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United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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NATIONAL REGISTER

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 an 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 Corning Opera House

other names/site number _____

2. Location

street & number 800 Davis Avenue not for publication

city or town Corning vicinity

state Iowa code IA county Adams code 003 zip code 50841

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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.)

[Signature]
Signature of certifying official/Title
State Historical Society of Iowa

8/16/93
Date

State of 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 the 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 of the Keeper

Date of Action

[Signature]
Patrick Andrews

9/21/93

Corning Opera House
Name of Property

Adams County, Iowa
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply)

- private
- public-local
- public-State
- public-Federal

Category of Property

(Check only one box)

- building(s)
- district
- site
- structure
- object

Number of Resources within Property

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing

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

Footlights in Farm Country: Iowa
Opera Houses, 1835-1940

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Recreation & Culture/Opera House,
Theater
Commerce & Trade/Specialty Store

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce & Trade/Business,
Restaurant

7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions)

Romanesque
Italianate

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Brick, Limestone
walls Brick
roof Asphalt
other Iron

Narrative Description

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

See attached 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.)

- 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 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 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.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

Performing Arts

Period of Significance

1902-1934

Significant Dates

1902-1934

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

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 of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

Name of repository:

Name of Property

County and State

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre.

UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

UTM grid for Zone 1, Easting 354180, Northing 4538900

UTM grid for Zone 3, Easting, Northing

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 Tracy A. Cunning, with James Jacobsen and Jane Seaton

organization date 5 March 1993

street & number 1141 S. Farmer Ave., Apt. 1 telephone 602/968-0615

city or town Tempe state Arizona zip code 85281-5551

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 SHPO or FPO.)

name Dan Field, Editor, Adams County Free Press

street & number 800 Davis Avenue telephone 515/322-3161

city or town Corning state Iowa zip code 50841

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine 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 (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.).

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including 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 Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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Section 7 Page 1

Corning Opera House
name of property
Adams County, Iowa
county and State

Physical Property Description

The Corning Opera House, built in 1902, is a two and one-half story brick building with raised basement at the northeast corner of 8th Street and Davis Avenue (the main street in Corning). It is at the upper end of the central business district; other commercial structures fill out the rest of the block north of the opera house, but the bulk of the commercial district lies south of it. Central Park is across Davis Avenue to the west, and the Corning City Hall and old fire department abuts the opera house to the east.

The Corning Opera House is a second floor theater located above first floor businesses. The building has a rectangular plan and measures 45' wide by 100' deep. It has a hipped roof behind a low parapet, and two public facades, west and south, that are divided by a pedimented cut corner with a semi-circular bay window at the second floor level. The words "Opera House" stand out in the pediment. Two businesses occupy the first floor, and entry to the southernmost is in this prominent cut corner.

The western facade is three bays wide, the northernmost of which is somewhat narrower than the others. A single door in this bay is the entrance to the theater. A three-sided, hip-roofed bay window projects from the second floor center bay. South of the opera house entrance, storefronts occupy the rest of the western facade at the ground floor level. Entry to one storefront is through a pass door under the three-sided bay window. All storefronts on this side have been covered with plywood and replacement picture windows. By virtue of the storefronts and bay window, the western facade appears to be the primary facade.

The southern face is the secondary facade. It is comprised of five bays, with the easternmost slightly wider than the others. The bay closest to the cut corner contains a storefront window, partially infilled with plywood and a smaller replacement window. Proceeding east, the next three bays each contain standard size windows, and the last bay, the wider one, contains a small, square window and a pass door with transom.

The raised basement is faced with finished ashlar limestone. Two below-sidewalk-level entrances to the basement are present: one beneath the opera house stairs and one on the south side near the rear of the building. The four basement windows on the west side have been infilled, as have two on the south side. Two south side basement windows remain. A "Kewanee Manuf. Co." coal door into the basement is centrally located on the south wall.

Second floor windows on both facades have segmentally arched brick hoodmolds, and hold 1/1 light double-hung sash windows. Most of the glazing was blown out in a tornado in 1986 or '87 (sources differed). Clerestory windows are in the upper half story of the building on both facades to light the balcony of the theater inside. These are hopper windows with decorative diamond panes, but much of their glazing was destroyed twenty years ago or so, perhaps in another storm; they are presently covered by plywood.

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The cut corner contains the aforesaid entry, which has been partially infilled with plywood and a single door. The entry way is flanked by recessed brick panels. The turret-like bay window is metal or sheathed with metal and holds three 1/1 light windows. It has a nearly flat bottom and a conical roof topped by a ball. Spandrel panels wrap around the bay underneath the window sills. Window molds resemble slim pilasters with molded bases and capitals, and vertical panels with pointed ends stand between each window. A row of metal rosettes or wreaths runs along the fascia under a slightly projecting eave. The smaller bay window on the west facade imitates the decoration of this bay window.

