

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form

NOV 3 1988

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 Clemmer Theater
other names/site number State Theater

2. Location

street & number West 901 Sprague Avenue not for publication
city, town Spokane vicinity
state Washington code WA county Spokane code 063 zip code 99204

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>0</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>1</u>	<u>0</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing:
N/A

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] October 26, 1988
Signature of certifying official Date
Washington State 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] 12/1/88

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theaterCOMMERCE/TRADE/business

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE/theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(enter categories from instructions)

Commercial StyleClassical Revival

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concretewalls brick

roof asphaltother terra cotta

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

The Clemmer Theater Building is located in Spokane, Washington near the western end of the central business district. Designed by noted theater architect Edwin W. Houghton, the building was constructed in 1914-15 and contains one of the earliest deluxe theaters in the West designed expressly for the showing of motion pictures. Situated on a corner lot, the three-story Commercial Style building has two major street elevations that are characterized by glazed cream brick facing and the judicious use of classical decorative elements of glazed terra cotta. The upper stories, including wood frame windows, retain their historical appearance. At street level, some original storefronts remain, although all those on the east side were removed in a 1975 remodeling. At the same time, the original theater lobby was altered by inappropriate additions. These, however, have been removed and the lobby space is being remodeled in the current rehabilitation. The interior of the theater is essentially intact. Original ornamental plasterwork and landscapes painted on canvas wall surfaces have been restored. Alterations needed to transform the space to a modern performing arts center have centered on backstage additions and upgrading of mechanical systems.

The Clemmer Theater is situated on the southwest corner of the intersection of Sprague Avenue and Lincoln Street. The building is rectangular in plan, with 100 feet of frontage on Sprague Avenue and 85 feet of frontage on Lincoln Street. Adjacent buildings abut the theater on the west and south. The exterior of the two visible facades is clad in glazed brick laid up in common bond. Glazed terra cotta in a matching color is used for decorative elements including intermediate cornices separating the second and third stories, spandrels and mullions at the mezzanine level, and Ionic capitals capping the first story piers. These piers, rising from polished granite bases, create eight bays on the north elevation and seven bays on the east elevation.

At street level on the north elevation there remain only three original storefronts, composed of a recessed entry, plate glass display windows in ornamental metal frames, and multipaned transoms. The remainder of the storefronts have been altered over time, including the two bays under the 1950s projecting marquee that marks the entrance to the theater lobby. In 1975 all the storefronts on the east elevation were replaced by tile infill that matches the original brick facing. The recent remodeling closed the original theater entrance and created a recessed entrance in the northeast storefront bay. A loading entrance was created in the northwest bay of the Sprague Avenue elevation.

Above the storefronts the original building fabric remains intact. At the mezzanine level single-light wood-frame pivoting windows are grouped in threes between each pier. At the second and third stories single rectangular openings hold double-hung wood-sash windows of one-over-one lights. Terra cotta lintels form a continuous belt course above the second story windows, while at the third story this same motif is interrupted by slightly

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projecting piers that define the bays and terminate at several courses of brick corbelling. A decorative band of patterned brickwork, dentil row and simple terminal cornice complete the design at the parapet.

The structural system consists of a steel frame encased in concrete, rising from a poured concrete foundation that encloses a full basement. Upper stories contain single-loaded corridors that provide access to office spaces at the north and east perimeters. The mezzanine level on Sprague Avenue originally housed the offices of the theater operation, while spaces on the two upper floors were rented to various professional service enterprises. The interior finishes in these office areas are standard for the period, and include painted plaster walls, hardwood millwork and typical hardware. The dominant feature of the building is the theater, which occupies the remainder of the interior.

The lobby of the theater features an elliptical coffered dome that rises above a classically detailed entablature. From this dramatic rotunda space the lobby continues as a wide curving colonnaded passage that provides access to the main floor aisles. A broad, balustraded ramp, echoing the curve of the colonnade, ascends to the balcony level. A restrained use of Ionic capitals, egg-and-dart moldings, dentil rows, and other classically derived decorative elements gives a refined elegance to these public spaces.

