

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

OCT - 5 2005

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable". For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, word processor, or computer to complete all items.

**1. Name of Property**

Historic name Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Other names/site number GA03-272

**2. Location**

Street & number 205 North 4<sup>th</sup> Street

Not for publication

City or town Beatrice

Vicinity

State Nebraska

Code NE

County Gage

Code 67

Zip code 68310

**3. State/Federal Agency Certification**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, 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. I recommend that this property be considered significant  nationally  statewide  locally. ( See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Bohannon DSHPO*  
Signature of certifying official

9/28/05  
Date

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 for additional comments.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of certifying official/Title

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

**4. 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): \_\_\_\_\_

*Edson H. Beall* 11.16.05

*per*  
Signature of Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

Number of Resources within Property

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

- Private
Public-local
Public-state
Public-federal

- Building(s)
District
Site
Structure
Object

Table with 2 columns: Contributing, Noncontributing. Rows: Buildings, Sites, Structures, Objects, Total.

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.)

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium
RECREATION AND CULTURE/Sports facility
RECREATION AND CULTURE/Theater
SOCIAL/Clubhouse and civic
GOVERNMENT/City Hall

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- RECREATION AND CULTURE/Auditorium
RECREATION AND CULTURE/Sports facility
RECREATION AND CULTURE/Theater
SOCIAL/Clubhouse and civic
GOVERNMENT/City Hall

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- Art Deco

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions.)

- Foundation Concrete
Walls Brick
Roof
Other

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "X" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing.)

- X A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
X C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "X" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- A Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
B Removed from its original location.
C A birthplace or a grave.
D A cemetery.
E A reconstructed building, object, or structure.
F A commemorative property.
G Less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Narrative Statement of Significance

(Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT

ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1940-1955

Significant Dates

1940 - Construction completed

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Fred Organ - Architect

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

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 for additional data:

- X State Historic Preservation Office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local Government
University
Other
Name of repository:

**10. Geographical Data**Acreage of property Less than one

UTM References (place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet).

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	14	691343	4459640	3.			
2.				4.			

[ ] See continuation sheet

**Verbal Boundary Description**

(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

**Boundary Justification**

(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

**11. Form Prepared By**name/title Jill M. Ebers/Historic Buildings Survey Coordinatororganization Nebraska State Historic Preservation Officedate May 4, 2005street & number 1420 P Street/Box 82554telephone (402) 471-4773city or town Lincolnstate Nebraska zip code 68501-2554**Additional Documentation**

Submit the following items with the completed form:

**Continuation Sheets****Maps**A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.**Photographs**Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.**Additional items**

(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

**Property Owner**

(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name/title City of Beatrice: Jim Bauer, City Administratorstreet & number 400 Ella Streettelephone (402) 228-5211city or town Beatricestate Nebraska zip code 68310

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determined eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, (15 USC 470 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including the time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Project (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 7 Page 1

This Art Deco public building is a brick, rectangular shaped, two-story structure with a full basement and a flat roof. It has a concrete foundation and concrete decorative details. The three bay façade contains a central entrance in a bay that is slightly taller and projects further toward the street than the bay wings on either side of it. This bay has stone coping with scalloped edges; the same coping is found just above the first floor around the wings on either side of the central bay. Each wing has an entrance with a stone capstone that reads "Civic Assembly" over the door on the north wing, and "City Hall" over the door on the south wing. Both are embellished with a waving water motif. The windows and doors of this façade have been changed; the doors are all tinted glass, and the windows are two and four light tinted glass that fill the openings for the previous windows.

The primary feature of the building is the bas-relief that dominates the east façade. It encompasses much of the central bay, and the limestone of the carving stands out markedly from the brick surface of the remainder of the building. The bas-relief measures eighteen feet wide and twenty-six and a half feet tall. The panels are divided into three sections with brick pilasters. The dominant figure in the center is a woman sowing small grain. Two children, wielding a hoe and a watering can, flank her, and three sheaves of wheat lie below her feet. The sun halos her, and the rays that radiate from it form a background for the rest of the upper panels. At left, a farmer is seen reaping wheat with a small hand sickle, and at right, a man embraces stalks of corn. At bottom left, a man is pouring milk in to a milk can, while the bottom right panel shows a woman running a milk separator with one hand on a butter churn with the other. Her right arm is missing. The bottom panels just above the doorways are decorated with stylized flowers of many different kinds, cornucopia and spouts of water. Below is a wide, slightly curved panel of limestone which bears aluminum letters that spell the words "Municipal Auditorium" and an incised waving water motif.

