. photograph, 2007.

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The two large murals that exist on either side of the auditorium toward the screen and stage area remain partially intact. Each one contained a nearly life-size human silhouette, cut out of particle board and lightly painted in blues, gold, and rose colors. The figures were held out from the wall plane by a few inches and electrical wires are evidence that they were illuminated. Indeed, some local residents remember the figures being painted to glow in black light.¹⁰ The stylized figures are centered in a large round medallion with a dark red field and cream colored band. Behind the figure, the paint is a gold color similar to that found on the men's lounge walls. Of the two, the south mural is less intact. Its particle board figure is missing, leaving only the gold shadow of the figure against the red field. Though essentially androgynous, the shadow figure has what may be long blowing hair and shapely legs, suggesting an athletic female figure (but also could be a Native American figure). Enough of the north wall figure remains so that there is little doubt about what is depicted—the yeoman farmer with hoe in hand. The subject matter is reminiscent of the work of Regionalist painters of the 1920s and 30s such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, yet the yeoman figure is stylized in the fashion of the commercial advertising of the day. The mural is an excellent example of geographically appropriate artwork meant for mass viewing in a commercial setting, and a natural choice for a movie theater setting in small-town rural America of the 1930s.



Figure 9 The yeoman farmer mural on the theater's north wall looks toward the screen and stage, with a hoe in his left hand and a large gear behind him. The figure probably represents the traditional values associated with rural life in a time of rapidly modernizing agriculture and the optimistic, progressive future of the upper Midwest. Tallgrass Historians L.C. photograph, 2007.

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At the time of the 1939 redecoration, which was undertaken by Mr. Gran within a month of his tenure as operator, the local newspaper cheerily described the work as follows: "A crew of professional decorators employed by the Svenson and Elstrom firm of Minneapolis arrived here to begin work early Monday morning...Local men are augmenting the decorating crew, and both day and night shifts are working in order that the theater may be reopened Saturday night...The main part of the auditorium is being repainted in powder blue and shades of rust and gray. The foyer and lobby are also being redecorated, and all light fixtures are being replaced with lights of the fluorescent neon type. Highlight of the new decorative scheme will be the two ultra modern mural panels. Both of them in huge circles, the panels will be made of engraved structure [sic], finished in warm shades of fluorescent [sic] paint and illuminated with black lights, something entirely new in this part of the country, which will give the figures the appearance of rare statuary."¹¹

Integrity

Integrity of the exterior of The Avery Theater is good and enhanced by the structural marquee and the original windows across the upper façade. The theater remains in its original location and its setting as a commercial building adjacent to similar main street neighbors is preserved. Integrity of feeling is very strong and integrity of association is intact. Despite the intrusively modern reflective glass windows to either side of the main door, and modifications to the central theater entrance doors, the building's historic function as a movie theater is hard to mistake. The overall design and scale of the building, its long side wall and corner lot location, as well as its tall central bay, work together to preserve the essential characteristics of the classic Main Street movie theater constructed for that purpose early in the last century. While the alterations to the shops and theater entrance mean some historic materials have been replaced, the bulk of the building's original fabric is present. Because of this, integrity of workmanship remains strong. Interior alterations certainly have a negative effect and the loss of historic fabric is severe, but the remarkable preservation of the historic paint scheme and decoration, plus the retention of the basic plan of each floor (preserved in paint and other floor markings) promise the ability to accurately recreate the original floor plan. Currently, a local preservation group is working to acquire ownership, create a business plan, and restore the theater in order to return it to its original function.

¹¹ *Garner Leader*, December 13, 1939.

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8. Narrative Statement of Significance

Summary Paragraph

Constructed in 1930-31, The Avery Theater is locally significant and individually eligible under Criterion C as the only theater building in Garner, Iowa constructed specifically to show sound movies, and as a good example of the modernistic movie theater property type, here specifically in the Art Deco style, constructed on Iowa's small-town Main Streets by independent operators who were unaffiliated with the nationwide studios or big theater chains. The theater is also significant under Criterion A as a locally important social and entertainment venue brought to the community through the combined efforts of local boosters and out-of-town investment interests. Designed by Twin Cities architect Henry E. Waldron, this modernistic Art Deco brick and stone-trimmed theater served generations of Garner area residents by providing them with a comfortable gathering place to enjoy the new technology of sound movies and participate in the fantasies projected onto the screen. It was a socially acceptable place where they could meet their friends, date their lovers, and escape the humdrum of daily life as well as the trials of the Great Depression and a world war. Secondly, The Avery served the community as a civic hall where local groups could hold meetings, service agencies could present programs, fundraising and war-defense drives could take place, and the local Chamber of Commerce could annually sponsor a visit from Santa during free Saturday shows for the town's children (leaving parents free to holiday shop). In sum, the theater operated as a vital local institution that strengthened the bonds of the Garner community by giving purpose and place for frequent gatherings of diverse interests. While the theater was met with great joy and enthusiasm at its opening, and operated steadily for several decades despite several management changes, the local movie business began to wither following World War II as alternative entertainment industries, like television, emerged. Playing its usual paradoxical role, the automobile's initial contribution to The Avery's business was positive; it broadened the reach of The Avery's attractions by providing ready transport into the heart of Garner for rural and surrounding community residents. Gradually though, the flow shifted directions and the automobile began to take away The Avery's patrons to bigger cities and more diverse entertainments. Today, a reawakening of the community is underway to the value of local entertainment and the importance of shared communal experiences. The historic commercial district surrounding The Avery Theater still contains many historically and architecturally important buildings, with varying degrees of integrity, but The Avery remains the sole historic movie theater in the district and the town. Its period of significance, 1931 to 1958, reflects the year the building was completed, through the 50-year age threshold for consideration as a historic place since the movie theater operated to and beyond that year.

The Rise of the Movie Theater Industry and its Reception in Iowa

The Avery Theater was constructed at an especially pivotal moment in the development of the movie theater industry, though few would have realized it at the time. The Avery's planning and construction during 1930 marked the apex of movie theater construction in the United States, following a quarter of a century of growth and a three-year sprint to construct theaters after the premier of the first "talkie" in 1927.¹ Movie theaters of all types—adapted storefronts, converted nickelodeons and vaudeville halls, picture palaces, and the specially-built neighborhood movie theater—were created by the thousands during the economic prosperity of the 1920s. By 1925, there were 19,489 such venues and the numbers were still climbing. Forty-eight million Americans attended at least one movie a week during that year, evidence that the popular form of entertainment was shedding its disreputable origins and being widely accepted by the middle class, even in the stiff-collar, Sabbath-keeping upper Midwest, where many local ordinances prohibited Sunday movies. Garner itself had such a city ordinance, stridently defended by "members of the Presbyterian and Methodist churches" and the local chapter of the Women's Christian Temperance Union.²

Events that took place just a few miles north of Garner in Lake Mills—where the local Methodist preacher evolved considerably in his attitudes about movies—reveal the growing acceptability of movies as entertainment in small-town Iowa

¹ The movie was Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer*.

² Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 195; *Garner Leader*, March 5, 1930; *Garner Leader*, Feb. 26, 1930.

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throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. William Spence, a young pastor with a growing family in the 1910s, ardently followed, and preached from the pulpit, the tenets of his faith that regulated personal conduct and guided social behavior. Spence railed against the silent movies that were shown in a second-floor opera hall as a “diversion that cannot be used in the name of the Lord Jesus,” that is, until he attended one Saturday matinee with his son, ostensibly to point out the movie’s harmful content. Spence emerged from the William S. Hart cowboy picture, however, convinced of the moral lessons to be mined in the cowboy movie, where goodness triumphed over evil. Thereafter, the Rev. Spence frequently accompanied his son to the Saturday matinees.³

Though many in rural Iowa lagged behind Spence in accepting the entertainment format, the groundswell of popular appreciation of moving pictures would not be quelled. Movie attendance in the nation nearly doubled between 1925 and 1930, when 90 million Americans attended a showing weekly. However, by the time the local Garner silent picture house, the Lyric Theatre, closed and the sound-capable Avery was under construction in 1930, the construction boom prompted by the introduction of talkies was showing signs of busting. The number of operating theaters across the country had crested at 23,344 in 1928 and was beginning to decline, shrinking to 23,000 in 1929 and then 21,993 in 1930, both because theaters that were unable to handle the technological requirements for sound shut down and because the industry became overbuilt with an excess of new theater seats. When the number of movie theaters dropped precipitously to 14,126 in 1931—just as The Avery had its grand opening—the deepening nationwide economic depression certainly was the cause.⁴

The Avery Theater and its Architecture as a Type

The moving picture industry of the 1920s had evolved from both the penny arcades and nickelodeons associated with urban immigrant neighborhoods, as well as the live performance format of vaudeville, an offshoot of so-called legitimate theater.⁵ In order to encourage their acceptability, new movie theaters constructed in the early 1920s were housed behind classical facades, as vaudeville and large opera halls once had been.⁶ As theater size and attendance increased, the architects of picture palaces in the 1920s, literally seating thousands of patrons, adopted much more exotic themes for both architectural facades and interior decorations, casting the theater-as-architecture in the starring role, rather than the silent movie on the screen. Chicago’s Granada Theater was constructed in 1926 in the Spanish Baroque style with a heavily ornamented façade of white-glazed molded tile outlined in glittery white light bulbs—a landmark incapable of being ignored by the passing traffic, night or day (Fig. 10). Once inside the 3400-seat edifice, patrons were treated to an interior of plush velvet draperies, expensive artwork, and a grand staircase fit for royalty, which was exactly what its promoters, the Marks Brothers, intended.⁷ On the West Coast, California’s Catalina Island saw the Avalon Theater built in 1929 for chewing-gum king Philip Wrigley who liked to escape from Chicago’s blustery winters to the cool blue waters of the southern Pacific coast. The Avalon greeted its patrons with murals inspired by the island’s surroundings—aqua underwater seascapes of rocks, coral, and darting orange fish—and treated them to an atmospheric auditorium ceiling of twinkling lights against an indigo sky.⁸

3 Jan R. Olive Full, “Hinterland or Heartland: The Survival of Small-town Lake Mills, Iowa, 1850-1950” (unpubl. Ph.D., Loyola University Chicago, 2006), 92-93. Spence’s conversion was recounted by his son, Hartzell Spence, in a novel entitled *One Foot in Heaven*, which was made into a movie in starring Frederic March. The 1941 movie received a Best Picture nomination from the Academy Awards.

4 *Garner Leader*, October 15, 1930; Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, Appendix A. Movie attendance figures declined throughout the early depression years, but turned around in 1934 and steadily climbed until after World War II. From a peak of 90 million in 1948, attendance figures then dropped again each year thereafter. By 1970, weekly attendance figures were down to 17.7 million.

5 Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 147; Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 6.

6 Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 17; also David Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters* (Washington, D.C.: Preservation Press, 1987), 23, 25.

7 Jan Olive Nash, “Granada Theater: Public Space and Private Memories” (unpubl. typescript research paper, 1997), 3 [located at the Library and Archives of Loyola University Chicago]. The relationship of the Chicago Marks Brothers, if any, with The Avery Theater’s Charles Marks is unknown.

8 Personal observation of the author, 1995.

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The Avalon's modernistic Art Deco styling suggests that architectural influences were churning in the movie industry just as plans for The Avery Theater were being developed by its architect, Henry E. Waldron, in St. Paul, Minnesota. By the end of the 1920s, grand size and exoticism were giving way in importance to the sound quality of the movie projection. This emphasis on technological innovation and "new fashionedness" associated with talkies was naturally compatible with modernistic architecture and design, where "form follows function" was the canon. Disconnecting design from historical revivalism, Art Deco offered a new array of images and colors that could be molded as the region and local community dictated. In the words of one architect of the period, modernistic lines, whether Art Deco or Streamline Moderne, "offer[ed] the decorator a fresh and fertile field for the play of imagination."⁹ Art Deco could just as easily be applied to a new theater in Beverly Hills, California (see the Fox Wilshire, 1928-30), as the streets of the copper boomtown Anaconda, Montana (the Washoe, 1936), or Charleston, South Carolina (the Rivera, 1939). Modernist lines were equally appropriate to a scaled-down, small-town version for the streets of Garner, Iowa.¹⁰



Figure 10 The exotic architecture of the Granada Theater in Chicago, a 1926 picture palace, thrilled thousands of moviegoers as much as its showings of silent movies of far off places. Naylor, 129.

History of The Avery: Its Construction and Operation

9 Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 52.

10 Images of these Art Deco theaters are found at Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 78; and at Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, 225-27, and 113. The Art Deco style was applied to movie theaters in numerous towns around Iowa in addition to Garner. The Avery's façade treatment is downright subdued in comparison to the colorful glazed terra cotta of the 1935-36 Charles Theater in Charles City, and the 1937 Capitol Theater in Burlington, both designed by architects Wetherell and Harrison (these theaters are extant but both appear to have newer marquees). The Varsity in downtown Iowa City also had glazed terra cotta, but colors were limited to black and white, creating a sophisticated yet modern appearance. The Varsity was slipcovered in the 1950s or early 60s with a new metal cover and renamed The Astro. It was demolished in 1995 by the adjacent bank for a bank expansion.