The auditorium, with a seating capacity of approximately 300 on the main level and 450 in the balcony, retains its original appearance. A ceiling of parallel barrel vaults over the balcony conceals steel trusses that provide a clear span of 60 feet. Between the balcony ceiling and the proscenium arch is suspended a false coffered vault laced with screened octagonal openings, which functioned as a sounding board for the organ pipes that were originally located behind it. This was apparently the first use of such an acoustical vault in theater design. The decorative theme of the auditorium continues that of the lobby areas. Ionic capped pilasters divide the balcony wall surfaces into large rectangles that are filled with landscape scenes painted on canvas by I. Peterson. Flanking the proscenium arch below the acoustic vault are banks of false boxes with curved balustrades framed by engaged Corinthian columns and infilled with painted landscape scenes under decorative tympana.

The theater has been remodeled and redecorated several times, although most of the changes were superficial. In the 1950s the last three rows of main level seating were removed to accommodate an enlarged concessions area. In 1975 the entry and lobby were remodeled and inappropriate additions compromised the rotunda space. In the current rehabilitation these additions have been removed and the lobby spaces are being restored to the extent possible. Work in the auditorium has been confined to cleaning, repairing and repainting the walls and decorative plasterwork, restoring the landscape paintings, and enlarging the stage by projecting it beyond the proscenium arch.

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

Period of Significance

1915-1938

Significant Dates

1915

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Houghton, Edwin W.

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

The Clemmer Theater is significant as one of the West Coast's earliest movie houses and for its important role in the cultural history of Spokane, Washington. Built in 1914-15 by local developer August Paulsen, the theater represents a turning point in mass entertainment, when vaudeville was relinquishing top billing to silent films and the era of the lavishly embellished movie palaces was about to begin. Designed by noted theater architect Edwin W. Houghton, the Clemmer embodied the restrained Neoclassicism of these traditional movie houses. Named for its first owner, Howard S. Clemmer, it also exemplified the continuing prosperity of the city of Spokane, which had served as the financial and cultural center of the Inland Empire since the 1880s. Before World War I, the town boasted several public auditoria for opera, legitimate theater, vaudeville, and motion pictures. Now the last remaining of these early theaters, the Clemmer is undergoing renovation and is scheduled to reopen as the Metropolitan Performing Arts Center.

Spokane's fortunes in its early years were dependent on two factors: railroads and mining. The Northern Pacific arrived in 1881 and was soon followed by four other lines. These transcontinental connections made Spokane a major rail center in the West. In the late 1880s, a gold rush, and then significant silver, copper, and other mineral production, contributed to the city's wealth. Spokane prospered from mining through the 1890s and on until the First World War. It became the acknowledged capital of the Inland empire, a region including eastern Washington, the Idaho panhandle, and parts of eastern Oregon, southern Idaho, western Montana, and southern British Columbia. A fire in 1889 that destroyed 32 blocks of downtown only spurred the citizenry to construct a central business district of distinguished commercial buildings over the next 30 years.

In 1906, August Paulsen built his namesake building, at that time the tallest structure in the city. Paulsen was an immigrant who struck it rich in the Idaho silver mines and moved to Spokane, where he became a developer, philanthropist, and civic leader. In the mid-'teens he saw the potential of a downtown parcel near the elegant Davenport Hotel (National Register), then under construction. Looking for a way to capitalize on the momentum provided by the hotel's presence, he commissioned Edwin W. Houghton of Seattle to design a commercial building incorporating a first-class movie theater. At the time, Spokane did not have a large quality house purposely designed for motion picture projection, and there seems to have been a race to build the first one in this regional capital.

See continuation sheet

9. Major Bibliographical References

- "Clemmer Leases Paulsen's Theater," Spokane Spokesman-Review, July 30, 1914, p. 1.
- "Clemmer Theater, christened by mayor, entertains 7500 first day," Spokane Spokesman-Review, February 23, 1915, p. 1.
- "Dr. Clemmer recalls movie house opening, 25 years," Spokane Spokesman-Review, February 22, 1940.
- "Edwin Walker Houghton," Washington State Architect, May 1927, pp. 2 & 5.
- Evenson, Ann Grombacher, wife of former owner. Interview, April 1988.
- Grombacher Archives, Eastern Washington State Historical Society, Spokane, Washington.
- Lufkin, George L., The Spokane Spectacle: A Study of Spokane Washington Theaters between 1883 and 1983. Spokane: 1983.
- Naylor, David, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1981.
- "New Clemmer Theater model of beauty, utility and comfort," Spokane Spokesman-Review, February 21, 1915, p. 6.
- "Superb Clemmer Theater, Spokane playhouse, opens tomorrow," Spokane Spokesman-Review, February 21, 1915, p. 2.