One story wings are found on the north and south elevations of the auditorium, and housed offices for the City Hall and the Chamber of Commerce, among others. The windows on these elevations have also been replaced. The west elevation provides entrance into the basement level of the building, and currently houses the Beatrice Fire Department. The basement originally housed the National Guard Armory and training facility, including an interior firing range. The space now occupied by fire trucks was always intended to serve vehicles, and the garage doors, while changed at some point, were always garage doors and not openings imposed upon the building. To the north of the garage doors, lies the boiler room and coal storage, constructed as a basement portion of the north wing.

Upon entering the building through any of the four doors of the main entrance on the east façade, one enters the ticket lobby. The primary features of this lobby include a ticket booth with an aluminum grate, four doors with decorative handles that lead to the lobby, and a cornice of waving water motif incised into the plaster and running around the circumference of the room. Inside the concessions lobby, the same motif with a different finish flows around the room at the cornice line. The walls in this room are finished in clay tiles, which are also found on the floor. On the north side of this lobby, three wooden panels open up to reveal the concessions stand. The panels are secured into hooks in the ceiling, and can be closed and locked when not in use. Curved, wooden shelves lie under the concessions counter, and the original money box is still found on the shelves. On the opposite wall, three wooden panels mirror the windows to the concessions, and could be used to post announcements or coming attractions.

The entrance to the main arena of the auditorium is located directly west of the lobby. There are also doors immediately to the north and south of the concession stand, which lead to the stairs to the upstairs balcony seating, bathroom facilities and the offices in the wings. The floor of the main arena is set up for basketball games, but can also be utilized for seating if necessary. Chairs were acquired in 1940 for this purpose. The stage lies directly ahead and can be utilized either as a stage or additional seating for sporting events. Bleacher seating for the stage area was also purchased in 1940. The permanent seating is organized into two tiers, which four inlets for people entering the seating from the main floor. A booth at the top of the steps was used for announcements during sporting events, but could also have housed

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Beatrice Municipal Auditorium**

Name of Property

**Gage County, Nebraska**

County and State

Section 7 Page 2

spotlights for plays and concerts. A 1940s sound mixing board is located just above the main entrance into the arena and consists of five knobs and a sound meter. Upstairs, beyond the second tier of seating, a corridor leads to two offices, two small restrooms and a lounge.

The basement was designed to house the National Guard Armory and training facility. While the drill hall could be used for any number of military exercises and currently houses fire engines, it originally could also be used to host banquets. A large kitchen for hosting the banquets was located off the north wall of the drill hall. The kitchen now serves as the dormitory for the firefighters. A seventy-five foot rifle range was located along the east wall of the basement, directly under the ticket lobby and the offices, and was heavily sound proofed. This room has since been reconfigured into storage space. A vault, presumably for holding rifles, is located just off of the original rifle range, as well as a supply room and classroom along the south side of the basement. A dormitory for the National Guardsmen was located along the southern wall of the building, but now serves as the Fire Department's offices.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 1

Criterion A:

While the stock market crash in October of 1929 created a crisis in America's business and industry, agricultural areas throughout the United States had been in a depression for most of the decade of the 1920s. Farm prices that spiked during and after World War I fell as drastically as they had risen. As prices fell in mid-1920, farmers were faced with debts they were unable to pay. Farmers' incomes did not keep pace with inflation, and a devaluation in land prices contributed to their financial problems. Suffering in the agricultural economy caused economic problems for the rest of Nebraska at large. Black Tuesday was simply another devastating blow to an already depressed economy. As the authors of *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* described the Depression,