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The place to see moving pictures in Garner during the 1920s was the Lyric Theatre, a town landmark at the corner of 4th and State streets. Since 1883, the building housing the Lyric had evolved along with the town, serving as an academy, an opera house, and, finally, a moving picture theater, where popular silent films such as *Ben-Hur* were shown.¹¹ With the advent of talkies in 1927, progressive residents of Garner and the surrounding communities began to agitate for “Sunday movies” (the repeal of prohibitions on showing movies on that day), not only to attract and keep rural residents’ business by providing additional reasons to come into town, but also to ensure that Garner could sustain talkies by allowing seven days of business for the theater operator. “If the Sunday movie question carries next Tuesday,” the local newspaper publisher pronounced on February 19, 1930, “it will be but a short time until there will be plenty of people interested who have the means to finance an up-to-the-minute talkie movie house.” The publisher repeated the Progressive Citizens’ club’s promise that it “will not ask council to rescind the ordinance prohibiting Sunday movies until arrangements have been made for a suitable building and the latest in talkie movie machines.”¹² In the midst of the agitation for Sunday movies and the rising expectation of a talkie theater in town, the Lyric Theatre closed its doors in October, 1930, prompting the local paper to apply the pressure by gravely observing that now “Garner is without motion picture entertainment of any kind.”¹³ The pressure was probably intended for Garner’s commercial club, headed by Dr. G.A. Bemis, which had been openly negotiating with Minnesota backers for months on the talking-movie project and held options on two prime town lots for the future movie theater.¹⁴ Sound motion pictures were inevitable for Garner, as they were for small towns all across Iowa.

Despite the discord, the new talking-movie house was a community project and supported by local residents financially and politically, and Garner boosters had searched well outside the local region for financial backing and technical expertise. The commercial club promised Garner residents a new theater building with “the very best sound equipment and furnishings that money could buy,” if voters would agree to rescind the ordinance against Sunday movies.¹⁵ In order to keep that promise, the club contacted Charles Marks, an experienced theater operator from St. Paul, Minnesota. Veteran of 20 years managing theaters, including the Tuxedo Theater (nonextant) in St. Paul, Marks gave his interest in the Garner project as a “desire to get away from the competition of corporation theaters in the large cities.” Apparently, Marks had responded to the Garner commercial club’s inquiries with a proposal that offered not only his years of experience, but also the financial backing of a large St. Paul firm, the Villaume Box and Lumber Company (still operating). Marks and the commercial club had a signed agreement by May, 1930, but the details, including the formation of Marks Amusement Company, were not finalized until November, 1930.¹⁶ A month later, Villaume bought the two town lots at the corner of State and 5th streets and construction started immediately.¹⁷ The plans for the new theater were provided by the Sperry Realty (likely the realty agent for the lumber company) and Sperry’s architect, Henry Waldron, who visited Garner as early as May, 1930.¹⁸ Little is known about Waldron or his work except that he was 45 in 1930 and an Iowa native born to parents native to New York. He was married to a Minnesota woman named Ruby, and all four of their children were born in South Dakota. These data suggest he had lived and worked as an adult in both Minnesota and South Dakota before he drew up the plans for The Avery.¹⁹ Construction on Garner’s new sound theater continued even after the weather turned frigid. Fourteen-year-old Rudy J. Urich watched with wonder as masons laid up the brickwork throughout the coldest part of the winter. In 2007, Mr. Urich recollected, “I can remember the Avery theater as it was being built. I could not believe that the bricks and mortar would not

11 *Ben-Hur* was the big attraction in February 1928. Not long after its conversion to a golf and roller skating rink venue in 1930, the building burned. Long-time resident Matt Love told the newspaper that the [Lyric] building “was officially opened as an opera house on Thanksgiving day, 1883, when the Garner Dramatic club presented a play entitled, ‘The Hidden Hand.’” *Garner Leader*, January 21, 1931.

12 *Garner Leader*, February 19, 1930.

13 *Garner Leader*, October 15, 1930.

14 *Garner Leader*, November 12, 1930; *Garner Leader*, May 28, 1930.

15 *Garner Leader*, November 12, 1930.

16 Local business owners and farmers also invested in the company.

17 The purchase was on Dec. 16, 1930 from the Hancock County Investment Co., owner of the lots since July, 1927.

18 *Garner Leader*, November 12, 1930.

19 U.S. Census of 1930 [manuscript census data].

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freeze in that kind of weather. The way it was done was that the bricks were stacked in a circle about six feet across and there was a big fire inside the circle which warmed the bricks enough that the mortar and bricks were able to be installed to cure normally.”²⁰ The *Garner Leader* sought to assure citizens that the construction company from nearby Clear Lake knew what it was doing. “To a community like this where there is not often so much construction work but what it can generally be accomplished in the warm months of the year, it is strange and a little questionable to see concrete and brick work done under freezing temperatures. But this work is being approved by men who are so thoroughly experienced in the building game that they would not give their endorsement to it unless they were confident that it would prove satisfactory. Larger and more valuable buildings than the one being built in Garner have been constructed in the dead of winter and have stood the test.”²¹

While building crews worked on the State Street site, the local newspaper generated excitement by running a contest to name the new moving-picture house. Charles Marks, the paper claimed, “is willing to permit Garner people to make suggestions and have some choice concerning the name by which the city’s outstanding entertainment project shall be designated. Before time for formal opening of the theater a contest will be undertaken to secure suggestions from citizens with original ideas, with the probability that some even more distinctive name can be found. The honor of choosing the name which will be finally selected will be quite as important as the worth-while prize which is apportioned for this part of the venture.”²² Over 300 entries were received and toward the end of February, 1931, as the theater neared completion, the winner was announced.²³ Young Miss Miriam Love won the contest and a ten-dollar gold piece for her suggestion, “The Avery,” in honor of Anson Avery, the first white settler in Hancock County.²⁴ This ability to adopt a local name, as well as the manner of financing construction, and Charles Marks’ selections for the first films suggest the difference between independent operators, of which there were shrinking numbers in 1930, and the business methods of the studio-affiliated theater chains that operated throughout the nation.

As late as 1920, most moving picture “exhibitors” were independent operators and there were wide variations in the manner and venues in which movies were shown. During the growth period of the 1920s, however, several theater operators, especially in the Midwest, began to build multiple-theater chains that could take advantage of economies of scale and market dominance.²⁵ According to one theater historian, the most successful theater chain system was Balaban & Katz. Perfected in Chicago between 1917 and 1923, the method of operation “enabled B&K to overtake all its larger rivals and thus dominate the Chicago market as well as the rest of Illinois and most of Iowa and Nebraska.”²⁶ Mergers of studios and theater-chains were happening throughout the industry, and in late 1925 B&K merged with Famous Players, a production company that was quickly renamed Paramount. Sam Katz thereafter applied the B&K business methods to Paramount’s Publix theater chain. To stimulate name recognition, many theaters were renamed “Paramount” and control was taken away from local operators and redistributed through a regimented system of management layers culminating with Katz who operated from New York City.²⁷ Paramount-Publix’ major competitor was the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio, which played its movies at the Loew theater chain venues, but Fox and United Artists also built and bought theaters for their productions.²⁸ When The Avery’s Charles Marks relocated to Garner from St. Paul late in 1930, he was abandoning his work for Paramount-Publix in the hopes of becoming a successful independent theater operator, perhaps in the last place where such entrepreneurial efforts could occur,

²⁰ Rudy J. Urich, email correspondence to Jill Blank, October 11, 2007.