On the brick wall above the corner bay window are two garlands of stone, concrete or terra cotta. Above them is a slightly overhanging cornice of brick, corbelled to resemble brackets or dentils. This cornice runs along both public facades. The pediment that caps the corner is rounded and broken with two balls on top of scrolled pedestals on either side, framing the words "Opera House."

The bays of each facade are marked at the second floor and clerestory levels by brick pilasters with stone capitals. All windows have stone lintels joined together by a band of brick runners. Similar runners outline and join the hoodmolds of the second floor windows. The storefronts have typical cast iron pilasters with molded bases and capitals. Iron lintels span the top with a rosette above each pilaster.

The Corning Opera House was built on the foundations of an earlier bank building which burned in 1896. The original brick foundation was 16 inches thick and faced with the stone now visible. This foundation was bolstered by a 2 1/2 foot-wide brick berm along the east wall. It is likely that the west wall of the city hall and a portion of the party wall north of the bank were incorporated into the present building. Photos of the burned building indicate the survival of these portions. The bank's vault (non-extant), located in the northeast corner of the building, also survived, and an extensive series of stone and brick piers in the basement may have provided support for the vault. Tile piers have been added in the basement, presumably to support the heavy printing equipment above.

INTERIOR

The ground floor businesses are presently the Adams County *Free Press* in the corner location, and a tavern north of it. The second floor opera house is used for storage by the newspaper. Originally the ground floor was open, a line of iron columns dividing it in half. The columns supported the opera house floor. Just inside the opera house entrance is a small ticket window to the left. A wide stairway ahead and to the right ascends to the upstairs auditorium. The door and ticket window surrounds have simple moldings, and a beaded, tongue-in-groove wainscot lines the stairway. The ceiling is pressed tin. Two vacant apartments are at the top of the stairs, in what used to be a lobby area, bathrooms (or lounges?), and a theater office. According to Paul Gauthier, former owner of the building, the lounges each opened into a bay window.

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One enters the rear of the auditorium from the apartments, emerging from a door underneath the balcony. The horseshoe shaped balcony is suspended from the ceiling by seven tension rods, and supported from beneath by two iron posts. Perhaps half of the auditorium floor and the bulk of the rear balcony seating area have been closed off by the east wall of the apartments, but the balcony's horseshoe curve remains intact. The auditorium floor is flat and painted with lines for half-court basketball. A hoop and backboard are attached to the north arm of the balcony. Stairsteps from the auditorium floor rise to the southeast end of the balcony. The main stairway to the balcony may have been at the west end of the auditorium but is now incorporated into the apartments. An iron or steel door is in the middle of the north party wall. A service door in the southeast corner of the auditorium leads to a back staircase which descends to the outside rear door on the south facade.

The stage is at the east end of the auditorium. The proscenium arch is 22 feet wide and slightly curved, measuring 15'7" high in the center and 13 feet at each side. Two proscenium doors are stage right, and one stage left. From the proscenium opening (a.k.a. the curtain line) to the back wall is 18'10". A curved apron juts out approximately four feet from the curtain line. The footlight trough, with empty bulb sockets, follows the curve. The opera house was built with electric lights, and the trough may be original. There is approximately 8 feet of wing space on either side of the proscenium, and one trap is located at stage center. The stage itself is slightly raked, rising from front to rear. A back stair leads to the dressing rooms which are beneath the stage and between first and second floors; two dressing rooms have separate stairways connecting them to the stage. A small prop room on stage right is reached by a few steps. On the wall, stage left, are the remains of the original electrical system with wood conduits.

The opera house ceiling is arched and covered with the original pressed tin, which is identical in pattern to that found throughout the first floor. Original stencilling and occasional wainscoting are visible in various places around the room. An early photo of the auditorium shows what may be stencilling above the wainscoting and at the tops of the walls, just under the ceiling. Three original light fixtures remain along the center line of the ceiling. Woodwork in the hall is mostly intact, and that around the stage and balcony is entirely intact. The proscenium and the doorways in the front of the auditorium all have simple molding. The balcony has a solid balustrade of false beadboard with spindled half-balusters applied to its facing. Eight red plush opera chairs (one section) is still in the balcony, but no other seating remains.

ALTERATIONS

In its 90 years of continuous use the Coming Opera House building has undergone several alterations. The original plate glass store windows were covered with plywood and reduced scale windows c. 1985, to help conserve energy. The front entry in the cut corner was originally a double door with a large 2-light transom; this modification appears to be contemporary with the storefront changes. Sometime prior to 1940 the three central windows on the south facade were elongated; they were originally small, high, square windows with panes identical to those in the clerestory. They had stone sills as well as

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lintels. The original opera house entry reportedly contained double doors and a 2-light transom, but the present entrance appears to be an early modification.