"The condition of the farmers affected Nebraska merchants, lumber dealers, realtors, school teachers, laborers, and artisans. Housewives stocked their pantry shelves with the simplest essentials; construction lagged; school administrators curtailed their programs as tax receipts went down; day laborers, formerly sure of a place on Nebraska farms and in Nebraska industries, began the long trek of the unemployed."<sup>1</sup>

By December of 1932, farm prices were the lowest in Nebraska history. In addition, Nebraska, and the rest of the Midwest, was suffering from a severe drought that caused valuable topsoil to erode, damaged crops and reduced agricultural production. Nation-wide, there were more than 12 million people unemployed and in need of assistance. Twenty-five percent of the American labor force was jobless.<sup>2</sup> State governments were incapable of supporting the vast numbers of destitute citizens who required help. The Federal government was forced to intercede, and with the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, the New Deal was instituted. Roosevelt's New Deal policies came in many manifestations, from the Social Security Act that provided monthly pensions to the elderly to direct relief payments from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, and perhaps most importantly public work relief projects that provided jobs to America's able-bodied unemployed. Some of these projects took the form of road construction, sewer repair, ditch digging, reforestation projects, and the construction of public buildings, among many other projects.<sup>3</sup> Throughout much of the Roosevelt administration, from 1933 to 1940 when public assistance was most required, billions of dollars were spent on projects intended to provide the working man with an opportunity to work. Under the Public Works Administration, programs administered by various administrations including the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works, led to the construction of 11,000 public buildings, including courthouses, firehouses, hospitals, gymnasiums, auditoriums, and schools, as well as over 100 airfields and 800 parks. They made repairs and improvements on more than 30,000 other pre-existing buildings, laid out 40,000 miles of public roads and repaired 150,000 miles of roads. They constructed 1,400 athletic fields and 1,800 swimming pools, and reforested 20,000 acres with trees and bushes.<sup>4</sup>

The Beatrice Municipal Auditorium is one such project. The National Industrial Recovery Act of 1933 created the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works for the purpose of giving employment and enabling local and state governments to undertake public construction works that had been on hold during the early depression years.<sup>5</sup> According to a study of work relief projects completed at the close of the Great Depression, public works projects were provided

<sup>1</sup> Works Progress Administration, *Nebraska: A Guide to the Cornhusker State* (1939; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 67; quoted in James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 313.

<sup>2</sup> Phoebe Cutter, *The Public Landscape of the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Page Smith, *Redeeming the Time: A People's History of the 1920s and the New Deal* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1987), 598.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, 814.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur E. Burns and Edward A. Williams, *Federal Work, Security, and Relief Programs* (Washington D.C.: United States Government Printing Office, 1941), 70.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 2

"not primarily as a test of willingness to labor but rather as a means of conserving the skills, work habits, and morale of the able-bodied unemployed. Work-relief projects...are not conceived of merely as a means of frightening off applicants for relief. True work-relief undertakings therefore, cannot be selected in a haphazard fashion, emphasis is placed, rather, on securing projects which when completed will be of value to the community."<sup>6</sup>

Roosevelt was convinced that public works projects were far better for America's morale than public relief, or "the dole", because such projects were not simply handouts to the needy. They were a means of providing the unemployed with a way to help themselves. The project, as it was intended to do, provided not only employment for a group of deserving men, but also bolstered Beatrice's citizens with civic pride and a renewed self-confidence.

FEAPW, under the Public Works Administration, provided grants to local governments for public works projects. When this opportunity for assistance in public building became available, the Beatrice Chamber of Commerce civic planning committee presented the Beatrice City Council with a long list of recommended projects, including a city auditorium.<sup>7</sup> There was a great public interest in an auditorium in Beatrice with citizens advocating for various uses of the building including city offices, club rooms, convention sites, gymnasium, police department quarters and training spaces for the National Guard.<sup>8</sup> They had expressed concern that Beatrice was losing opportunities for many conventions and for winter and indoor fairs because of a lack of space adequate for these purposes.

