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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

NATIONAL
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Custer School
other names/site number "Little Red Schoolhouse"

2. Location

street & number 7700 Steilacoom Blvd. SW (rear) not for publication
city, town Tacoma vicinity
state Washington code 053 county Pierce code 053 zip code 98498

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	<u> </u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	<u>1</u>	<u>0</u> objects
			<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
Rural Public School Buildings in Washington

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria. See continuation sheet.

[Signature] DSHPO 5-20-87
Signature of certifying official Date
State Historic Preservation Officer/Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation
State or Federal agency and bureau

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

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

5. 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] Entered in the National Register 7-15-87

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Education: school

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Education: school

7. DescriptionArchitectural Classification
(enter categories from instructions)

Other: hip roof vernacular

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete

walls stucco

roof asbestos shingles

other

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Custer School is a one story, three-room wood frame school house with a cross hipped roof and a belfry. Constructed in 1932 and located in western Pierce County, Washington, near the community of the same name, the building retains good exterior integrity and rests on its original location. Today, the historic school is adjacent to a parking lot and playing field and is surrounded by suburban housing and a nonhistoric school complex constructed to replace the historic school.

The single story building is a wood frame structure with a stucco veneer, a cross hipped roof and a cross axial interior plan. The eaves of the roof are boxed. The north-south rectangular mass dominates the structure; a lower intersecting hipped roof wing projects from the east wall and provides an additional classroom. Another lower cross gabled wing projects on the front (west) facade and houses the entry. The roof is covered with composition shingles; a chimney rises from the rear slope of the roof. The front cross hipped roof above the entry has a square hipped roof cupola, housing the original school bell and supporting a flag pole. The cupola's true arched openings are covered with a metal screen. The entire exterior wall surface is veneered with stucco, which is original to the schoolhouse and is now painted red.

The windows on the school are wood framed, one-over-one double-hung sash banded in groups of three on the north, south, and front (west) facades of the building. Single light fixed windows are placed in each wall of the east wing. The windows are framed with simple wood surrounds. In the northwest corner of the east wing is a wood panelled door.

The center front entry has a mansard-type roof covered with wood shingles and supported by two wood posts. The wood door has a glazed panel. Front and side windows have wood brackets beneath the sills to support flower boxes.

The building is still used for school-related functions and the original interior features were altered somewhat to accommodate office use. The three classrooms extend off the central hall on the north, east, and south while the enclosed entry projects off the west.

The building is generally well maintained with some slight deterioration of plaster at the foundation, the loss of the front flower boxes, and chipped paint on the window frames. It sits in a corner of what is now a parking lot for the new school complex. The only alteration to the structure is the removal of some interior partitions and the fixtures.

8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally statewide locally

Applicable National Register Criteria A B C D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions) A B C D E F G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)
Education

Period of Significance
1932 -1936

Significant Dates
n. a.

Cultural Affiliation
n. a.

Significant Person
n. a.

Architect/Builder
Not known

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

The Custer School is historically significant for its association with rural public education and community life in Custer in rural Pierce County, Washington. The well preserved, three-room schoolhouse was constructed in 1932 to replace an earlier frame school built in the 1890s. Constructed in the midst of the Great Depression, the new school symbolized the continued vitality of the Custer community and the continued strength of its local school district. The school represents the last phase of rural school construction before consolidation led to the creation of large schools serving multiple communities. Today, the structure is one of the few properties remaining in the Custer community that reflects the pre-suburban character of the region.

Historical Background: Like other counties in the Puget Sound region, Pierce County was settled in the mid- and late 19th century by Americans from more eastern states and by European immigrants attracted by the area's vast forests, rich mineral deposits, fertile farmland, and saltwater harbors. Given these physical features, it is not surprising that the economy was dominated by extractive industries--principally logging but also mining, fishing, and farming. Even as late as the 1930s, when other industries (notably manufacturing and commerce) had developed in Tacoma, the county's rural economy was fueled by the products of its forests, fields, and the Sound.

This economic base led to the creation of widely scattered rural communities (usually unincorporated) close to natural resources but often accessible to other parts of the county only by difficult water or overland transportation. While Tacoma had a diversified economy--the node for trade, manufacturing, railroad, and government activities--the small rural communities in the county were independent and isolated and reflected the dominant economic character of the region.

Without exception, each of these small rural communities established a school district shortly after the first settlers arrived. As elsewhere in the state, the creation of a district and the construction of school buildings signalled the formation of a community and reflected a belief in both the importance of universal education and the permanence of the community itself. The school buildings were often the first and sometimes the only public structures in the area, and thus served as social and cultural centers as well as centers of education. The typical schoolhouse served all school age children in the area

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

William Pierce Bonney, History of Pierce County, Chicago, 1927.

Auditor's Annual Exhibit, Pierce County, WA., Tacoma, 1910.

Tacoma News Tribune, September 30, 1953.