²¹ *Garner Leader*, December 3, 1930.

²² *Garner Leader*, November 26, 1930.

²³ *Garner Leader*, January 14, 1931.

²⁴ *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

²⁵ Douglas Gomery, “The Movies Become Big Business: Publix Theatres and the Chain Store Strategy,” *Cinema Journal* 18 (Spring 1979) 2: 27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Gomery, “The Movies Become Big Business,” 31.

²⁸ Naylor, *Great American Movie Theaters*, 18-19.

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the smaller communities and rural areas not yet under control of the studios and theater chains.²⁹

According to newspaper reports, Charles Marks had 20 years of experience in theater operation. He was the former manager of St. Paul's Tuxedo Theater, a "suburban" neighborhood theater (nonextant), and had been "affiliated with Publix theaters."³⁰ Fifty years old in 1930, Marks was a Minnesota native born to Russian immigrants. He was married for the first time at age 42 to a woman 20 years his junior (Wyllenee P. Pearson Marks). In addition to his wife, Charles Marks' family in St. Paul just before moving to Garner included Wyllenee's younger brother and sister, and Mary Nevin, Wyllenee's 75-year-old aunt. Apparently, Charles and Wyllenee did not have their own children. Mary Nevin moved to Garner with her niece's family and, despite her advancing age, worked in the theater for Charles. In their ensuing years at Garner, Wyllenee would become prominent in the community's social circles, holding top office in the garden club.³¹

Negotiations during 1930, between Marks and Garner's commercial club resulted in the formation of a new corporation, Marks Amusement Company, in which local business owners and farmers bought stock and probably provided Charles Marks with a source of operating cash. Other stock owners included the contractors who built the theater and supplied construction services, and the Sperry Realty Company, "designers of the building." Clearly, the parties thought there was profit to be made. The agreement specified that Charles Marks had "full control of the theater" and gave him the opportunity to "in time...become the owner of the building." He was also required to furnish all of the equipment for the theater, an obligation that tapped into his experience with sound production and assured Garner residents of high quality.³²

Contractors installed 400 red leather theater seats in the building in time for premier night, March 17, 1931 (Fig. 11). "Long before time for opening the doors of this elegant new picture theatre, every available seat had been sold," the *Leader* reported. "The admission charge for Tuesday evening was \$1.50, but price was not a consideration, it was more a matter of being able to secure a seat." Those who attended declared The Avery "by far the finest to be found in the northwest---perfect in visibility, perfect in sound, and incomparable so far as general appearance is concerned."³³ Dr. G. A. Bemis, president of the commercial club's theater committee, acted as master of ceremonies and called upon Charles Marks and many others "for a word or a bow." Men from St. Paul, Des Moines, Mason City, Clear Lake, and "many home celebrities, responded to the call of the master of ceremonies."³⁴ Movie stars and film producers sent stacks of telegrams and letters of greeting and admirers of Mr. Marks and well wishers sent floral pieces. Miss Miriam Love, the girl who won the naming contest, spoke briefly, as did the son and daughter of Anson Avery, after whom the theater was named.³⁵

29 Publix operated a training school for its theater managers in the mid-1920s, but discontinued it because trained managers often left to work for competitors (Valentine, *The Show Starts on the Sidewalk*, 38). Iowa was not without its own theater chains during the 1920s. One such chain was established by Romanian-born Abraham H. Blank in the first decade of the twentieth century, when he bought a movie projector to show "10-minute films for a nickel" in a rented storefront in Des Moines. Later, Blank began to build theaters in other towns to show silent films accompanied by organ music. According to his son, Myron Blank's, obituary in 2005, "by the mid-1920s, [Abraham Blank's] Central States Theater Corp., made [Abraham] one of the largest private owners of movie theaters in the nation." "Myron 'Mike' Blank, philanthropist, 93," *Des Moines Register*, February 27, 2005.

30 *St. Paul Daily News*, December 17, 1930, cited in the *Garner Leader*, December 17, 1930; *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

31 *Garner Leader*, October 4, 1939.

32 *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

33 *Garner Leader*, March 18, 1931.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

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Figure 11 Advertisement for the grand opening of the theater: “The Avery, The Theater Beautiful. Perfect Sound, Perfect Ventilation, Comfortable Seats, Perfect Vision, It’s Gorgeous, It’s Sublime. All modern Conveniences—including ladies Lounge, gents smoking room and baby’s cry room. To appreciate the grandeur of this new play house you must see it.” *Garner Leader*, March 11, 1931.

Manager Marks chose the latest in sound technology from R.C.A. Photophone, which in 1930-31 was a leader in sound motion picture equipment, both for filming and projection.³⁶ Among other recommendations, the installation guide suggested the liberal use of soft surfaces such as “plush drapes, carpets, heavy upholstered seats,” all of which absorbed between 25 and 70 percent of unwanted sound.³⁷ Architect Henry Waldron had planned the interior structure of the building itself according to the latest theories in theatrical acoustics.³⁸ The commercial club, which claimed The Avery would be the “only entirely new one [theater] in northern Iowa built exclusively for sound,” described the architecture for the community as follows:

There are no square corners in the auditorium and the ceiling is plastered with an especially prepared plaster that has sound absorption. The width of the building is in correct proportion to its length so that the sound does not reverberate back like it would in a long, narrow building . . . The aisles and foyer will be carpeted with the very best theater carpet obtainable and under carpeting, will be thick material with sound deadening properties . . . The seats will be rich red leather with spring

36 R.C.A. Photophone was one of four competing technologies that emerged in the late 1920s for synchronizing sound with motion picture images. The three other major technologies were Warner Brothers Vitaphone sound-on-disc system and two variable density sound-on-film systems, Lee De Forest’s Phonofilm, and Fox-Case’s Movietone. R.C.A. Photophone was a variable-area film exposure system. The modulated area (width) corresponded to the amplitude of the audio signal. In 1928, the new Hollywood studio R.K.O. Radio Pictures, controlled by R.C.A., used R.C.A. Photophone exclusively for its movies. Paramount Pictures also adopted Photophone.

37 *Handbook for Projectionists*, 12-6.