The proper procedure for obtaining a PWA grant was to first make a formal application to the regional PWA office, submitting rough drawings and estimates. An approved application was forwarded to Washington D.C. If accepted, the city would sign an agreement with the federal government, which would bind the government to release the funds, but did not bind the city to the project. The city could withdraw at any time and forfeit the use of the funds, which was provided in a 45% grant, 55% city match arrangement. With a signed agreement in hand, the architect can be authorized to draw up detailed plans. At some point during the process, a bond election must be held in which 75 percent of registered voters must vote for approval of the bond.<sup>9</sup> The Nebraska Legislature passed a 1929 law that limited bonds to amounts of \$100,000 for cities the size of Beatrice, resulting in a maximum construction cost of \$181,818 after the local match and federal grant were combined.<sup>10</sup>

The auditorium plans committee actively began researching past WPA auditorium projects in Nebraska, as well as other successful auditoriums throughout the state. They reviewed the plans and data from the Junction City, KS, Hastings, Fremont and Columbus auditoriums. A few weeks later, the committee made an "inspection tour" of municipal auditoriums in Omaha, Lincoln and Fremont. Boosters reported upon their return that they were more than ever convinced of Beatrice's need for a community building. The Fremont Chamber of Commerce told them they were "completely sold on their year-old auditorium...the building was not dark a total of three weeks in the year, and almost every date for the remainder of 1938 [was] filled with some activity at the building."<sup>11</sup> The Fremont Chamber president even offered to send a contingent of five or six Fremont businessmen and professionals to Beatrice to share their experience.

In order to get the voters' support for the bond, the municipal auditorium committee launched a promotional campaign. Circulation of petitions began on August 13, 1938.<sup>12</sup> According to a special law pertaining to municipal auditoriums, the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>7</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 3 January 1938.

<sup>8</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 10 July 1938.

<sup>9</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 21 July 1938.

<sup>10</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 14 July 1938.

<sup>11</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 12 August 1938.

<sup>12</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, *ibid.*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 3

city commissioners could call a bond election for an auditorium with just three weeks notice to the public. The PWA required that the bond election be held before October 1, 1938; the Citizens Progress Committee was operating under a strict time schedule.<sup>13</sup> Thirty-one volunteer solicitors covered the town in a drive to gather the 900 signatures required for the petition. The number of signatures actually acquired surpassed the number needed by an additional 100, and the special bond election was set for September 23, 1938. A number of organizations threw their influence behind the auditorium initiative, including the Beatrice Retail Merchants Association, the Junior and Senior Chambers of Commerce, the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the executive committee of the Women's Club, the Parent Teachers Association, the Eagles Club, and the Business and Professional Women's Club. Carl Wilke, the chair of the Citizens Progress Committee was often the featured speaker at their meetings. At the Junior Chamber of Commerce meeting he stated, "Beatrice stands at the crossroads. The people will make the choice – whether this shall be a solid, substantial city, or a quaint little old village. There can be no compromise with progress: cities are built, they don't just happen."<sup>14</sup>

The Junior Chamber signed on to support the effort; in an effort to convince the doubtful, they sold tickets for a special excursion train to Fremont to inspect the Fremont Municipal Auditorium (NRHP listed, 11 July 2002). For two and a half dollars, passage to and from Fremont on a special train and a banquet in the Fremont Auditorium would be provided. "Supporters and opponents of the Beatrice auditorium project and fence-sitters are all invited."<sup>15</sup> By September 15, the day of the trip, 250 tickets had been sold for the trip. Seven different entertainers were scheduled for the train ride to Fremont "to break the silence." The group from Beatrice, led by Beatrice mayor John Ostrander, was met at the station by a delegation made up of Fremont Mayor Fred Drew and members of the Fremont Chamber of Commerce, accompanied by the Fremont High School Band. After marching the seven blocks to the Municipal Auditorium, the group from Beatrice sat down to dinner with approximately 100 Fremont citizens who hosted the affair. After dinner, speakers touted the value of a community auditorium. They estimated that \$350,000 in revenue were brought into Fremont during the year the building was in operation through thirty-two statewide conventions that had been held in Fremont, due only to the existence of this new facility. Dr. Horace F. Martin, president of Midland College in Fremont, stated in his speech that, "A community is made by the men that hold it together and this building is a remarkable monument to the coordination of human effort, of minds and hearts directed toward a laudable and noble purpose."<sup>16</sup> After the speeches, the group was allowed to tour the building, and later returned to the train. Although no effort was made on the part of the Chamber of Commerce to promote the auditorium project, the passengers universally seemed to have a new or renewed appreciation for the project.

