

INVENTORY SHEET FOR GROUP NOMINATIONS: IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, BOISE, IDAHO

NOMINATION: (TOURTELLOTTE AND HUMMEL ARCHITECTURE ~~IN IDAHO~~ TR),

✓ SITE NAME: Gem County Courthouse 12 SITE NUMBER: 134

✓ LOCATION: Main Street ^{and} ~~at~~ McKinley Avenue, Emmett, Gem County ~~(045), Idaho~~

OWNER'S NAME AND ADDRESS:

Gem County
Gem County Courthouse
Emmett, ID 83617

QUADRANGLE AND SCALE: Montour, 15 minute ACREAGE: three acres

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:

The nomination includes the Gem County Courthouse and the property on which it stands, north 1/2 of block bounded by Main, Hawthorne, First, and McKinley streets. Legal description on file at the Gem County Courthouse, Emmett, Idaho.

UTM(S): 11/5,40,625/48,57,925

DATE OR PERIOD: 1938-1939

AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE: Architecture

EVALUATED LEVEL OF SIGNIFICANCE: Local

CONDITION: excellent unaltered original site

DESCRIPTION:

The Gem County Courthouse is a two-and-one-half-story structure--two floors on a high basement--constructed of cast concrete which has been roughened and scored to resemble stone. The building is designed in a somewhat spare and classicizing art deco style. It is essentially rectangular in plan, one hundred by forty feet in size. Its length is parallel to Main Street. The symmetrical facade is four window bays wide on either side of a tall, slightly outset entry which visually dominates the building.

The entrance ell is in the form of a tall, stepped, angular archway which spans the three stories and crests above the flat roofline. Its forward planes are perforated on either side by two sets of cast cross vents which are vertically arranged, three to a set, in front of narrow inset lights. On the inner faces of the archway, flanking the opening, are stylized quarter-round fluted columns. The opening is trisected by sharply outset ribs which create sidelights on either side of the first-floor entry door, continue upward past the second-story glass stairwell wall, and finally angle out and over the top of the arch itself.

The lateral wings of the building on either side of this parapeted central form each contain four sets of windows, aligned on all three stories. On the upper floors, casements are set between fixed upper and lower lights; beneath each window is a tripartite coffered panel. At basement level, casements are set over fixed lower lights near ground level. (On the west end, which contains the county jail most windows have been entirely closed off for security.) Between the windows, fluted pilasters tie together all three levels of the building. The pilasters rise from plain bases near ground level and culminate in plain bands ornamented with roundels and flattened Doric capitals.

The end elevations employ the same devices. They contain two window bays on either side of a scaled-down form of the main arch. The side arches culminate below cornice line. On the west end the arch frames a fifth set of windows; on the east, a secondary entrance. Near the tops of these end arches is a narrow strip of egg-and-dart ornament. The same motif appears at the upper corners of the outer elements of the main arch in front. The upper cornice line all around the building is finished with narrow fluted parapet trim.

The interior plan accommodates the county court system on the upper floor: courtrooms, judges' chambers, jury room, and so on. Commissioners, clerk, assessor, and similar functionaries are in offices on the second floor. The basement houses the county jail and sheriff's office. Originally an underground garage was approached by a ramp leading down from the rear alley. This vehicle storage space has now been converted for offices. The upstairs interior of the courthouse is functional but not imposing. Given the smallness of the spaces, this was probably so even before minimal veneering with modern materials (carpet, etc.) took place.

SIGNIFICANCE:

The Gem County Courthouse has exceptional architectural significance on two counts: first, as the art deco representative of the illustrative triad of deco moderne buildings discussed in the significance statement for the first of them, the Morris Hill mausoleum in Boise (site 132), and indeed as the best example found among the surviving WPA-financed buildings of the institutional art deco style executed in concrete. Second, the building is significant as an institutional building of primary importance to Gem County, a sparsely settled political subdivision which had been entirely without a county building for almost two decades when this theme very modern-looking structure was dedicated. The building therefore illustrates with particular effectiveness the benefits of WPA matching funds to local communities.

The building, as noted, represents the more traditional art deco end of the continuum established by the three buildings designed around a single entryway motif in variations on the late 1930s art deco and art moderne styles: the Morris Hill Mausoleum, the Gem County Courthouse, and the John Regan American Legion Post (sites 132, 134, and 135). The relative verticality and mass and the literalness of classical reference place this compact but monumental building on the early end of the continuum, although it was the second one built. The more visible traditional underpinnings of the deco style very likely recommended it as particularly appropriate to governmental and educational buildings, and the feelings of stability they might be wished to evoke. This rather austere version of deco also appears in the firm's work of the period in a number of WPA-financed schools,

which in outlying towns were frequently though not always executed in concrete (see significance statement for Boise Junior High School, site 129). Gem County Courthouse is the strongest and most distinctive example discovered of this socially and architecturally important late-1930s manner and use of material.

The building also has unusual local historical significance. It was the county's first permanent headquarters since an earlier frame building burned around 1920. The voters approved a bond for fifty-five percent of the cost--\$37,500--in 1938. The \$32,000 WPA grant permitted construction under a total contract price of \$66,276, with funds left over for furnishings. Frank Hummel was named as the architect in newspaper reports. David Richardson of Caldwell was the contractor. The courthouse was dedicated in September of 1939.

MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES:

Emmett Index, June 2, 1938, p. 1; June 16, 1938 (drawing); August 3, 1939, p. 1; September 14, 1939, p. 1.

Boise, Idaho. Hummel Jones Miller Hunsucker P.A. File 122A. Collection book reference 1938. list of Volume of Work by Years 1939. Drawings signed Tourtellotte and Hummel.