The broken pediment over the cut corner originally held an urn-like piece of statuary, but how long this has been gone is unknown. A basement door on the south facade was installed c. 1936, to facilitate storage of rolls of newsprint paper used by the *Free Press*. Two basement windows on this facade have been filled in, as have all four on the west facade. The concrete steps beneath the cut corner entry and the rear door on the south wall are relatively recent modifications. The original front corner steps appear to have been wood without railings of any kind.

Interior alterations include the compartmentalization of the first floor, which had an open plan until at least 1936, into two businesses. Originally a furniture store occupied the entire ground floor. Upstairs, two apartments now fill the west end of the theater. The apartments were built in 1943 during the wartime housing shortage. Inside the opera house auditorium, the raked floor has been covered by a flat wooden floor and the western portion of the balcony, which was also raked, closed off (for the apartment). Almost all of the opera house chairs are gone.

INTEGRITY

The Corning Opera House has a relatively high degree of integrity overall. It remains on its original site; retains its original plan, massing and relationship with the city hall; and its facades are primarily intact. The architectural features of the opera house, with the exception of the ground floor facades, are essentially unchanged. The bay windows are unaltered and the classically-influenced architectural detailing around the windows, cornice and pediment remains unmasked. As is typical of many small town commercial structures, the ground floor facades have borne the brunt of change. The most noticeable changes appear to be reversible, such as the infilled storefronts and entryways. Others are less so (the south side windows and most of the basement windows for example), but these are also less striking to the eye.

The interior integrity of the ground floor is similar to that of the opera house overhead, impacted in some places and pristine in others. Interior store areas remain oriented to the main facade, and retain their basic configurations and dimensions, although a few office partitions have been installed in the *Free Press* portion. The historic opera house ticket window and stairwell, with original woodwork and tin ceiling, are untouched, however.

The Corning Opera House has a high degree of interior integrity as theaters go. The scenery and the equipment needed to operate it have been removed from the stage, but otherwise the stage area is remarkably intact. Backstage and understage dressing rooms, a small prop room, the footlight trough, and woodwork are all intact, along with the remnants of an original electrical lighting system. Unlike most other extant opera houses, the horseshoe balcony with its tension rods, balustrade, and the stairs at its southeast corner remain intact. Only the west end has been walled off. Like most other opera houses with balconies, however, the structural integrity of its flooring is now questionable. The

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original tin ceiling is intact, and remnants of stencilling remain on the walls. Numerous playbills and graffiti can still be read on the stage and dressing room walls.

Index to Photographs

1. Coming Opera House, west and south elevations, looking NE.
2. Coming Opera House and adjacent City Hall, south and east elevations, looking NW.
3. Coming Opera House, cut corner with bay window and pediment, looking N.
4. Coming Opera House, ticket window, looking NE.

All photographs taken by Tracy A. Cuning on 10 July 1992. All original negatives on file with the Historic Preservation Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa.

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Corning Opera House, c. 1906
courtesy Adams County House of History