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: _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of property less than one acre

Quadrangle Name: Spokane N.W. Scale: 1:24000

UTM References

A

1	1
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4	6	8	1	6	0
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5	2	7	8	0	6	0
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Zone Easting Northing

C

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B

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

Zone Easting Northing

D

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

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Lots 5 and 6, Block 5, Railroad Addition to the Plat of Spokane, Washington.

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Boundary Justification

The boundary includes the two entire city lots occupied by the building and historically associated with the property.

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Ronald W. Wendle, Architect; edited by Shirley Courtois, OAHP

organization Metropolitan Mortgage Company date July 1988

street & number West 901 Sprague Avenue telephone _____

city or town Spokane state Washington zip code 99204

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Although small-scale nickelodeons had flourished for a decade, the first deluxe theater built expressly for showing movies had opened in Manhattan as recently as 1913. With its ornate Venetian facade, the Regent foreshadowed the movie "palaces" of the next decade. But these early motion picture theaters still owed much to the vaudeville houses that preceded them, and many of their designers had made their reputations as architects of these earlier live performance theaters. Edwin W. Houghton (1856-1927), member of a family of English architects, had settled in Seattle around 1890 and established himself as a prolific designer of commercial and institutional buildings. He was particularly noted for his outstanding theaters and, during a long career, produced designs for nearly 100 vaudeville and film houses in the western United States. Of his several performance halls in Seattle, the Moore Theater and Hotel of 1907 (National Register) is still standing, while his American Theater and Hotel in Spokane (1910) has been demolished. His design for the Clemmer followed a typical pattern: a multi-storied commercial structure housing office or hotel space, and retail storefronts or restaurants, with a magnificent auditorium and stage incorporated in a complex interior. This arrangement, perhaps best exemplified by Chicago's Auditorium (1889), continued in movie theater design into the 1920s. However, the parallel development of single-function buildings with elaborately expressive facades signaling the cinematic experience became the norm for the major "picture palaces."

When August Paulsen began to build his movie house in 1914 he did not yet have anyone to manage the theater. Midway through construction, he negotiated a lease with Dr. Howard S. Clemmer, a former dentist, who operated the 450-seat Clemmer Theater located two blocks to the east. Clemmer became involved in the movie business following the death of his father, who saw a future for the nickelodeons by dignifying them with a Main Street location and the amenities that a dime admission could provide. Clemmer's father was the first to establish small-scale movie houses in both Spokane and Seattle. The new Clemmer Theater was intended to be the first of the medium-sized deluxe motion picture houses in Spokane.

The pace of construction was brisk, but the Clemmer took second place in its "race" with the Liberty Theater, which was finished three weeks earlier. The Clemmer opened with great fanfare on February 22, 1915, presenting the film "Mistress Nell," starring Mary Pickford. A local newspaper reported:

The opening of the Clemmer theater last Monday, following the opening a few weeks previous of the Liberty theater, both devoted to motion pictures, and built for that purpose, marks an epoch in the theatrical history of the City...Paulsen's theater has outlasted all its rivals, however, and is the only one of the early Spokane theaters remaining.

The Clemmer Theater holds the Spokane record for the longest run of a motion picture when the "Sound of Music" played for 54 weeks in 1964-65. In addition to first-run movie presentations, the theater also hosted a variety of live performances on a regular basis. These events included organ recitals, singers' contests, and classical music, jazz and dance performances. One of the better local artists, Bing Crosby, made his last Spokane appearance at the Clemmer before going to Hollywood."

Dr. Clemmer operated the theater until 1925 when it was sold to Universal Pictures. The Clemmer name remained until Ray Grombacher bought the theater in 1929 and renamed it the

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Audian. It was sold again two years later and reopened as the State, a name it held until it last closed in 1985. The theater is presently owned by the Metropolitan Mortgage Company and has been renamed the Met. It was recently rehabilitated for use as a performing arts center and reopened in September, 1988.