38 *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

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seats. The backs, in keeping with the latest type of seats used in sound theaters, are not upholstered. [Wood seat backs seem surprisingly out of order here.] The backs will be done in olive green. A few seats will be equipped with acoustiphones which will enable deaf people to hear the show. R.C.A. sound equipment will be used and the committee here states that this equipment is one of two made that are considered standard...The projection machines are of the latest type simplex.³⁹

In addition to its state-of-the-art sound system and acoustic perfection, The Avery boasted the latest in theater fire safety. "The projection room, where the machines are operated, is built entirely of concrete and hollow tile, and the roof is of concrete six inches thick. The entrance door is of steel. Should a film catch fire, it could burn without any person in the audience being aware of what was going on or placing the audience in the least bit of danger. Gases generated under such contingency would be carried away by an especially constructed ventilator. . . . The doors to all exits will be equipped with panic bolts, so that in case of trouble, although locked, can be opened automatically from the inside."⁴⁰

The theater featured good ventilation as well, with a system "furnished by the Campbell Heating company of Des Moines. The warm air will be circulated through the auditorium by a specially constructed fan system which causes a complete change of air every few seconds. In summer, the same fan system will provide cool air so that the theater will be comfortable on the hottest days."⁴¹ Though The Avery could accommodate 400 moviegoers, no one would feel crowded or unable to see. With the elimination of balconies, visibility in the theater depended on a floor that sloped gently from back row to screen. "The space between the aisles," the committee explained, "will be sufficient so that there will be no crowding when entering or leaving the theater. The rows of seats are 32 inches apart and the aisles are four feet in width."⁴²

The Avery Theater offered Garner moviegoers both the essentials of comfort and a bit of cosmopolitan luxury. According to the committee's published report, the lighting, fixtures and draperies were "all in modernistic styles and the color scheme will harmonize perfectly" with this style, eventually termed Art Deco.⁴³ On the north end of the second level, to one side of the projection booth, was a women's lounge "furnished with the latest type of furnishings" and predicted to be "the last word in comfort and convenience." The gentlemen's restroom or lounge, which provided a space for smoking, was on the other side of the projection booth. Historic photos suggest it had its own viewing window that looked out over the auditorium. Near the women's lounge was a baby's "cry room," where both mothers and fathers could take fussy children and still watch the movie through their own window. Many Garner residents recalled making use of this convenience. Etta Lou Bier attended the movies at The Avery for three decades and as a young mother used the cry room often. Another faithful patron, who lived on a farm as a girl but regularly caught the Saturday evening Western while her parents shopped in town, later made use of the cry room as an adult mother in the 1950s. One man taking care of a baby remarked, "The entire place is very beautiful, but the spot I most admire is the baby's cry room. The boy became restless and I took him up to the cry room. He enjoyed his surroundings, amused himself and disturbed no one in the show. I was able to hear and see perfectly from this room."⁴⁴

Moviegoers at the new Avery Theater had been generous with their praise from the start. "Every sound was perfect and not a flutter in any of the pictures" and "luxury personified" were a few of the comments published in the *Garner Leader* soon after

³⁹ *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931. Other sound theaters in the area included the Princess Theatre in Britt ("the only theatre in Hancock county showing Paramount Pictures"); the Forest Theater in Forest City ("where you can see all and hear every word spoken"); and the Park Theater in Clear Lake ("Finest sound, Comfort, Big Shows!"). After The Avery was built, the Park Theater claimed "North Iowa's Finest Sound." Whether these three theaters were built for sound pictures or were older theaters retrofitted for sound is unknown. *Garner Leader*, November 12, 1930; *Garner Leader*, January 7, 1931; *Garner Leader*, March 4, 1931.

⁴⁰ *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Etta Lou Bier and Marj Finn, interviews with Jill Blank, July 14, 2007; *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

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its opening.⁴⁵ Indeed with the theater open seven nights and two afternoons a week, the newspaper predicted that “[p]eople who demand the best in sound pictures will form the habit of driving considerable distance to attend.”⁴⁶ That prediction soon rang true and parking became a problem, especially on Sunday afternoons and evenings, when “many motorists were obliged to leave their car several blocks from the theatre.”⁴⁷ Saturday night double features also drew in the crowds.⁴⁸

The Avery Theater as Social Center for Garner

Charles Marks left The Avery and Garner in 1939, claiming the Villaume Box and Lumber Company (which had re-acquired the theater property after it was briefly held by the Marks Amusement Company in 1931 and 1932) had decided to “liquidate all of its out-of town holdings.”⁴⁹ Marks apparently could not manage the financial burden of owning and operating the theater in the face of the deepening Great Depression and the Villaume Company was tightening its own financial belt. Holding theater property in north central Iowa probably no longer seemed a good investment for a lumber company. The property was sold to Edna Collins Rector and her new husband Donald Gran, who also operated a theater in nearby Sioux Rapids, Iowa. Within a month of acquiring The Avery, the couple embarked on a major interior remodeling intended to make the theater “a show place.”⁵⁰ This resulted in the decorative scheme and wall murals that survive today. Eighteen months later, however, the Grans too sold the theater, in April, 1941, to a couple from Clear Lake, Iowa. By this time, The Avery was no longer obtaining first-run movies, evidenced by the showing of the 1939 classic *Gone with the Wind*—so long that moviegoers brought lunch with them—the same month the Grans sold it.⁵¹ Despite an economy that picked up with the war effort, The Avery again changed hands relatively quickly, in April, 1942, when G.B. and Lucy Kirchner bought it to operate. Five years later, yet another couple tried to make a go of operating the theater. Henry and Gabrielle Johnson, along with their seven children moved to Garner from Minnesota, but they moved on in 1949. That year, The Avery finally was sold to long-term owners, Alice and Lloyd Kingsbury. Alice B. Kingsbury (Fig. 12) stayed in Garner to operate the theater, while her husband lived in South Dakota operating a chain of movie theaters there. Alice’s daughter, Gail Christians, remembers her grandfather running the theater in the later 1940s.⁵² Alice Kingsbury did not sell her theater building until 1970, when it ceased operating as a movie house.⁵³

45 *Garner Leader*, March 25, 1931.

46 *Garner Leader*, March 18, 1931. A few of the first movie pictures to be shown in the opening weeks: *Cimarron*, starring Richard Dix; *Mixed Nuts*, starring Wheeler & Woolsey; *The Royal Bed*, with Lowell Sherman and Mary Astor; *A Connecticut Yankee*, starring Will Rogers; *Merely Mary Ann*, with Janet Gaynor and Charles Farrell; *Kismet*, with Otis Skinner; *The Lash*, starring Richard Bartholmess; *Fifty Million Frenchmen*, with Olson and Johnson, “the funniest comedians on the screen”; *The Criminal Code*, with Walter Huston; *Charley’s Aunt*, “funniest picture ever made”; *Tol’able David*, with Richard Cromwell; and *Sunny*, starring Marilyn Miller “New York’s favorite stage star.” *Garner Leader*, February 18, 1931.

