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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

MAY 24 1988

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 Martha Ellen Auditorium
other names/site number State Theatre; NeHBS #MK02-8; OHBIN #02-07-04

2. Location

street & number 706 "C" Ave. not for publication
city, town Central City vicinity
state Nebraska code NE county Merrick code 121 zip code 68826

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input 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> </u>	<u> </u> objects
		<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: Opera House Buildings in Nebraska 1867-1917
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] May 16, 1988
Signature of certifying official Date
Director, Nebraska State Historical Society
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. *Bob Roland* 9/28/88

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 the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture: Theatre;
music facility

Social: Meeting hall

Commerce/Trade: Specialty store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Vacant/Not in use

Commerce/Trade: Specialty store

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

OTHER: One-part commercial block

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Unknown

walls Brick

roof Unknown

other Decorative brick trim

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Martha Ellen Auditorium is located at the busy intersection of "G" St. (Highway 30) and "C" Avenue. Constructed in 1916 by Col. William Shelton and named for his daughter, the brick One-Part Commercial Block structure is about eighty feet long by 58 feet wide. Aside from minimal decorative brick trim and broad inset panels (see photo #1), the exterior is void of ornamentation. The original "Martha Ellen Auditorium" sign on the building is intact, but covered by the State Theatre movie marquee. Access to the auditorium is through broad doors and across a lobby 13 feet deep. The lobby has received some remodeling in recent years.

The auditorium itself is 51 feet long from the proscenium opening to the back of the house, by 56 feet wide. There are no windows in the auditorium. The sides of the proscenium wall on the outsides of the arch are curved; the original boxes there have been covered over, although the rails remain behind the new fronts. The stage left box once served as a barber shop. The horseshoe-shaped balcony is 9 feet, 6 inches deep on the sides, which extend all the way around the auditorium to the proscenium wall. The sides of the balcony are three-tiered, while the rear is six-tiered, with a 13-foot projection booth behind the tiers. The balcony is reached by stairs on both outside walls of the auditorium. Strategically located pillars stand around the balcony edges. A number of original opera chairs from the Martha Ellen Auditorium remain in the balcony; the entire lower floor has newer, more conventional movie seats dating from the years when the building served as the State Theatre. The pink-tinted peach colored plaster walls have been maintained in their original color scheme. Aisles are carpeted.

The proscenium arch measures 22 feet wide by approximately 14 feet high; ample 17-foot wings are now filled with movie speakers. Access to the backstage area is through a door in the extreme stage right proscenium wall. The stage is 15 feet deep from the curtain line to the back wall. A four-foot apron curves outward from the proscenium arch. Dressing rooms, no longer extant, were under the stage.

The structural and historical integrity of the building and theatre has been preserved.

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The two-story rectangular brick building has a flat roof and is divided into bays (three bays on the front or northeast facade and five bays on the side or northwest facade) by full height brick pilasters visually supporting a wall cornice with parapet wall above. Brick corbeling further enhances the facades. Windows on the second level remain intact but have been boarded up. Retail spaces, evidenced by storefronts, are found to each side of the main (northeast) entry and each corner of the side (northwest) facade (see photo #1). These retail spaces originally housed various specialty stores including a barber shop. Alterations (new doors, plate glass windows) were made to these storefronts in later years. A marquee and sign were added when the building became a moviehouse. The theater is currently vacant and the retail spaces are used for various commercial businesses.

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)

Performing Arts

Entertainment/Recreation

Social History

Period of Significance

1916-1917

Significant Dates

1916

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

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

The Martha Ellen Auditorium is significant for its association with and in reference to the historic context "Aesthetic Systems: Itinerant and Local Performing Arts in Nebraska" and the property type of "Opera House Buildings in Nebraska, 1867 to 1917." Under Criterion A, this opera house is significant in the areas of the performing arts; entertainment/recreation; and social history, on a state level, as a well preserved example of an opera house building in Nebraska. The building retains a high degree of historical integrity, possessing the physical and associative characteristics to make it an eligible member of its property type.

This opera house is significant in the area of performing arts for bringing a variety of entertainment to the community of Merrick. As a facility for the performing arts, it offered productions such as musical concerts, comic operas, touring companies, vaudeville performers, classics like *The Shepherd of the Hills*, and home talent productions. (See following table of Representative Entertainments -1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of entertainment/recreation, since it provided a place where the whole community could gather to attend movies, school entertainments, and lectures. (See following table of Representative Entertainments -1917.)