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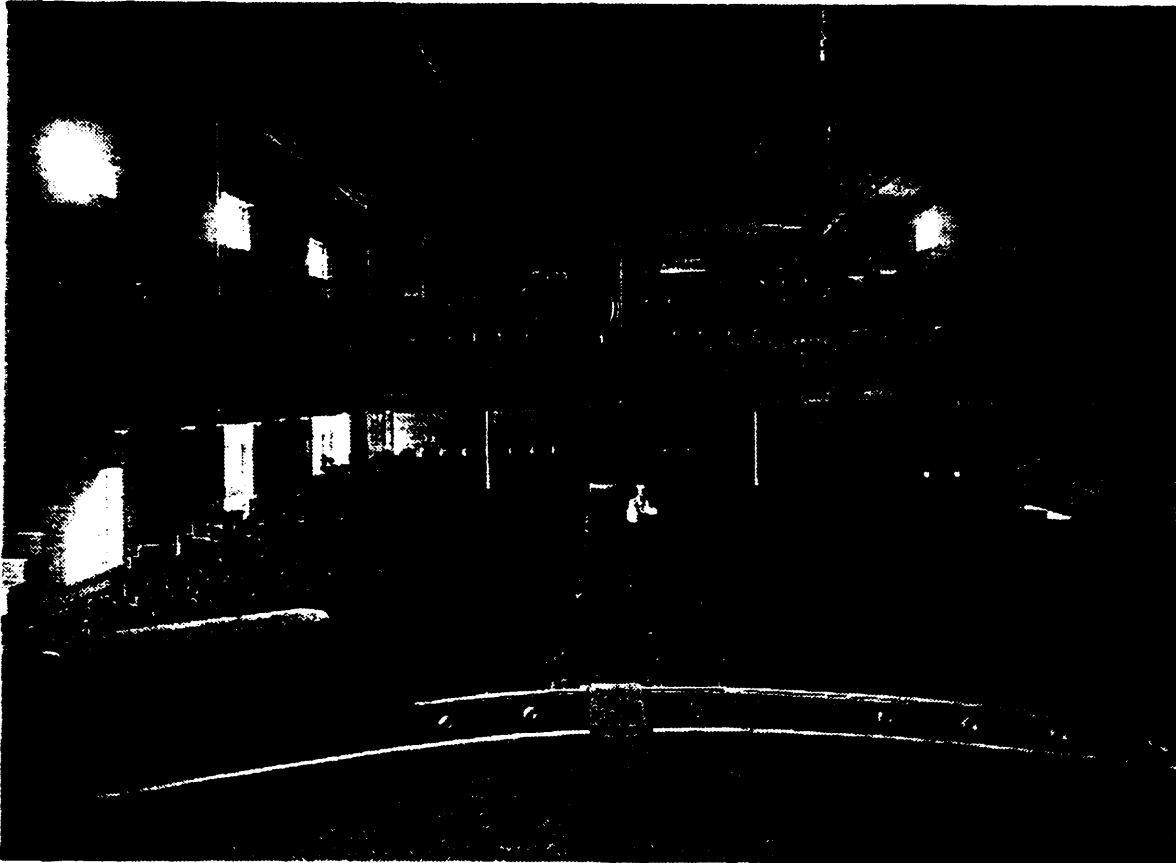
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Corning Opera House—Historic Interior Photograph

Adams County Historical Society, *Centurama, Corning Iowa (1857-1957)*.
Corning: Free Press Publishing Co., 1957, p. 126.



For many years the Corning Opera House was one of the outstanding show places of southwestern Iowa.

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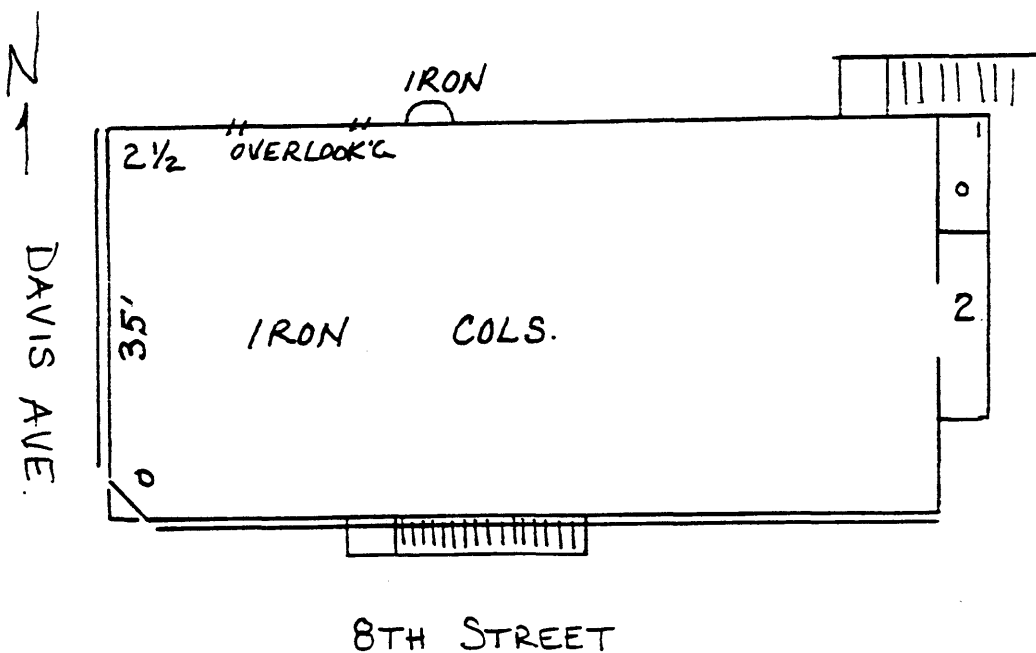
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Corning Opera House

Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1907



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Statement of Significance

The Corning Opera House (1902) at 800 Davis Avenue is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of Performing Arts as the building most closely associated with livestage entertainment in Corning. Between the early 1880s and the early 1930s Corning could boast of at least one opera house in operation, sometimes two operating concurrently. The present Corning Opera House, the subject of this nomination, is at least the third building known to have served as a performance facility in Corning. The first known opera house, G.C. Calkin's (1883) at 8th and Benton, is non-extant. The second, the Palace Rink Opera House (pre-1886) at 6th and Adams, has been dramatically altered and is deemed ineligible for the National Register at this time. The present opera house offered a variety of theatrical productions to residents of Corning and the surrounding area for over thirty years (1902-1934), serving as a community gathering place and the center of the town's cultural life. Its construction was noted as a culminating achievement in Corning's social history; that it was called "an ornament to the city" reveals its importance as a source of civic pride. Its association with the attached city hall also reflects the opera house's prominence in town life.