47 *Garner Leader*, March 25, 1931.

48 Carol S. Wille DeBruyn, email correspondence to Jill Blank, January 17, 2008.

49 *Garner Leader*, October 4, 1939. Marks moved to Davenport, Iowa, in 1942, where he managed the Garden Theater until 1945. He died at age 69 in 1949 at his St. Paul, Minnesota, home. *Davenport Democrat and Leader*, Marcy 9, 1949.

50 *Garner Leader*, December 13, 1939.

51 Marj Finn, interview with Jill Blank, July, 2007; *Garner Leader*, April 23, 1941.

52 Interview with Jill Blank, July 2007.

53 Land transfer entries as researched by Jill Blank; *Garner Leader*, October 4 and 25, 1939; *Garner Leader*, April 23, 1941; *Garner Leader*, April, 29, 1942; and *Garner Leader*, April 24, 1946.

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Figure 12 Alice Kingsbury, owner of The Avery Theater from the end of World War II until 1968, stands in front of the ticket booth in this undated but circa 1950 photograph. Jill Blank Collection.

Over the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and into the 1960s, The Avery Theater served the Garner community in several ways. Though always intended "primarily as a talkie house," Charles Marks and the commercial club also included a stage and a musicians' pit in the auditorium so the theater could also serve as a "community assembly hall [that would] be open to the public."⁵⁴ The Avery hosted parties for community groups like the Stitch and Chatter Club and the Catholic Daughters of America, and served as the venue for business organizations, such as the Hancock County Oil Co-Op, the Iowa State Trade Mark Butter Association, and the Hancock County Rural Electrification Co-Operative Society, all of which held their annual meetings in the auditorium.⁵⁵ Free holiday children's matinees and annual visits from Santa Claus sponsored by the local merchants brought excitement to the areas' youth each year and, importantly, also freed up their parents for shopping.⁵⁶ In fact, every

54 *Garner Leader*, November 12, 1930. While the stage was used frequently, no one interviewed by Jill Blank in July, 2007, remembered the musicians' pit ever being used.

55 *Garner Leader*, February 3, 1932; *Mason City Globe*, June 23, 1941; *Mason City Globe*, June 28, 1940; and *Mason City Globe*, October 10, 1941.

56 See Richard Butsch, "American Movie Audiences of the 1930s," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 59 (Spring 2001): 117-118.

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year until it closed, The Avery hosted Santa Claus and his treat bag in the lobby after a free cartoon. Special educational films united townspeople and area farmers in collective crusades such as bicycle safety, and weekly news reels informed residents of national and international events.⁵⁷ During World War II, patriotic films for various war relief and charity drives brought the community together at The Avery and the building served as a drop point for collections.⁵⁸

Even during difficult times like the Great Depression or World War II, The Avery helped residents endure by giving them inexpensive entertainment and letting them rub shoulders with similarly affected neighbors. Hardship was easier to endure when shared. Bank night drawings meant cash prizes during the depression, something painfully remembered by Alice Mae Anderson who was at the theater one night with her grandmother, but not her father, when his name was called out for the \$40 prize. "I just sat frozen," she recalled, "thinking what an unexpected \$40 dollars would mean to the family during the depression." Virgil Eness was both a patron and a projectionist during the 1940s and early 50s. He fondly recalled that Wednesday and Thursdays were prize nights, with cash prizes from \$24 to \$50, but that the money accumulated if unclaimed (Fig. 13). When Sharon Larson's uncles went off to the war, her family went to The Avery constantly to watch the war news.⁵⁹



Figure 13 The Avery Theatre, circa 1947. Note the sign over door advertising Wednesdays and Thursdays as "Prize Nites." Collection of Jill Blank.

⁵⁷ "Thru the efforts of Aaron Greiman, local chief of police, the safety education division of the state highway patrol will present a moving picture show in Garner on Saturday afternoon, June 14, at 2 o'clock at the Avery theater to which every boy and girl and their parents as well are cordially invited. Frank B. Ulish, state department representative will be present and will show a special bicycle film entitled "On Two Wheels." Whenever this film has been shown it has created a lot of interest in safe bicycling, and it is hoped that there will be a good attendance when it is put on here. There is no charge for the show and any person interested is cordially invited." *Garner Leader*, June 4, 1941. During World War II, special war relief films were shown. See *Garner Leader*, May 2, 1941; *Garner Leader*, April 22, 1942; *Mason City Globe*, April 20, 1945.

⁵⁸ *Garner Leader*, May 2, 1941; *Garner Leader*, April 22, 1942; *Mason City Globe*, April 20, 1945.

⁵⁹ Interviews with Jill Blank, July, 2007.

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Over the years, the theater also gave a number of young town residents the opportunity to earn some cash, like Karen Becker May, who was one of two “popcorn girls” during the late 1940s. May recalls, “we had to come to work one hour before the show started, getting supplies—shortening, popcorn, and bags—from behind the screen. I hated to do that as it was always so dark! Then I started to pop corn in the machine...(there was no pop or candy sold in those years). I was guaranteed 50 cents per night, getting a penny per bag of popcorn I sold...I remember my best night was \$3.57 or 357 bags!”⁶⁰

Decline of Moviegoing at The Avery Theater

After mid-century, competition from television and drive-in movies, declining rural population and small-town migration to bigger cities, better roads and increasing number of automobiles all combined to reduce movie patronage for The Avery, a phenomenon experienced by movie theaters all over the nation.⁶¹ A drive-in opened in nearby Mason City in 1952 or 53, and Sharon Larson recalled that was why and when she stopped attending movies in Garner. Vergil Eness agreed that it was “TV and the drive-ins that helped close down The Avery.” Earl Erdmann, who lived two blocks from The Avery and as a kid watched it being built, returned to his hometown in 1954 but did not patronize the theater because “they had TVs then.”⁶² A 1957 survey of recent Garner high school graduates revealed their dissatisfaction with the quality of social life in their small town and with The Avery in particular. One respondent complained that “[c]ultural offerings consist of class plays, band concerts and second-run movies.” Another graduate agreed saying “there is not any kind of recreation in this [town] other than a theater that runs about three nights a week. Anything you want to do you have to go to another town to do it.”⁶³ By the late 1960s, Alice Kingsbury had become a widow and the theater was finally sold in 1970. Developers Robert Nonnweiler and Dale Reichardt filled and leveled the sloped floor, removed interior walls, and reopened the building as a pharmacy.⁶⁴ Today, The Avery Theater is vacant but remains a cultural landmark on State Street and is the focus of an active local restoration effort.