This opera house is significant in the area of social history, because it gave Central City a neutral, nonaffiliated location for sporting events. (See following table of Representative Entertainments -1917.) In the days before radio, television, and sound movies, activities at the opera house were anticipated for days or weeks ahead of time. It provided a place for people to get together to have a good time and forget their troubles over crops, weather, taxes, the railroads, and the generally hard life of settling the Great Plains.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bice, Stanley. Letter to the author. Central City: 14 Jul. 1986.
Blodgett, Catherine. Personal interview. Central City: 7 Feb. 1987.
Central City Nonpareil. 7 Jul. 1917 - 29 Nov. 1917.
Gorgen, Barbara. Letter to the author. Central City: 1986.
Harris, Miner. "Merrick County's 100th Year 1858-1958." Unpublished ts.,
Nebraska State Historical Society Library.
Jensen, George. Telephone interview. Central City: 5 Feb. 1987.
Martha Ellen Auditorium. Central City site visit. 7 Feb. 1987.
Merrick County Register of Deeds. Martha Ellen Auditorium public records. 4 Sep.
1987.

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:

D. Layne Ehlers (see below)

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property less than one acre

UTM References

A
 Zone Easting Northing

C

B
 Zone Easting Northing

D

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

This property is described as the east 22 feet of Lot 7 and all of Lot 8 of Block 29 of the Original Town of Lone Tree (Central City), Merrick County, Nebraska.

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the entire town lots that have been historically associated with this property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title D. Layne Ehlers, Principal Investigator

organization OHBIN Study date April, 1988

street & number 2302 South 11th telephone [402] 435-6946

city or town Lincoln state NE zip code 68502

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The period of significance is derived from the original construction date of the building, 1916. The *Central City Nonpareil* declared when the theatre opened, "Col. W. C. Shelton deserves the patronage of every resident of our city as remuneration [sic] for his progressive spirit in giving the playgoers of Central City such a house. The investment was prompted by a spirit of community advancement for the returns cannot possibly pay interest on the investment Mr. Shelton is putting into this building" (2 Nov. 1916:1). It continues through 1917, the year considered to signal the end of the opera house era in Nebraska, based on declining numbers of touring companies nationally and rising numbers of movie houses and automobiles. Eventually the Auditorium showed solely motion pictures, eliminating its primary opera house significance in the performing arts.

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Martha Ellen Auditorium, Central City
Representative Entertainments, 1916-1917

DATE EVENT AND PERFORMERS

Social History

Oct 1917 Heavyweight wrestling, Joe Stecher vs. "Bill" Hokuff

Entertainment/Recreation

Nov 1916 D. W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*
Children's recitations, home talent
Dec 1916 *The Mysteries of Myra* (serial)
Lord Loveland Discovers America, moving picture
Oct 1917 *Do Children Count?* Series of pictures
The Lad and the Lion, moving picture
The Lair of the Wolf, moving picture
Lyman H. Howe's Travel Festival, moving pictures
Nov 1917 *Jack and the Beanstalk*, moving picture
D. W. Griffith's *The Avenging Conscience*
Dec 1917 Lecture by Dr. Charles T. Bayles, Writer, Traveler, Orator,

Performing Arts

Nov 1916 *Our Jim*
Don't Tell My Wife
The Shepherd of the Hills
Dec 1916 *Jess of the Hill Country* with Marguerite Nichols
Hallowell Concert Co.
Alexander Gaden, featuring *The Drifter*
The Bohemian Girl grand opera by the Aborn Opera Co.
Little Peggy O'Moore
The Dream That Came True, Junior class home talent play
Oct 1917 The Giersdorf Musical Opera co. in *The Holy City*
Lee Chandler's American Ginger Girls
Nov 1917 Mitchell Players of Grand Island in *Somewhere In France*, A
Cowboy Sheriff and *Kentucky Sue*
My Soldier Girl
Kulolo's Hawaiians in *The Princess of Paradise*
Uncle Tom's Cabin
Bob and Eval McGinley and the Two McGinley Children
Dec 1917 Mitchell Players in *The Sweetest Girl in Dixie* and *Turned Up*
The Garden of Allah

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Photographs
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The following information is the same for all Central City photographs:

NAME OF PROPERTY: Martha Ellen Auditorium
CITY, COUNTY, STATE: Central City, Merrick, Nebraska
NeHBS SITE No.: MK02-8
OHBIN SITE No.: 02-07-04
NAME OF PHOTOGRAPHER: Christian H. Ehlers

PHOTO NUMBER: Central City #1
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 02-07-87 (8611/8:10)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Exterior view, looking south at the northeast (front) and northwest facades.

