

SURVEY-INVENTORY FORM  
COMMUNITY CULTURAL RESOURCE SURVEY

1. NAME  
Historic Columbia Theater

and/or Common N.A.

2. LOCATION  
Street & Number 1225 Vandercook Way

UTM References: Kelso, WA-OR Scale: 1:24,000  
Zone 10 Easting 505310  
Northing 5109470  
- not for publication

City, Town Longview - vicinity of

State Washington County Cowlitz

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership: public private both  
Status: occupied unoccupied work in progress  
Present Use: agriculture commercial educational entertainment government  
industrial military museum park private residence  
religious scientific transportation other:

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY

Name City of Longview

Street & Number 1525 Broadway

City, Town Longview - vicinity of State Washington 98632

5. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Jechort, Melanie and Larry Kolano. "The Columbia Theater, Longview's High Class Theater".  
Cowlitz Historical Quarterly. Kelso. 1983  
Long-Bell Files. Deposited in the Longview History Room, Longview Public Library.  
McClelland Jr., John M. R.A. Long's planned City, The Story of Longview, Bicentennial  
Edition, Longview. Longview Publishing Co. 1976.

6. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title Michael L. Neuschwanger, Architectural Apprentice

Organization City of Longview Urban Services Dept. Date March 18, 1985

Street & Number 1525 Broadway Telephone 577-3330

City or Town Longview State Washington 98632

## 7. DESCRIPTION

Condition:        excellent    good    fair    deteriorated    ruins    unexposed  
Circle one:        unaltered                      altered  
Circle one:        original site            moved    date \_\_\_\_\_

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Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance  
attach photo

The Columbia Theater is a prominent four story building with an 1100 seat auditorium. The building is located at the northern entry of the Longview's primary business district, built during the city's settlement, at the junction of Commerce Avenue and a diagonal arterial, Vandercook Way. The building's footprint is several sided, a result of the lot lines' perpendicular alignment to the shifting street grids. The plan is symmetrical about the central axis of the building, the theater entry bay and the auditorium inside. The three street elevations are composed of a short central side containing the main theater entrance and flanking longer sides, with three structural ground story bays. A contemporary building abutts the slot wall on the south side. The north side faces a parking lot with an alley to the rear. Indented light courts occur on the upper stories of the otherwise blind faced side elevations. The street facade features a columnar ground story supporting the more planar wall surface of the upper stories.

The building is constructed on timber pilings, with a concrete basement. The perimeter walls and the auditorium shell on three sides are also constructed of concrete.

Verbal boundary description: Lots 15,16,17, Block 82 of  
Longview Addition #2  
190' X 120'

Acreage: Less than One Acre

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## 8. SIGNIFICANCE

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Specific dates	1925	Builder/Architect	Olympic / George Purvis
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Level of significance: local

### a. History

The Columbia Theater was financed by a group of 40 local investors who formed the Columbia Amusement Company. The building was constructed within the first two years of Longview's settlement on property purchased from the Longview Company, a division of the Long-Bell Lumber Company. The project was initiated by Wesley Vandercook, who was the amusement company's first president and George Secrest, Secretary-Treasurer of the company. Mr. Vandercook, Chief Engineer for Long-Bell, was also responsible for the analysis which led to the choice of the Cowlitz site for the Long-Bell mills and accompanying townsite and was active in Longview's construction (see thematic nomination). Another notable accomplishment of this Longview protagonist was his successful lobbying effort for the controversial Longview-Rainier bridge, spanning the Columbia River (The bridge required an act of Congress, in January 1927 to allow its construction, which the Port of Portland

### b. Evaluation of Significance

The Columbia Theater is a prominent and fine example of the Classical Revival influence in the city of Longview. The 1100 seat auditorium is one of Longview's most impressive, finely detailed and richly embellished rooms still surviving from the settlement period. The building is significant by its association with the Columbia Amusement Company, a collaboration of local investors, headed by Long-Bell's Chief Engineer, Wesley Vandercook along with other Long-Bell executives. The building is important in the evolution of the settlement period and is representative of the founding company's emphasis on the cultural life of the planned city. The theater has continuously served as an important cultural and entertainment center throughout the city's history and is presently a performing arts facility.