⁶⁰ Letter to the Editor, *Garner Leader*, March 28, 2007.

⁶¹ Kathryn H. Fuller, *At the Picture Show: Small-Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Press, 1996), 198.

⁶² Interviews with Jill Blank, July 2007.

⁶³ “The Garner Survey: 304 Recent High School Graduates Tell What Think Ought To Be Done to Improve Their Home Town” (unpubl. report of the Recital Club of Garner, Iowa, and the Institute of Public Affairs of the State University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1957), 21-22.

⁶⁴ *Garner Leader*, May 26, 1970.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 5 & 6, Block 25, Original Town of Garner, Iowa.

Boundary Justification

The boundary is the legal description of the entire parcel historically associated with The Avery Theater.

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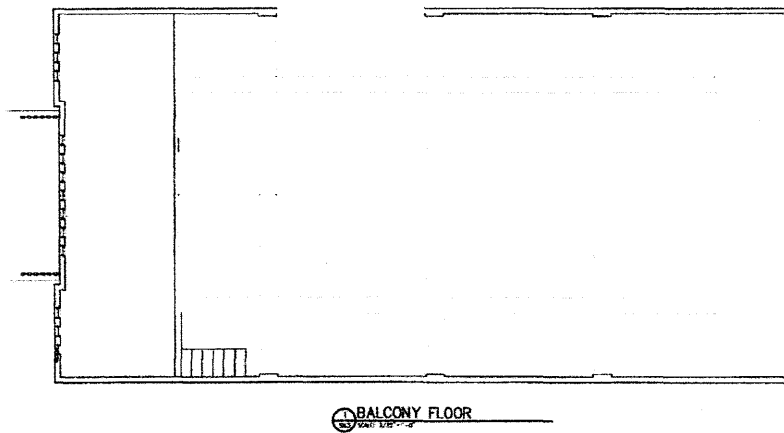
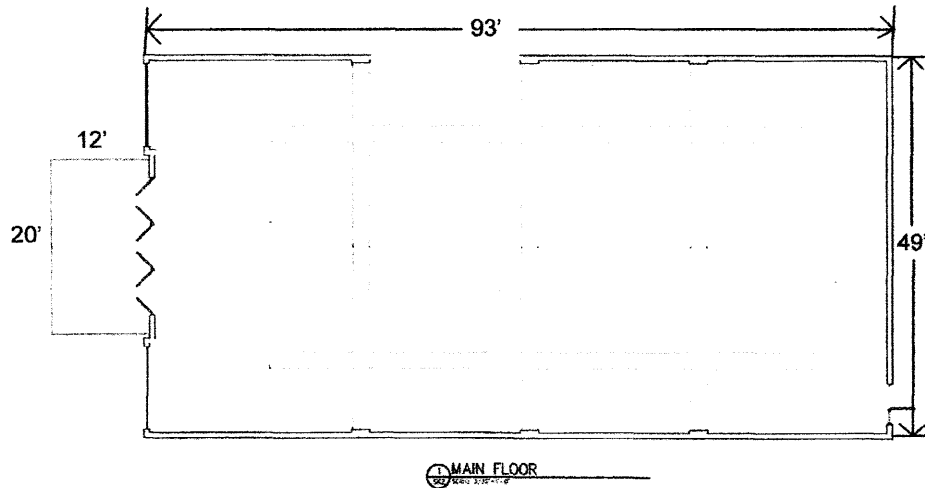
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Floor plans (modified from plans drawn by Douglas J. Steinmetz, AIA, 2007)



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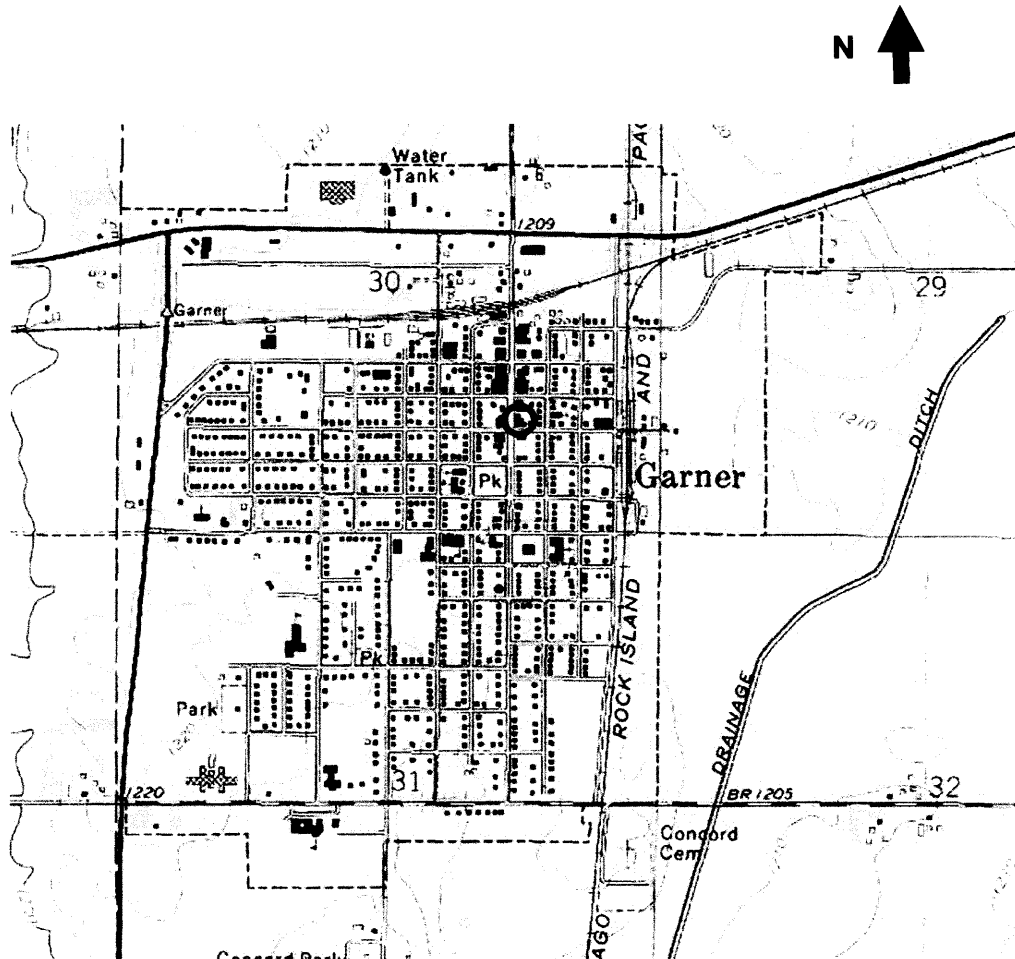
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City of Garner, Hancock County, Iowa with the general location of the property circled.
(map obtained from <http://cairo.gis.iastate.edu> on January 29, 2007; based on USGS map)