The special bond election was held September 23, 1938, and it passed with a two-thirds majority in favor of the proposition, above the 60% majority required for its passage. The PWA was notified of the results of the election, and the work was allowed to proceed. The *Beatrice Sun* proudly proclaimed,

Friday's election was the climax of the most determined special election campaign in the history of this city. A citizens progress committee, headed by the tireless Carl Wilke, and supported by hundreds of active volunteer workers, staged an election drive that surprised even the leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Post election commentary noted that never before had Beatricians so enthusiastically cooperated on any election, and remarked that this was the first time there was no organized opposition to a project in a bond election. With a positive

<sup>13</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 13 August 1938.

<sup>14</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 7 September 1938.

<sup>15</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 7 September 1938.

<sup>16</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 16 September 1938.

<sup>17</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 25 September 1938.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

**Beatrice Municipal Auditorium**

Name of Property

**Gage County, Nebraska**

County and State

Section 8 Page 4

outcome in the special election, and bookings already coming in, approval of the application to the PWA was considered a mere formality, and plans moved forward.

Hopes were nearly dashed a mere two weeks after the election, when Secretary of State Harold Ickes announced that Nebraska's share of funding for the year had already been allocated.<sup>18</sup> Nebraska PWA project promoters from thirty-three communities throughout the state gathered in Lincoln to protest what they considered to be blatant discrimination against Nebraska. Beatrice Mayor Ostrander was appointed head of a statewide committee whose goal was to secure the PWA allocations. Chamber of Commerce president Ross Lincoln even dispatched letters to Secretary of War Harry A. Woodring and Major General Albert H. Blanding, Chief of the National Guard Bureau, seeking their aid in acquiring the funding from the PWA, intimating that the local National Guard unit would likely not have another opportunity for acquiring an armory and training center if the Auditorium was not constructed.<sup>19</sup> The community was kept in suspense throughout much of October, with final notification of approval to proceed finally being reported in the 30 October 1938 *Beatrice Sun*.

The city of Beatrice solicited early proposals from architects and received four from qualified applicants; the city opted to contract with Fred Organ, an architect from Omaha in August.<sup>20</sup> Fred Organ traveled to Beatrice many times to discuss plans for the project, and was extremely cognizant of the goal of providing labor opportunities for Beatrice's unemployed. The architect suggested that the auditorium project would likely provide work to as many men as the construction of thirty \$6000 homes. Since the project would have to be started by January 1, 1939, the project would provide labor for local men during a season that commonly was a slow one for laborers. Organ estimated that 95% of the labor would be available to Beatrice workers. He further estimated that the construction of the building would take about twelve months to finish and would employ an average of 47 men per day.<sup>21</sup>

During the promotion of the special election, word reached the site selection committee that people wanted to know the future location of the auditorium before they would vote in its favor. The committee chair, Carl Wilke, reported to the Beatrice city commissioners prior to the election that the most favored site for the new auditorium was Fourth and Ella Streets, largely because the city already owned two of the lots and held an option on the remainder, which could be obtained relatively cheaply for \$4900. In discussing sites generally, the committee agreed that the site should be centrally located, near the business district, but not so near that it would cause parking problems. It shouldn't be on too expensive a site, but should be "situated that its beauty could be enhanced by its parking and surroundings." The benefits of the Fourth and Ella site included its surroundings, which included a city park, athletic field and a single church, and its lack of competitors for parking. Also, the slope of the land provided for easy excavation and less dirt to be moved in making the basement, resulting in a less expensive construction estimate and the ability to incorporate ground-level entrances to the building into both the first floor and the basement at the rear of the building. Carl Wilke concluded his recommendation by saying "All in all, it seems as though this particular site has been left there all these years free of any large business building just in anticipation of the day when Beatrice would want to make use of it."<sup>22</sup> The selection of the Fourth and Ella location was announced in mid-November, 1938.

