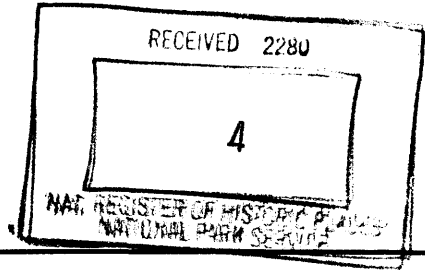


1251

(Oct. 1990)

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

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
REGISTRATION FORM**



**1. NAME OF PROPERTY**

**HISTORIC NAME:** Lea Theater  
**OTHER NAME/SITE NUMBER:** N/A

**2. LOCATION**

**STREET & NUMBER:** 106 E. Central Street  
**CITY OR TOWN:** Lovington  
**STATE:** New Mexico      **CODE:** NM      **COUNTY:** 025  
**NOT FOR PUBLICATION:** N/A  
**VICINITY:** N/A  
**ZIP CODE:** 88260

**3. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION**

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this   x   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   x   meets    does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant    nationally    statewide   x   locally. (   See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

*Katherine Slisk*  
Signature of certifying official

*27 November 2006*  
Date

State Historic Preservation Officer

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 commenting or other official

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): \_\_\_\_\_

*for*  
Signature of the Keeper  
*Edson H. Beall*

Date of Action  
*1.17.07*

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**5. CLASSIFICATION**

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**OWNERSHIP OF PROPERTY:** Building

**CATEGORY OF PROPERTY:** Private

<b>NUMBER OF RESOURCES WITHIN PROPERTY:</b>	<b>CONTRIBUTING</b>	<b>NONCONTRIBUTING</b>
	1	0 <b>BUILDINGS</b>
	0	0 <b>SITES</b>
	0	0 <b>STRUCTURES</b>
	0	0 <b>OBJECTS</b>
	1	0 <b>TOTAL</b>

**NUMBER OF CONTRIBUTING RESOURCES PREVIOUSLY LISTED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER:** 0

**NAME OF RELATED MULTIPLE PROPERTY LISTING:** *Movie Theaters in New Mexico, 1905 to 1960*

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**6. FUNCTION OR USE**

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**HISTORIC FUNCTIONS: RECREATION AND CULTURE:** theater (movie theater)

**CURRENT FUNCTIONS: RECREATION AND CULTURE:** theater (movie theater)

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**7. DESCRIPTION**

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**ARCHITECTURAL CLASSIFICATION: MODERN MOVEMENT:** Art Deco

**MATERIALS: FOUNDATION:** CONCRETE  
**WALLS:** BRICK  
**ROOF:** ASPHALT  
**OTHER:** CERAMIC TILE

**NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION** (see continuation sheets 7-5 through 7-6).

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**8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE**

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**APPLICABLE NATIONAL REGISTER CRITERIA**

- 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.
- 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 VALUE, 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:** N/A

**AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE:** ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION; ARCHITECTURE

**PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE:** 1948-1956

**SIGNIFICANT DATES:** 1948

**SIGNIFICANT PERSON:** N/A

**CULTURAL AFFILIATION:** N/A

**ARCHITECT/BUILDER:** N/A

**NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE** (see continuation sheets 8-7 through 8-10).

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**9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES**

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**BIBLIOGRAPHY** (see continuation sheet 9-11).

**PREVIOUS DOCUMENTATION ON FILE (NPS):** N/A

- 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 (*Historic Preservation Division, Office of Cultural Affairs*)
- Other state agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

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**10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

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**ACREAGE OF PROPERTY:** less than one acre

**UTM REFERENCES**    Zone Easting    Northing  
                          1 13    654390    3646721 (NAD83/WGS84)

**VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION** Lots 9 and 10 of Original Lovington Town, Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico.

**BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION** The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the theater.

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**11. FORM PREPARED BY**

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**NAME/TITLE:** David Kammer, Ph.D.