Between c. 1920 and 1931 the opera house functioned primarily as a movie theater, the largest of its kind in Corning for ten years, but it also housed vaudeville shows and high school plays on occasion. The opera house's period of significance begins with its construction in 1902 and ends with the last live production known to have been staged there, *Blue Heaven*, directed by Milo Green in 1934.

The Corning Opera House is an opera hall, the intermediate type of theater structure, by virtue of its second floor location, relatively small stage, two exits, lack of box seats, and spare interior decoration. Its raked floor with fixed, cushioned opera chairs, its raked, horseshoe balcony, and the fact that it has specialized rooms backstage, on the other hand, indicate that it was designed with the presentation of drama in mind rather than as a multifunctional hall.¹ As such it is the best remaining evidence of the livestage theater tradition in Corning.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Corning was platted in 1857 and had rail service by 1867, but the construction of an opera house in the town was delayed because of the proximity of the Icarian Colony. Located a few miles east of Corning, this communal settlement — founded on intellectual rather than ethnic, religious or economic principles — provided theater, culture, and instruction in music and art to the nearby community. Provision of these services probably ceased when the colony collapsed in the mid-1870s.

¹ Cuning, Tracy A., "Footlights in Farm Country: Iowa Opera Houses, 1835-1940," MPD prepared for the Historic Preservation Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa, January 1993.

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The earliest known opera house in Corning was G.C. Calkin's Opera House, designed by Omaha architect C.F. Driscoll and built in 1883. The three story brick building measured 30 x 100 feet, and cost \$18,000 to erect. It is presumed that this is the opera house with metal cornice at the northwest corner of 8th and Benton indicated on the 1886 Sanborn map. Typical of many theater structures of the day, this was a second floor opera house, with a Masonic Hall above and a hardware/furniture store below; an agricultural implements shop occupied the basement level.²

In 1886 entertainment facilities in Corning consisted of Calkin's Opera House and a skating rink at the southeast corner of 6th and Adams. By 1889 Corning's population had risen from 1,600 to 2,300 and the town supported two theater structures, Calkin's and the converted skating rink, now "F.M. Smith's Palace Rink Opera House." According to theater directories, both houses seated 500. For unknown reasons, the Palace Rink had by 1893 become the town's leading opera house, and Calkin's was vacant.

The new opera house, variously known as the Palace Rink Opera House, Mack's Opera House, the Rink, F.M. Smith's Opera House, and the Auditorium, was a one story frame structure built sometime prior to 1886. A stage with scenery and footlights occupied the north end of the hall, and a small one story addition at the northwest corner contained dressing rooms. Today, the rear two-thirds of the building survive relatively intact, and the former location of the proscenium arch can be traced along the ceiling.

In 1886 the site of the subject property was occupied by a two story brick building with the lower floor divided into two storefronts. The National Bank filled the southern space, and general merchandise occupied the northern one; a photo gallery was on the second floor. By 1893 a two story addition to this building's east end housed the fire department and city offices. A stationary and jewelry shop had replaced the general merchandise store and a post office now filled the space behind the bank and jewelry shop, adjacent to the city office addition.

A fire swept through the core of Corning's business district in 1896, destroying the bank building and city offices at 8th and Davis and a good portion of the businesses south of 8th street. Both the Calkin's Opera House and the Palace Rink survived. By 1899 the Calkin's block was occupied again, with a lodge hall on the second floor, and reports were circulated that year of plans to remodel the building into a hotel.

² *American Architects and Builders News* 13: 375 (3 March 1883), 108; Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, Corning, 1886.