Excavation of the site began during the last week of December, and by the first week of January was operating on a 24-hour per day basis to take advantage of spring weather. Blueprints for the construction of the building were finalized around 20 January 1939. A newspaper article described,

<sup>18</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 6 October 1938.

<sup>19</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 18 October 1938.

<sup>20</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 10 August 1938.

<sup>21</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 8 September 1938.

<sup>22</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 18 September 1938.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 5

"Structurally the building consists of a large, rectangular center, flanked on either side by low, narrow wings. In appearance, however, from the front facing Fourth Street, the building will consist of a square, projecting decorated façade between the main façade and the wings, with buttressing masses filling the angle between the main façade and the wings. Over the centered main doors, reaching nearly to the top of this main façade will be carved and pierced stone panels, depicting law and government, industry, transportation, recreation and agriculture."<sup>23</sup>

The newspaper went on to describe the preliminary plans in detail. The plans indicated that city offices would be included in the new building, including spacious new offices for the mayor, city treasurer, city clerk, city engineer, city attorney, and the city light and water commissioner in the south wing of the building.<sup>24</sup> The offices would be divided by light partitions, which were planned to be impermanent and removable should office needs change. Two vaults were provided to serve the city offices, while a third vault served the National Guard space in the basement. These spaces continue to serve as city offices to this day, although not all of the offices mentioned in 1939 are still housed in the building.

Bids were let and returned in early May 1939, however all were rejected because the sixteen bids were all rumored to have overrun the city's budget of \$111,000 by \$25,000 to \$60,000. Since the bids all reflected an estimate far higher than the city's means, architect Fred Organ was forced to make some revisions to bring down the costs of the project. He eliminated some interior decoration and at least one vault, and the bids were let a second time. M. J. Green, a general contractor from Manhattan, Kansas, was awarded the job, with the electrical portion of the contract given to a local sub-contractor, Baker and Hartzell.<sup>25</sup> With properly signed contracts in hand, work was scheduled to begin within a week. For the next four months, the *Beatrice Sun* reported few delays or difficulties with construction. Locally manufactured brick made by Leo Werner was used in the construction of the exterior walls.<sup>26</sup> By September 10<sup>th</sup>, the building was almost completely enclosed, and the heating plan would be in operation within the week. The remaining work consisted primarily of interior finish.<sup>27</sup>

Meanwhile, plans for the cornerstone laying were well underway and being undertaken by the Nebraska Masonic Lodge. V. R. Johnson, a former grand master of Nebraska Masons and Beatrice citizen, was placed in charge of local arrangements for the ceremony. William J. Breckenridge of Hastings, the current Grand Master, would conduct the ceremony, and Judge Cloyd B. Ellis, past grand orator, would present the cornerstone oration. In addition, plans included placing a copper box containing letterhead, photos and other items of future historic value in the cornerstone, gathered by the Chamber of Commerce.<sup>28</sup> The program itself included a parade from the Masonic Temple at Sixth and Grant streets to the auditorium. Marchers would follow the American Legion color guard, the Beatrice municipal band, the Sons of the American Legion drum and bugle corps, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, and the Masons. A number of speeches were scheduled to follow. Beatrice businesses were asked to close their doors for the hour the ceremony was scheduled.<sup>29</sup> Beatrice Public Schools were also asked to give the students the afternoon off to attend the ceremony. The *Beatrice Sun* reported the next day that much of Beatrice had attended the ceremony. In his dedication oration, Judge Ellis stated,

"On this site the resources of this community and the national, material and financial, are engaged in a creative effort. That here the genius, the skill and the hands of men are being employed in the raising of a physical structure for the use and benefit of mankind. That while our contributions, our sacrifices and our efforts are here being expended, they are not being expended in destruction, in ruinous tragic and futile waste, that they are not being expended in

<sup>23</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 20 January 1939.

<sup>24</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 22 January 1939.

<sup>25</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 19 May 1939.

<sup>26</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 17 September 1939.

<sup>27</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 10 September 1939.

<sup>28</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 25 July 1939.