**ORGANIZATION:** consulting historian

**DATE:** June, 2006

**STREET & NUMBER:** 521 Aliso Dr. NE

**TELEPHONE:** (505) 266-0586

**CITY OR TOWN:** Albuquerque

**STATE:** NM

**ZIP CODE:** 87108

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**ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTATION**

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**CONTINUATION SHEETS**

**MAPS** (see attached *Lovington, New Mex.* USGS quadrangle map)

**PHOTOGRAPHS** (see continuation sheet Photo-12)

**ADDITIONAL ITEMS** N/A

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**PROPERTY OWNER**

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**NAME:** John and Joyce Joy

**STREET & NUMBER:** 1906 South Main Street

**TELEPHONE:** (505) 396-5261

**CITY OR TOWN:** Lovington

**STATE:** NM    **ZIP CODE:** 88260

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 7 Page 5

Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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### Description

Located on the south side of Lovington's courthouse square, the Lea Theater is a two-story, brick and tile faced building resting on a concrete foundation. Exhibiting a modicum of modernistic design elements, the façade consists of brick and ceramic tile with a recessed entry leading to a ticket booth flanked by paired doors. A marquee overhangs the sidewalk with a wall-mounted sign rising above it. The lobby located inside a second set of doors has a refreshment counter located along its rear wall. Flanking doors lead to the auditorium with a stairway leading to a small balcony. Some seating was removed at the front of the theater when the stage was enlarged in the 1980s, and former overhead lighting has been replaced with sconce lighting along the walls of the auditorium. Changes to the exterior of the theater are minor, and those in the interior do not detract from its historic character. As a result, the building retains a high degree of integrity as to location, setting, design, materials and workmanship, conveying a feeling of its role in the commercial life of downtown Lovington.

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The Lea Theater is situated on the south side of Lea County's courthouse square (Photo 1). Some buildings facing on the square have been removed, including a corner building, now a pocket park, west of the theater, and an office, now a parking lot, east of the theater. The theater, however, and other remaining buildings, including the former Commercial Hotel, now the Lea County Museum, contributes to a streetscape defined by one and two-story commercial buildings and offices facing on the courthouse square. The building occupies two lots. It is two stories with a shed roof masked with a stepped parapet topped with a brick coping. The building's walls are brick with the second story of the façade faced with blonde brick. Reflective of the modernistic details characterizing theaters constructed in the late 1940s, the upper façade's decorative vertical molding and a rectangular pattern of decorative terracotta blue stars articulate the stepping of the parapet. A vertical wall-mounted neon sign rises above the building and divides the two grouped, three-light metal casement windows located at the second-story projection room.

Beneath a triangular marquee extending over the mosaic tile-patterned sidewalk, the walls are faced with amber, tan and cream-colored Romany Tile. Near the recessed entry, a flanking pair of metal-framed picture boxes fixed to the wall exhibit posters of coming attractions (Photo 2). Glass blocks with an inset fixed window extend across both sets of picture boxes. The slightly inclined recessed entry is also tiled. A rounded ticket booth mirroring the tile pattern of the façade walls and topped with fixed windows is located in the middle of the recessed space and is accessible through a door located in the lobby. Paired wood doors with three small stepped vertical lights flank the ticket booth. Six feet inside the entry, a second set of multi-light French doors have been added to provide a buffer from winter cold and fierce local winds that formerly buffeted the lobby as patrons entered the theater.

The interior of the Lea Theater retains most of its original plan. A refreshment counter lines the lobby along the interior wall, and restrooms with original tile floors and walls are located along both sides of the lobby. Steps lead from the west side of the lobby to the projection booth and to a small balcony. Flanking the

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

Section 7 Page 6

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refreshment counter are the two entries to the auditorium. Murals depicting Plains Indians and cowboys completed in the early 1990s by local artist Albert Perea appear on the walls adjacent to these entries. Also flanking the entries are two enclosed rooms, one that once functioned as a crying room and the other as a smoking room. With windows facing the auditorium and with speakers in each enclosed space, they permitted smokers and parents of small children to depart the auditorium but to continue viewing the film. A large aquarium that served as a diversion for small children was once located in the still-functioning cry room. The former smoking room now functions as a storage space.

Once seating approximately 600, the 50 by 100 feet auditorium today seats approximately 400, the result of seating replacement that offers patrons more legroom and the removal of rows located at the front of the auditorium where an addition to the stage in the 1980s projected it beyond the proscenium. Initially, lights were suspended from the ceiling and decorative neon lighting lined air ducts. The overhead lights have since been replaced with scone lighting mounted on periodic pilasters along on the two-tone blue walls of the auditorium. The vents of a former air conditioning system located above each of the fire exit doors flanking the proscenium have been covered with cloth, and a roof-mounted "swamp" cooling system added. The heating system is located behind the screen.