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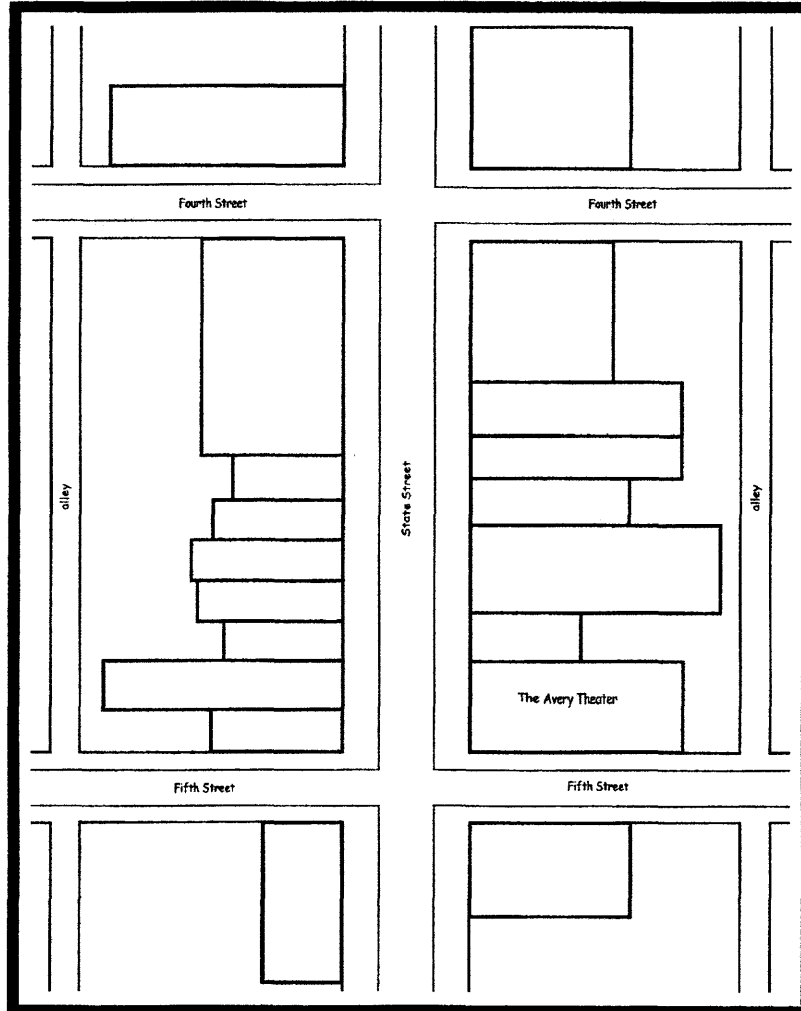
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Site Plan – The Avery Theater property is labeled.
(sketch map by Tallgrass Historians L.C., 2007)



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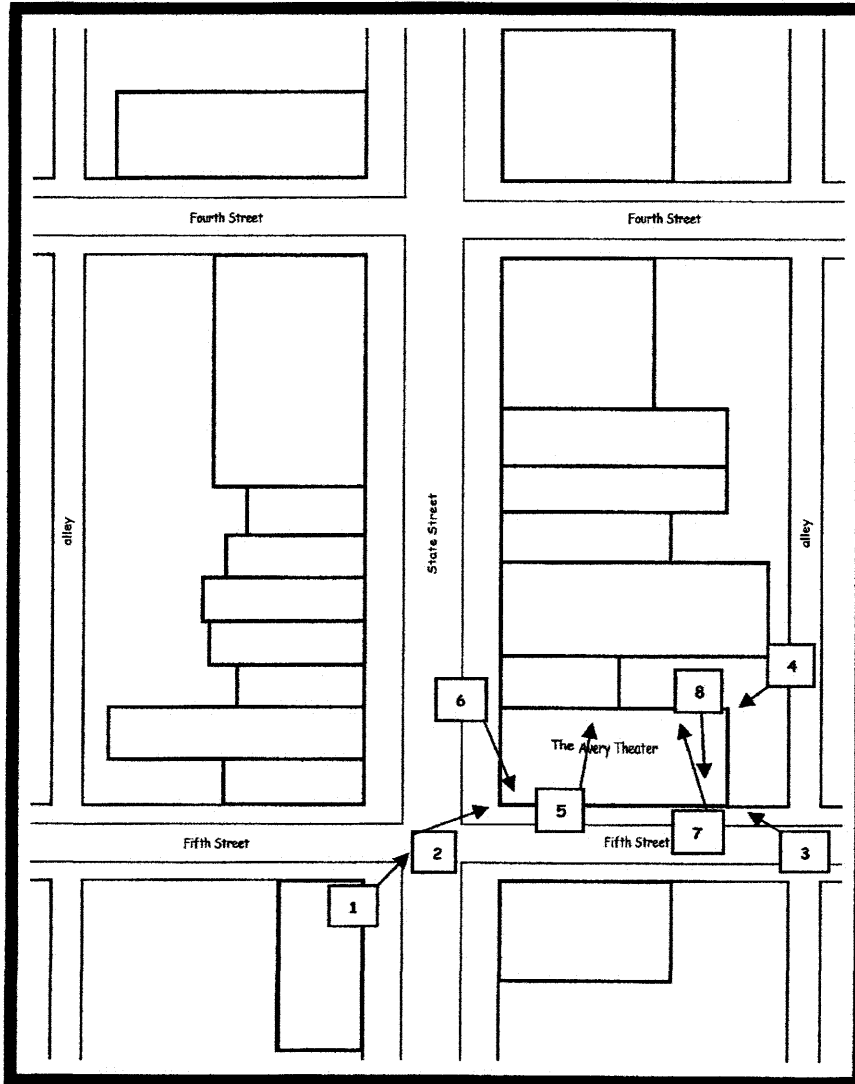
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Photograph Locations



Photograph Label Information (## 3,4, & 5 share information)

3. Tallgrass Historians L.C., Jan Olive Nash
4. July 15, 2007
5. Tallgrass Historians L.C., Iowa City, Iowa
6. Photograph #1: Streetscape, facing NE
- Photograph #2: Streetscape, W facade, facing NE
- Photograph #3: South side, East rear, facing NW
- Photograph #4: East rear, North side, facing SW
- Photograph #5: Interior detail, auditorium, facing NNE
- Photograph #6: Interior, second level, South end, facing SE
- Photograph #7: Interior detail, auditorium mural, facing N
- Photograph #8: Interior detail, auditorium mural, facing S