<sup>29</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 10 September 1939.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Beatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 6

producing hopelessness and despair in the hearts of men. When this effort is completed we have the promise and the right to look forward to a better life and a better community in which to live."<sup>30</sup>

He went on to say,

"In the past cities have been classified and we have boasted and contended about their size. I think the time is here when they should be ranked, not according to population, but according to those things which make them suitable, desirable, and attractive places in which to live – those things which contribute to the health, happiness and prosperity of the men, women and children whose hometowns they are."<sup>31</sup>

Work continued apace, with 98% of the general contractor's work being completed by 1 February 1940. The majority of work left to perform included installing light fixtures, and interior finish, including installing kitchen appliances, venetian blinds, the stage curtain, seating and other items. These items, as well as furnishings for the main arena, the banquet room, kitchen, stage and armory had been provided through the funds from the city and the PWA. However, the Junior Chamber of Commerce discovered that the smaller rooms in the front of the building did not have furnishings at all, and no funds had been set aside for them. The Junior Chamber voted to hold a two day or three day jamboree in connection with the official dedication of the auditorium, with all the funds donated to the auditorium board for the purpose of supplying furniture.<sup>32</sup>

The Junior Chamber of Commerce held a contest with a \$5 cash prize for the person who named the festival, which was eventually called Sod Buster Days, to honor the nearby Freeman Homestead, the nation's first homestead. A parade was planned with floats and marching bands from neighboring towns, civic organizations, a clown brigade, a group of people dressed as cartoon characters, a fleet of decorated bicycle riders, and children dressed as cowboys and cowgirls on ponies. Glen Wenzel, of Ellis, brought a genuine stagecoach from Belleville, Kansas, as well as several other old buggies. A queen of Sod Buster Days was elected, and treated to a ride in the parade; her coronation occurred later during the show at the Auditorium. A number of "big name" acts was brought in to entertain over the two-day celebration, between May 9 and 10, the highlight being Henry "Hot Lips" Busse's band. Dances were held both nights, with no intermissions.<sup>33</sup> Local banks stocked up on silver dollars for local merchants to give as change, in keeping with the western theme. In support of Sod Buster Days, the Junior Chamber sold ten-gallon straw hats for men and straw sunbonnets for women for 50 cents. The hats could be seen on heads about town for weeks in advance of Sod Buster Days. Voortman's department store began selling patchwork shirts and Hetherington's sold out of Sod Buster ties within days of offering them.

Sod Buster Days was a rousing success, with thousands in attendance over the two-day jamboree. A cameraman from Fox movies set up a camera in front of the Rivoli Theater to film the parade. Three airplanes from Auburn performed a flyover and dropped leaflets congratulating Beatrice on their achievement. The festivities brought interested revelers from great distances, but highlighted the pride the citizens of Beatrice felt over the ownership of their new monument to civic pride and participation.

Criterion C:

The Art Deco style emerged out of the Paris Exposition Internationale Des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in 1925. Having emerged from a bitter, modern war just seven years before, the goal of the Paris Exposition was to

<sup>30</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 14 September 1939.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 24 January 1940.

<sup>33</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 19 April 1940.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park ServiceNational Register of Historic Places  
Continuation SheetBeatrice Municipal Auditorium

Name of Property

Gage County, Nebraska

County and State

Section 8 Page 7

announce the coming of a new modern age by determining a new, international modern style of architecture and decorative arts. Much like Art Nouveau almost four decades before, proponents of Art Deco rejected decorative vocabularies of the past and chose new geometric and streamlined motifs rather than the classical columns, architraves and pediments of previous styles. The style emphasized simple cubic forms and flat surfaces for their modernity. Art Deco ornamentation accentuated verticality and is mechanistic and linear in nature. Motifs often included faceted surfaces, zigzags, chevron patterns, and octagonal shapes.<sup>34</sup>

The Beatrice Municipal Auditorium was designed in the Art Deco style. Compared to other WPA/PWA Art Deco auditoriums in Nebraska (Wayne Municipal Auditorium, NRHP listed 28 March 2002; Fremont Municipal Auditorium, NRHP listed 11 July 2002), the Beatrice auditorium is quite exuberantly decorated with Art Deco detail. In place of the more common geometric and stylized motifs such as zigzags and chevrons, the motifs for the auditorium focused on agricultural motifs of corn cobs and sheaves of wheat to more artistically represent themes important to a medium-sized farming community, and reminiscent of the agricultural motifs found throughout the Nebraska State Capitol (NHL, 1970).