PHOTO NUMBER: Central City #2
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 02-07-87 (8611/8:15)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking southwest (from the balcony) at the stage area.

PHOTO NUMBER: Central City #3
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 02-07-87 (8611/8:20)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking northeast at the auditorium area.

PHOTO NUMBER: Central City #4
DATE OF PHOTOGRAPH (and NEGATIVE NUMBER): 02-07-87 (8611/8:11)
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVE: Nebraska State Historical Society
DESCRIPTION OF VIEW INDICATING DIRECTION OF CAMERA: Interior view, looking southeast at some of the original seats located in the balcony.

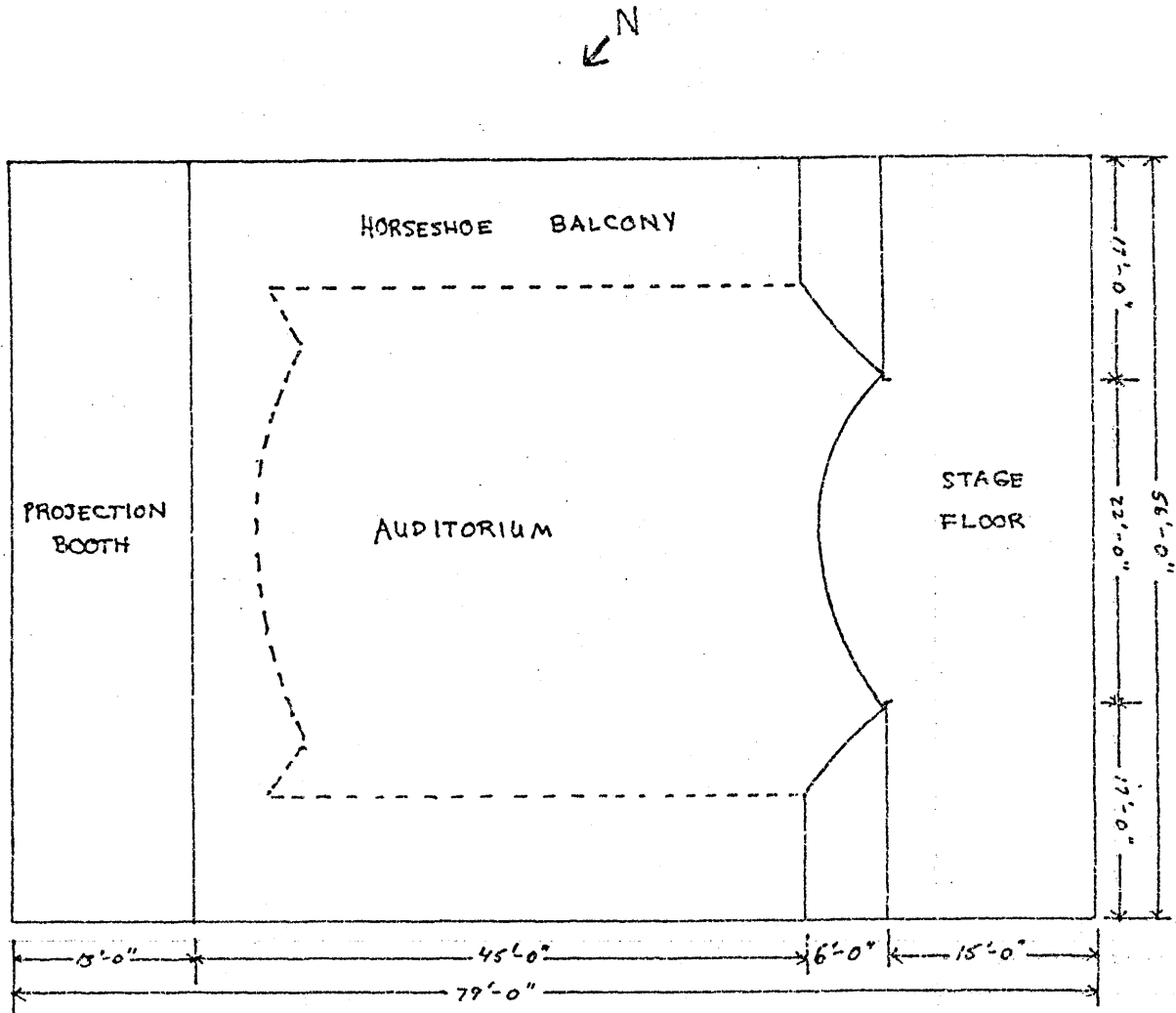
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Floor plan, Martha Ellen Auditorium, Central City



P. Leitner, Draftsman