Much of the equipment installed when the Lea Theater opened in 1948 remains. The original perforated Neo-Plastic screen is fronted by a red and gold curtain and illuminated by recently installed stage lights. In the projection booth, the E-7 Simplex projectors and RCA sound heads also date to the theater's opening. The speaker system, however, has been replaced although a speaker originally located in the smoking room is now positioned above the concession stand.

With its unaltered exterior and its largely unaltered interior, the Lea Theater conveys a strong feeling of a modernistic post-World War II theater designed and built to enhance the downtown area of a growing community. Comparatively new to other buildings surrounding the courthouse square, it suggests the optimism that marked the postwar outlook in Lea County where ranching and oil were then contributing to Lovington's growth. Siting a new theater in the center of the community, imbuing it with a modernistic design, and offering popular theater amenities such as smoking and crying rooms conveyed the significance that both the theater's developers and the city boosters placed on the role it would assume in the community. Nearly 60 years later, the building continues to convey that feeling and historic association.

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 7

Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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### Statement of Significance

When the Lea Theater opened on September 30, 1948, the townspeople of Lovington celebrated with a parade that ended with live performances and speeches given from the new theater's stage. A relatively new community, founded in 1908, and the seat of Lea County, created in 1917; Lovington initially thrived and then stagnated before experiencing rapid growth in the 1940s as nearby oil fields developed. Although movie theaters had appeared as early as the 1910s, it wasn't until the post-war boom and the construction of the modernistic Lea Theater that boosters proclaimed that the town now had "one of the finest, small-city movie houses in the United States" (*Lovington Press* 9/24/1948 1). With its architecture offering a striking contrast to other buildings located around the courthouse square and the prominent role it assumed from opening day in serving as a gathering place for Lovington's entertainment and civic events, the Lea Theater is eligible for listing under Criteria A and C, meeting the eligibility requirements of the *Movie Theaters in New Mexico, 1905 to 1960* Multiple Property Documentation Form.

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### Context

Founded in 1908 on the Llano, or plains, of southeastern New Mexico, Lovington developed as ranching center. In an effort to attract settlers during its early years, the small town offered free town lots to families with children (Hinshaw 167). By 1917, when the New Mexico legislature created Lea County, Lovington, with its population of 840, emerged as the county seat. By 1919 the small town had its first motion picture theater, the Lyric. Purchased in the summer of 1919 by F.E. Beckwith, owner of the local utility company, it offered two shows a week, promising patrons in June 1919 that "there will be no more breaks in the reel" (*Lovington Leader* 6/27/1919 2).

The decade following World War I, however, brought a reversal of fortune to the town. As historian Gil Hinshaw notes, "Lovington's isolation on the Llano, the great distances to centers of trade, commerce and rapid transportation, and the lack of good roads all combined to retard its progress" (Hinshaw 178). As Lovington languished, the opening of oil fields near Hobbs, twenty miles to the southeast, resulted in the emergence of that city as the predominant community in Lea County. Although its residents would continue to identify themselves primarily with ranching, the discovery of the South Lovington Pool in 1929 and the completion of a road system began to stimulate more growth in Lovington as well.

During the 1930s at least two theaters, the Palace and the Mesa, located along the main north-south highway south of the courthouse square, offered movies and permitted civic groups to use the theater space. The Mesa, constructed of adobe brick, seated about 200 and had a marquee outlined with light bulbs. Indicative of the town's role in the northern section of the county, its owner dispatched some of the town's young men to small towns in the area to distribute flyers announcing upcoming movies (Beverly).

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section 8 Page 8

Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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The post-World War II period saw Lovington experience its greatest growth as the population jumped from less than 2,000 in 1945 to over 3,300 by 1950. As oil exploration spread across the Southwest, new technology permitted the drilling of deeper wells, and the South Lovington Pool emerged as a major resource. The rapid growth of the town prompted renewed interest in theaters to serve the population. The Mesa Theater (now demolished) was remodeled in 1948 with a pylon holding a wall-mounted neon sign erected in the middle of its façade.