The limestone bas-relief is the most prominent feature of the entire building, and is the focus of the Art Deco artwork incorporated in the building. One could speculate that the woman in the center of the panel is Ceres, the goddess of agriculture and the harvest, and symbol of the cultivated, fertile soil that fed and provided for humanity. Just emerging from a drought and an agricultural and financial depression, a mother-goddess of harvest and prosperity would be a comforting image. The *Beatrice Sun* initially reported in January 1939 that plans for the bas-relief included images depicting law and government, industry, transportation, recreation and agriculture.<sup>35</sup> Clearly, the artist changed his or her mind and found enough fodder for their imagination focusing on agriculture.

Another motif that is found throughout the auditorium is stylized waves of water, found on the cornice of the lobby and the concessions area, as well as light fixtures and the stone coping around the top of the central tower and the one story wings. Since much of the Midwest had been in drought for most of the decade of the Depression, water was an important theme that represented the success of any agricultural community. Beatrice sits along the course of the Big Blue River as it runs through southeast Nebraska, and it is no doubt integral to the community's establishment and its success. Even so, a concurrent PWA project in Beatrice during the construction of the auditorium was a large reservoir that was needed for improving Beatrice's water system. Water was very much on the minds of Beatrice's citizenry during the era in which this building was constructed, and is reflected artistically in the Art Deco motifs of the building.

The historic integrity of the Beatrice Municipal Auditorium is high. Aside from a reconfiguration of rooms in the basement and changes in office spaces, the significant spaces of the auditorium have not been altered. The most significant change is, of course, the doors and windows, but while they have largely been changed, the replacements have been made so that the openings themselves have not had to be altered. While in many cases, a change in windows and doors can be significant enough to preclude listing a property under criterion C, in this case, the most significant feature of the building, the bas-relief on the main façade, is artistically and architecturally significant enough to supersede a decision based on the doors and windows. Public artwork of this merit and scale is rare enough in Nebraska, but is unheard of in small towns in Nebraska, with the exception of this example in Beatrice.

<sup>34</sup> Carole Rifkind, *A Field Guide to American Architecture* (New York: the Penguin Group, 1980), 220.

<sup>35</sup> *Beatrice Sun*, 20 January 1939.

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Beatrice Municipal Auditorium**

Name of Property

**Gage County, Nebraska**

County and State

**Section 8 Page 8**

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The Beatrice Municipal Auditorium is an exceedingly significant building worthy of listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The building is a startlingly artful example of an Art Deco public building, a style that is relatively rare in Nebraska. The bas-relief on the main façade of the building is of such a uniquely agricultural and artistic nature that it would not be out of place in the Art Deco Nebraska State Capitol. The auditorium is also significant for its association with Federal relief programs that sought to alleviate the extreme poverty of the American public during the Great Depression. The citizenry of Beatrice committed themselves to higher taxes in order to bring this building opportunity to their town. Many jobs were created in a community that sorely needed them, and a lovely facility was constructed that has contributed to the livability of Beatrice as a charming mid-sized community for the last sixty-five years.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

**Beatrice Municipal Auditorium**

Name of Property

**Gage County, Nebraska**

County and State

Section 9 Page 1

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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

**Beatrice Municipal Auditorium**

Name of Property

**Gage County, Nebraska**

County and State

Section 10 Page 1

**Verbal Boundary Description:**

South 1/3 lots 1 – 6 INC & W 28 feet South 67 feet North 2/3 lot 6 and 60 feet by 67 feet tract of vacated Third Street adjacent to lot 6 and all lots 7 – 12 INC block 38, Beatrice, Original Plat.

**Boundary Justification:**

The boundary for the Beatrice Municipal Auditorium include all of the land historically associated with the building.