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The Rink remained the community's sole entertainment facility through the end of the decade, but the building may have been inadequate to the task, for early in 1900 the Adams County *Union Republican* reported the movement for a new opera house. Frederick Charles Reese was the local business man who dedicated himself to providing the community with one. The newspaper describe the first plan:

There is considerable talk about remodeling the Calkins block and fitting it up for an opera house. It was bought by the Messrs. Reese. The building is 44' by 90' and the high basement and first floor could be made into a splendid hall for public entertainments. Contemplated alterations must cost upward of \$3,000 and it is proposed that citizens buy \$1,000 worth of tickets in advance.... The building can be made into a fine opera house, much better than a town this size would be able to build and we believe the business men will do their part. The rooms have been idle for a long time and probably the best way to make it productive would be to turn it into an opera house.³

For unknown reasons this plan fell through, and in early October 1901 Reese purchased the lot at 8th and Davis, which had remained vacant since the fire destroyed the previous building in 1896. Reese planned an opera house building that would incorporate the remnants of the burned predecessor, which post-fire photographs show included the foundation and portions of the rear and side walls. The new building would have a raised basement and cut-corner entry, a footprint much the same as the Coming National Bank building. A commercial establishment was to occupy the first floor, while the upper one and one-half floors were intended for the opera house.

Construction commenced in the spring of 1902. Except for the buff-colored facing brick which was shipped in from St. Louis, the brick was on the building site by mid-April. A.P. Devore won the contract for the brick work and his crew began laying bricks in early May. By early August the new opera house was "rapidly nearing completion" with the intended aim of opening by "fair week."⁴

At the same time the city was in the process of passing a bond issue to construct a new city hall and fire house. The issue passed in early April 1902 for the amount of \$4,000. The issue was challenged but finally resolved, and the city began constructing the new facilities on their former site, immediately east of the opera house. This construction essentially coincided with the erection of the opera house and the two buildings bear the same face brick and matching styles, factors which give the impression of a single structure.

The slate roof and cornice work on the opera house were in place by the first week of August 1902. Progress was further described by the *Free Press*:

³ Adams County *Union Republican*, January 25, 1900. The measurements of the building referred to as the Calkin's Block in this article do not match those reported in the AABN article (30 x 100 feet).

⁴ Adams County *Free Press*, August 2, 1902.

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The plain opera chairs have been here some time and this week the cushioned opera chairs, numbering 260, purchased from the Congregational Church of Creston, were brought down by Messrs. D.D. Boham and H.S. Fisher. These chairs will be used for the high priced seats. The house will be seated for 700 and with the exception of Iowa Falls will be the finest opera house in any small city in the state. If the house is ready by fair week and used, it will not be considered the opening. It is the intention of the management to open with some good company—probably an opera—an entertainment appreciated by all classes, about October 1st. The building adds to the appearance of the business portion of the city, and especially the corner where it is located...Corning is and should be proud of her new opera house building.⁵

At the end of August, it was announced that the fair week goal would be achieved. The Morey Stock Company was engaged for the first week of September to present "a series of scenic productions that are positively new to Corning." The company was billed as bringing "all their own special scenery and electrical effects to properly present their plays, and each one is correctly costumed." New presentations included *Mam'selle Satan* and *Michael Strogoff*. The company would also perform "Illustrated songs" and singing and dancing specialties between acts.⁶

One week later the paper reported the opera house's first week as a great success, although the auditorium was not quite ready. "While the new hall is not completed it is far enough along to show what it will be when finished and what a creditable play house Corning will have." People flocked to the new opera house throughout the week to experience its novelty, its electric lights, horseshoe balcony, ladies lounge, and large size (when compared to previous theater structures in town). The paper also applauded the Morey Stock Company, which had "given good satisfaction as actors and actresses and their conduct both on and off the stage has been of the highest order." Their third night's performance was a sellout, the management turning many away, and the evening's receipts totalled \$370.⁷

The grand opening of the Corning Opera House was scheduled for the end of September, and featured William Owen's theater company. The company was apparently engaged for only one performance, "an elaborate revival" of *The School for Scandal* on Friday evening, September 26, 1902. The newspaper strongly promoted the event, referencing the attraction effusively four times in its two successive weekly editions. The scenery carried by the company was said to be "new," and "almost gorgeous," while the costumes were "historically correct...beautiful and lavish," having been designed by "Brugiere of Paris." The event promised to be "The most magnificent production [of that play]...that has ever been offered the American public."⁸

5 Ibid.

6 Adams County *Free Press*, August 30, 1902.

7 Adams County *Free Press*, September 6, 1902.

8 Adams County *Free Press*, September 2, 1902.

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Advertisement for the Corning Opera House, undated

**THE CRESTON
ADVERTISER-GAZETTE**

Gives the news of this part of Iowa more fully than any other paper, and is the only paper which gets to the people of Corning TODAY with TODAY'S general news and today's markets.

It is the only paper that circulates largely in a number of counties in this part of the state, and hence is a splendid advertising medium for stock sales, real estate and other lines.



Corning Opera House, at Corning, Iowa.

F. C. REESE, Manager.

Stage, 28x44.

Seating Capacity, 800.