More important, however, was the decision of R.E. Griffith Theaters, Inc., a regional theater chain based in Dallas, to construct a theater in Lovington. Owning several theaters in West Texas and in partnership with the Hardwick family who ran the State Theater in Clovis, New Mexico, the company appointed C.T. Smith to be the manager of the new Lea Theater and selected contractor Jesse Waller of Lubbock to construct the building. Although no reference is made to the project's architect, Waller relied heavily on local laborers and tradesmen to complete the project.

Excavation and the pouring of the foundation began in February 1948. By early summer the outside of the building was largely completed and the Tesco Neon Sign Company of Roswell arrived to erect the wall-mounted Lea Theater sign that was installed directly above the marquee.

As the summer passed, both of Lovington's newspapers devoted an increasing number of articles, including comments by civic leaders, to the events that would celebrate the theater's opening on September 30. The tone of both the articles and the leaders' comments was one of booster pride, exemplified by Mayor H.W. Gilbert's comment, "How fortunate we are in Lovington to have been selected for this theater building!" (*Lovington Leader* 10/1/1948 1). Echoing these comments were those of the president of the Lovington Lions Club who noted that not only was the Lea a fine theater but that it provided the community with a "recreation facility" that would "add to the general appearance of our business district." The opening day festivities included a parade and speeches from the stage of the new theater in which leaders equated the opening of the theater with a "better and brighter future for Lovington" (Figure 8-1).

Equating a new theater with civic pride suggests the importance that motion picture theaters played in smaller communities. The modernistic details present in the design of theaters in the post-war years often marked the first example of a modern building style along main streets in many communities. Such was the case with the Lea Theater, which represented Lovington's first exposure to modernistic design. With neon marking both its marquee and wall mounted sign, the theater stood as a beacon amongst the buildings lining the courthouse square. The ample seating provided in the auditorium, also offered the community a venue for civic events as well as motion pictures. A reminder of the prevailing racial attitudes of the era, seating in the Lea Theater was initially segregated. As it was in other communities in southeastern New Mexico, the auditorium was reserved for white patrons and the 25 seats above the auditorium floor designated "the colored balcony" (*Lovington Leader* 10/1/1948 2).



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## **National Register of Historic Places**

### **Continuation Sheet**

Section 8 Page 9

Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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Over the following decades, the Lea Theater fulfilled the promise the town's leader predicted at its opening. Numerous civic events occurred at the theater, including school band concerts and the Mrs. Lovington Contest, a local event connected with the annual Mrs. America contest in which women were judged as to their homemaking abilities, appearance, personality and poise.

In the 1960s ownership of the theater changed, first to banks located in Dallas and, finally, in 1969 Commonwealth Theaters owning the property. In the 1980s local talent, or "gong shows," were staged at the theater, prompting the extension of the stage and the installation of a new sound system. By the late 1980s, however, the theater had closed. In 1991 the Joy family, the current owners, purchased the theater, carrying out extensive restoration work that resulted in the theater receiving the New Mexico Main Street Best Building Award in 1997. More recently the Lea County Museum has formed a film society and is using the Lea Theater for the screening of old films. This nomination is meant to recognize these ongoing efforts to preserve the architectural character of the theater and to maintain its role as an entertainment center on Lovington's courthouse square.

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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

Figure 8-1: Opening of the Lee Theater, September 30, 1948



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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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### Bibliography

Beverly, Walter. Interview with David Kammer, April 11, 2006. During his boyhood Mr. Beverly worked at the Mesa Theater.

Hinshaw, Gil. *Lea, New Mexico's Last Frontier*. Hobbs: The Hobbs Daily News-Sun, 1976.

*Lovington Leader*. Various issues, 1919-1958.

*Lovington Press*. Various issues, 1948.

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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Lea Theater  
Lovington, Lea County, New Mexico

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### Photograph Log

*Information pertaining to all photographs unless otherwise noted:*

#### **Lea Theater**

Lovington, Lea County New Mexico

Photographer: David Kammer

Date: October, 2005

Location of negatives: New Mexico State Historic Preservation Office

Photo 1 of 2

Theater and streetscape

Camera facing southeast

Photo 2 of 2

Entry and marquee

Camera facing southeast