See continuation sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

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

Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Specify repository:

Pierce Co. Dept. of Planning, Tacoma

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of property less than one

USGS Map: Steilacoom, WA Scale: 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	0	5	3	5	0	1	0	5	2	2	5	1	8	0
Zone				Easting				Northing						

C

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

B

Zone				Easting				Northing						

D

--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Custer School is located in Section 34, T 20 N, R 2 E, west of Phillips Road S.W. near Steilacoom Boulevard on parcel No. 02-20-34-6-012, and can be described as that portion of said parcel which begins at a point about 1000 ft. north of the northeast intersection of Steilacoom Boulevard and Phillips Road and about 800 west of Phillips Road. Beginning at that point, proceed 200'

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes only that part of the larger parcel upon which the building sits and the immediately adjacent yard. It does not include any of the larger playing fields, school grounds, or parking lots.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Caroline Gallacci, Preservation Planner (edited by L Garfield, OAHP)
organization Pierce County Planning Division date December 20, 1986 (rev. 5/87)
street & number 2401 South 35th Street telephone 206-591-7172
city or town Tacoma state WA zip code 98409

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and often doubled as a meeting place for their parents. Between 1853, when Washington became a territory, and the 1940s, when rural school consolidation resulted in the construction of larger schools serving several communities, the small community schoolhouses were the primary public structures on the rural landscape and today they often are the only surviving evidence of the once thriving rural communities that dotted the county.

Pierce County's rural schoolhouse construction reflected three general periods of development. Shortly after initial settlement, a one-room log or frame schoolhouse was constructed on land usually donated by an early homesteader. As the community grew, two- or four-room frame schoolhouses were constructed, indicating increased community stability, the growth of the school age population, and the expansion of the school curriculum. Schools built between statehood (1889) and World War I often reflect this second period of growth and expansion. A third phase of growth is reflected in buildings constructed after World War I, when many frame buildings were replaced by larger brick structures and ancillary structures--including gymnasiums and play shelters--were constructed adjacent to the schoolhouse. This period, which lasted through the 1930s, included structures built by the federal Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression. This third period ended by 1940 when the last WPA projects were constructed and the move toward rural school consolidation was well underway.

The center for early settlement in Pierce County were the lake-dotted plains south and west of the present city of Tacoma. It was here, in the 1830s, that the Hudson's Bay Company established Fort Nisqually as its base for a farm managed by the Puget Sound Agricultural Company. After the Oregon boundary settlement of 1846, Americans rapidly filed claims within this area. These settlers included William Daugherty (1851) who donated land for the first school in Pierce County, and Andrew Byrd (1852) who built a gristmill and sawmill at the north end of Lake Steilacoom.

One of the earliest, however, was Frederick Myers who settled in the Custer area in 1849. Myers reputedly raised the first flag over the U.S. Army's Fort Steilacoom, located west of the Custer settlement. These early settlers established farms around the crossroads of Custer, grew wheat and had it milled at the Byrd grist mill. Later, grazing replaced wheat as the main agricultural activity, and in 1903, the Flett Dairy was established. As this agricultural base was being established, Frederick Myers, motivated by the extension of the railroad and streetcar lines into this part of the county, filed a plat for Custer, a community named for Lesour Custer who had a store at the northern end of Steilacoom Lake. The town never materialized, however, and the area retained its rural character until 1935, when Norton Clapp financed the construction of Lakewood Center, the county's first suburban shopping center. The complex helped lead to the gradual development of suburban housing after the end of World War II.

In 1890, the Knoxhum family donated one acre of land for a school on the site of the present building. No description of this initial school survives. It was completed in 1892 when Custer District No. 77 was formed. School directors at the time were E.C. Hill, William Hipkins, Frederick Myers, and Skip Kelley. School enrollment averaged about 14 pupils. In 1932, the first school was demolished and replaced by the nominated three-room structure. The old school's wood shed was remodeled as a teacher's cottage but neither the old school nor the cottage remain. The nominated school served area school children from 1932 until 1953, when a modern elementary school was built on adjacent property.

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After World War II, the Custer community, and the larger Lakewood community south of it, was the most rapidly developing suburban area in the county. As a result, many historic buildings that reflected the rural character of the area were lost, and few buildings that predate Lakewood Center survive. The Pierce County historic sites survey identified 12 properties in the area; five of these were associated with early settlement. Apart from the Flett House, which is entered in the State Register of Historic Places, the Custer School and Flett Dairy are strongly associated with the early 20th century history of the community. Other properties include the site of the demolished Byrd School, a site that requires further testing to determine archaeological significance.

The project of surveying and documenting Pierce County's rural schools was conducted by James Wildrig, architect of the Pierce County Landmarks Board, and Caroline Gallacci, Preservation Planner for Pierce County. The nominated schools were drawn from a list of 84 school buildings and associated sites included in the countywide historic sites survey. The project followed federal survey guidelines and the results are filed in the Washington State Inventory of Cultural Resources at the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation in Olympia. Each property was physically evaluated to determine its integrity. In addition, traditional research methods were used to place the building in its local historic context as well as to evaluate the property within the statewide context of rural public education.

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Verbal boundary description continued:

west, 200 feet north, 200 feet east, and 200 feet south to said point of beginning,
the described parcel being the historic schoolhouse and immediate grounds.