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The newspaper emphasized the significance of the new opera house as a culminating achievement and civic monument by further noting:

This will be an event in theatrical circles never before enjoyed by Corning. The opening of a new opera house is always a great event and on this occasion it will be especially so, because of the friendly feeling for the enterprise, just completed, that will mark an epoch in the history of Corning. The Company will come direct from Des Moines here, is one of the best on the road and can only be secured in towns of this size by the management making them a large guarantee. Don't fail to attend, see a good comedy produced by artists and also view Corning's new play house in its completed state. It is an ornament to the city, and not only the city but the surrounding country is to be congratulated on having a house that will accomodate good attractions. We trust a large number from nearby towns and the country will attend the opening.⁹

Ticket prices were typical of the region and time — 25, 35, and 50 cents — and tickets were sold at Shinn's Drug Store. Curiously, there was no review of the opening night in subsequent issues of the paper, which may indicate that the performance did not live up to its billing.

Single night presentations followed the grand opening, generally one per month. Performances included *Mr. Earle Doty* (October 31), *A Millionaire Tramp* (November 19), *The Boy Tramp* (January 2, 1903), *My Friend from Arkansaw* (January 12), and *Peck's Bad Boy* (February 20). The February 14, 1903 weekly edition of the local paper printed a photo of the completed building. F.C. Reese and his wife Viola, transferred ownership of the opera house to the Corning Opera House [Company?] in March 1903, presumably having incorporated the name. Reese continued to manage the operation, however.

The old Palace Rink Opera House, now called the "Auditorium," continued to compete with the new opera house until at least 1904. Theater directories for that year list the two structures as offering live stage entertainment. By 1907, however, the new opera house was the only such structure in Corning, the Auditorium having been returned to its first function — a skating rink.

The frequency of theatrical performances at the Corning Opera House is unknown, but published sources indicate that the opera house remained in business until at least 1921. In the August 26, 1904 issue of the *Opera House Reporter* (published in Estherville, Iowa), Manager Reese reported the successful performance of the play *For Her Sake*, by a ten-member cast on August 16, which resulted in a "\$166.00 house." Reese rated the performers an "A1 company," saying the show offered "special scenery" and "pleased the people." By this time admission prices were 35 and 50 cents. The next troupe to play Corning was to be the Morey Stock Company, which would remain a week. On September 2, 1904, Reese ran the following advertisement in the *Opera House Reporter*: "WANTED,

9 Ibid.

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Good Company for one or two night stands for the date of Firemens Tournament of S.W. Iowa to be held at Corning Ia., Sept. 5." He also advertised "Concessions to Let" with the same details given.

More details about the theater are given by Julius Cahn's *Official Theatrical Guide* of 1907. The 724-seat house was still managed by F.C. Reese, was illuminated by electricity and even had its own electrician, C.K. Muns. The proscenium measured 22 feet wide and 16 feet high. The stage was 28 feet deep: 24 feet from curtain line to back wall with a four foot apron. Behind the stage, the sidewalls were 45 feet apart. Scenery was wing and drop, with ten grooves to handle the wings. The house scenery was produced by Sosman and Landis of Chicago, and the theater lacked a scenery room. Cahn's 1909 *Guide* gives an identical description.

After 1911, theater troupes as well as theater patrons found it easier to reach the opera house in wet weather, for in that year, Corning initiated a streetpaving program. Brick paving began at the depot and progressed up Davis Street to the opera house, and then continued east and west on 8th Avenue for one block.¹⁰

The Cahn-Leighton *Official Theatrical Guide* for 1912-13 simply lists the opera house with the notation, "No details at hand." The population of Corning was listed at 1,702, a significant drop from the 2,600 given by Cahn in 1907. The population decline and the lack of information in the *Guide* may indicate financial distress for Reese and the opera house.

Gus Hill's *Theatrical Directory* of 1914 was better informed. The same theater dimensions as before were listed with the following exceptions: seating capacity was listed as 800, and the space between sidewalls as 44 feet (one foot less than previous listings). Reese was still manager, and indeed, sometime that year he once again assumed ownership, by means of a quit claim deed. The house was noted as presenting legitimate theater only, no films or vaudeville. The town's lower population was likewise noted, although two weekly papers and three hotels were offered.

By 1921 the theater guide had been expanded to include a "Moving Picture Directory." The opera house was listed under the same title, management and capacity. By now motion picture performances were also offered, although the stage was unchanged. Admission prices ranged from 25 cents to \$1.50. For the first time an orchestra leader and stage carpenter were acknowledged; they were F.F. Blockner and Edward Lorenzen, respectively. Also for the first time, the Corning Opera House was listed as being represented by A.L. Erlander and the Shubert Brothers of New York. This indicates that the opera house had formally become part of a large string of theaters across the nation that were controlled by these agents. As a result, F.C. Reese's control over the booking of engagements was probably curtailed.