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1. NAME Columbia Theater

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7. DESCRIPTION - continued

The fourth side of the shell, separating the auditorium from the lobby and apartments, is constructed of laminated wood framing members. The auditorium is spanned by four steel trusses, resting on the concrete shell, with wood cross-bracing. The interior bays of the stores and the apartments are wood post and beam, in conjunction with the concrete and laminated wood walls. The street facades are faced in stucco, with elements of architectural detail constructed of wood. The light courts are framed in wood and faced in stucco.

The building is characterized by the Classical Revival style, exemplified by the horizontal emphasis of the tripartite facade composition of the base, midsection and attic story and by elements of Classical detail. A columnar ground story is distinguished from the more planar upper stories by a projecting belt course at the sill of the second story windows. The attic story is defined by a horizontal belt course at the window sills and by an architrave constructed of multiple fascias which forms the lintel to the attic openings. The entablature features a plain stucco fascia and a projecting boxed cornice with dentils and modillions. The pattern of the upper stories various sized openings is ordered, but only loosely related to the rhythm of the ground story bays. The windows, of two sizes, are constructed of wood, one over one sash, arranged singularly, or in pairs with a central dividing mullion. Two semicircular arched windows, with hood moulds springing from corbel stops, are featured in the second story over the theater entrance. The ground story shop bays are transomed and slightly recessed from the wall plane, with tile kick-plates and small inset entries recessed under the banks of transom lights. Shop doors are single leaf with lighted panels. The stairhall and vomitory entries are arranged in the central bay of each flanking wing and are deeply recessed with transom lights over the double leaf, paneled doors. The theater entrance bay, thirty-five feet wide by eight feet deep, features a centralized semi-octagonal ticket booth which projects into the space, flanked by a bank of double and single leaf doors, with decorative stenciled trim. The ticket booth is tiled, with leaded glass windows. The entry also features a highly detailed, plaster entablature, with a stenciled frieze, located on the rear walls above the doors. The building's facade is original except for the alteration of the vomitory doors in the northern wing, the alteration of the accoladed cornice of the original "COLUMBIA" sign, and the addition of a 1940's marquee at the theater entrance. A single turnstile has been added within the theater entrance bay.

The auditorium is in good condition, featuring a stage with a full flyloft including original backdrops, an orchestra level and pit, and a full crescent shaped balcony. The seating is raked on both levels, more steeply in the balcony and is arranged in an arc, related to sight lines. The front of the stage is aligned with the quarter rounded proscenium arch, which springs from engaged pilasters. A fan shaped vault, forming a natural horn, thrusts into the hall, extending from the proscenium. Above the vault is the organ loft. The organ has been removed. The vault of the loft is relieved by a series of metal screens on the intrados and extrados-the underside and the face-of the vault. The screens of the intrados are trimmed by spiral shafts and ornamented arches in raised plaster relief.

The vault appears to rest on corresponding planar walls, with semicircular arched niches. The walls and niches are a part of a renovation dating from 1930-1933. The area originally contained box seats which stepped down from the balcony towards the stage. The niches feature delicate foliated raised plaster relief in the surrounds, with a plaster screen of a bolder geometric design set into the opening. The curved orchestra pit had been covered to provide more seating in 1933, but has been reopened in 1985, with only slight

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CONTINUATION SHEET

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1. NAME Columbia Theater

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7. DESCRIPTION - continued 2

spatial variations to the original. The side elevations of the hall, of plaster, are divided into three bays of equal size, by engaged pilasters, with a full entablature. The elements are richly embellished by stylized stenciling, over a distinctive tonal color scheme. The planar walls of the bays are embellished by delicate stenciled trim, with painted scenes set into centralized ovals. The flat, plaster ceiling also retains stenciling, which is indicative of the structural bays. Some of the stenciling under the balcony has been damaged by pop drainage. The ornate chandeliers, which are original or dating from the 1930-33 renovations, are constructed of iron, brassed, with mica panels. The wood floors are original, with Art Deco seating dating from the 1940's.