¹⁰ Adams County Historical Society, *Centurama, Corning Iowa (1857-1957)*, Corning Iowa, 1957, 90.

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The opera house is depicted on the 1929 Sanborn Map, although a new movie theater one block south on Davis now competed with it for the motion picture market. By this time the old Palace Rink Opera House had been converted into an auto repair shop, and its dressing room addition removed. It is now a Texaco station. The original front of the building is gone and it has been deemed ineligible for National Register listing at this time.

The 1929 Sanborn Map shows the ground floor of the opera house building occupied by a printing company. That year, Albert Gauthier, owner of the *Free Press* Publishing Company, purchased the opera house building from F.C. Reese. The *Free Press* also absorbed the Adams County *Union Republican* in 1929, making it Corning's only newspaper. The firm has owned the building since that time.

Occasional liveness performances were given in the opera house in the 1920s and early 1930s, with local companies providing a majority of the programming. Vaudeville appears to have been the mainstay, supplemented with plays by the local high school. Graffiti and playbills pasted on backstage walls include *The Charm* and the "Jerome Med. Co." in 1920. The high school performed *Kempy* in 1926, and *Polly with a Past* was offered by the class of 1927. Milo Green and Warren Lee with their "hometown Greenlee Players" performed *Prunes* in 1928; Everett Thompson and Yvonne Wilson also gave vaudeville shows that year. The Greenlee Players performed *Six o'Clock* and *This Modern Age* sometime in the 1920s (exact dates unreadable). Milo Greene directed *Blue Heaven* in 1934, in what may have been the last live performance in the opera house.¹¹

Silent movies were probably the main fare offered in the Corning Opera House during the 1920s and '30s. Films were shown by the American Theater, managed by L.A. Kuhl. A projection booth was built in the back of the balcony and a screen erected on the stage (both non-extant) prior to 1931. In 1931 the "talkies" came to Corning and the American Theater moved to a new location downtown (704 Davis Avenue), where it remains today.

Since 1934 the opera house has served primarily as a storage area for the newspaper. In 1943 the western third of the theater (mainly the lobby and restroom area) was blocked off and converted into two apartments to ease the wartime housing shortage. A flat floor was constructed at some point, and marked out for half-court basketball. The front curtain "with its mountain stream scene" apparently remained in the theater until c. 1980, but it and all other scenery are now gone.¹²

¹¹ Ibid., 126; graffiti and playbills on backstage walls noted during on-site visits by James E. Jacobsen in 1988, and by Tracy A. Cunning in July, 1992.

¹² Paul Gauthier, personal interview with Tracy A. Cunning, 10 July 1992; *Centurama*, 126; and Poole, Richard, telephone interview with Tracy A. Cunning, 9 September 1992.

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CONCLUSION

The Corning Opera House provided quality live stage and community service to the citizens of Corning and Adams County between 1902 and 1934. As the third such facility in town, it represents the high point in the evolution of a live stage facility in Corning. By virtue of its relatively late construction date, the Corning Opera House witnessed the transition from the live stage era to the film era.

The Corning Opera House functioned solely as a liveness theater until at least 1914, but by 1921 it had become a movie theater first and a play house second. In 1931, with the advent of sound films, a new movie theater down the street was constructed. Travelling repertory theater was dying off across the region, and the old theater was outmoded. Although silent films may have been shown at the opera house for a few years thereafter, activity there virtually ceased by 1935.

From its corner location at the uphill end of Davis Avenue, almost overlooking the rest of the business district below it, the Corning Opera House is a key component in the overall streetscape of the town. The visual effect of the opera house, partly due to the park across the street and the lower-stature buildings on its northern flank, is one that gives a sense of closure to the Corning business district. Perhaps not as elaborate as a few other commercial structures in town, the opera house nevertheless architecturally "finishes" the downtown by virtue of its size and restrained, classically-influenced detailing; the round corner bay window is also complemented by a similar feature on the building occupying the opposite corner. Additionally, the relationship of the opera house to the rest of the commercial district may be seen in a symbolic light: contrasted to the industrial buildings at the foot of Davis Avenue, near the railroad tracks, the two and one-half story opera house at the upper end of the thoroughfare represents the arts, the pinnacle of "cultural influence" in Corning throughout the first third of this century.

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* All theatrical guides are on file with the Historic Preservation Bureau, State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, IA.

Geographical Data

Boundary Description: The Corning Opera House occupies Lot 115 of Corning, Iowa.

Boundary Justification: This nomination includes only the subject building; adjacent buildings, including the city hall are not in this nomination.