The rear of the auditorium has been altered by the addition of a snack bar, constructed in 1948. The projection booth in the balcony, by its planar, unadorned walls, appears to have been altered. The ground floor and mezzanine lobby has been altered, primarily in 1933, but also, in 1948, by the snack bar. Original details include a centralized frieze with ornamental plaster relief, flanking sets of stairs, paneled mirrors, doors and wood trim. A centralized opening, which provided a visual link to the mezzanine, was closed around 1935. The spatial organization and detailing of the mezzanine, while derived from the original design, appears to have been substantially modified by the renovations of 1930-1933.

The interior of the ground story retail slots, and the apartments of the upper stories are spatially intact, but have sustained water damage and are in fair condition. Significant details in the upper stories include wood doors, baseboards and floors, as well as the original stairs and paneled balustrades.

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8. SIGNIFICANCE

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a. History - continued

and the Portland Chamber of Commerce vigorously opposed.) Mr. Vandercook was also President of the Cowlitz Valley Bank. Secrest, also a community leader, was a former Long-Bell employee, Longview's City Attorney and President of the Longview School Board.

The building was designed by George E. Purvis, who had previously designed several theaters on the west coast. Purvis lavished much personal attention on the construction of the theater, eventually investing in the building, managing theater operations and serving as president of the Columbia Amusement Company. The theater was built by Olympic Construction and engineered to carry three more stories. The auditorium and lobby detailing was constructed by regional craftsmen under the charge of A. Weissenborn Decorating, of Seattle. F. J. Hahn, of the Architectural Decorating Company, also of Seattle, directly supervised the ornamental plastering. In an article published in the April 3, 1925 edition of the Longview Daily News, the interior is described as Italian Renaissance. In the article Mr. Weissenborn is quoted as saying "This is such a wonderful theater that I wanted it to have the best that I and my associates could produce and for that reason, I was on the ground most of the time to see that things were done as I intended they should be, to the very smallest detail," .....

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CONTINUATION SHEET

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1. NAME Columbia Theater

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8. SIGNIFICANCE

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a. History - continued 2

... I have decorated many larger theaters but none finer."

The design and construction of the building was thoroughly summarized on the front and succeeding pages of the April 3, 1925 edition of the Longview Daily News. One of the articles, entitled "Beautiful Columbia Theater is Monument to Endeavors of Builders" begins, "Another triumph for Longview and for all of Cowlitz County is the opening of the quarter-million-dollar Columbia Theater tomorrow night. The premiere marks a new era in the amusement field in this section of the Pacific Northwest and another notch in the wave of civic pride, confidence in the future and substantial development on which Longview is rapidly moving forward."

Opening night was April 4, 1925, with a dedication by local judge, T.P. Fisk, standing in for the scheduled speaker, Robert A. Long, Chairman of Long-Bell, who was ill. Well known organist, Arnold Leverenz performed selections on the \$30,000 W.W. Kimball organ, followed by acts by the Orpheum Junior Vaudeville Players. Regular scheduled movies began the next day. Vaudeville was a popular weekend attraction in the city.

The early developmental designs by Purvis for the building indicates two story frontal wings, with the higher auditorium rising behind. The early financial projections for the cost of the building was \$125,000. The additional two stories of apartments might logically account for a portion of the higher actual construction costs, which were double the early projections at \$250,000. Mark Morris, General Western Manager of Long-Bell, began investing in the theater before its completion, becoming easily the largest shareholder of the Columbia Amusement Company before the building was finished.

The theater was a financial failure. Courthouse records indicate that in November of 1935, the State Supreme Court ruled in favor of Ellis Shephard, trustee representing Puget Sound Savings and Loan, and against the dissolved Columbia Amusement Company, in a case involving the liquidation of the theater assets. On January 4, 1935, the property was sold at a public auction for \$210,930 to C. Ellis Shephard, Trustee representing Puget Sound Savings and Loan.

The theater continued to operate as a movie house until the 1980's. In 1983, the City of Longview purchased the building in a complicated land swap, saving the theater from demolition. The initiators of the drive to save the building, the Columbia Theater Task Force, now operates the theater as a regional performing arts center. The shop spaces and apartments are currently unoccupied. The renovation and restoration of the theater is ongoing, as funds become available.