

**United States Department of the Interior  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Inventory—Nomination Form**

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*  
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

**1. Name**

historic Lerner Theatre

and/or common Elco Theatre

**2. Location**

street & number 401 South Main Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication

city, town Elkhart \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of congressional district 3rd

state Indiana code 18 county Elkhart code 039

**3. Classification**

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> educational
<input type="checkbox"/> site	<b>Public Acquisition</b>	<b>Accessible</b>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> entertainment
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial
		<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military
			<input type="checkbox"/> museum
			<input type="checkbox"/> park
			<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
			<input type="checkbox"/> religious
			<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
			<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
			<input type="checkbox"/> other:

**4. Owner of Property**

name William P. Miller (L. E. Lerner and Security Pacific National Bank, Co-Trustees)

street & number 59338 Park Shore Drive

city, town Elkhart \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity of state Indiana 46514

**5. Location of Legal Description**

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. County Court House Division: Elkhart County Recorder

street & number Main Street

city, town Goshen \_\_\_\_\_ state Indiana

**6. Representation in Existing Surveys**

title Indiana Historic Sites & Structures Inventory

has this property been determined eligible?  yes  no

date May, 1978  federal  state  county  local

depository for survey records Indiana Department of Natural Resources

city, town Indianapolis \_\_\_\_\_ state Indiana

## 7. Description

<b>Condition</b>		<b>Check one</b>	<b>Check one</b>
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

### Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Lerner Theatre, 410 South Main Street, Elkhart, Indiana, was built in 1924. The reinforced concrete and steel structure is adorned with a Beaux Arts Classical Facade that rises 60 feet from street level.

The Beaux Arts Classical Facade, with its four Corinthian columns, three freestanding urns, enriched cornice, parapet and frieze, and faced with terra-cotta, has a lighted canopy projecting over the sidewalk. Inside was a gilded, glass-enclosed foyer and luxurious lobby with terrazzo floor, imported travertine marble walls accented with crystal chandeliers.

The auditorium featured a simple color scheme of blue and cream with gilt accents, great damask panels, plush carpeting and costly draperies. The acoustics in the auditorium were excellent due to the large central dome 30 to 40 feet in diameter. This was augmented by a smaller, elongated dome under the balcony and by meshed wires imbedded in the wall.

Both domes were wired to the stage lighting system, the larger dome having 650 lights and a mushroom shaped pendant that provided indirect lighting in shades of white, red and blue to convey appropriate mood lighting during the entertainment.

Stage equipment included an intercom system, complete lighting equipment (three borders, footlights, spotlights and control board), the "Peter Clark" flying system for hanging lights, curtains, backdrops and diorama from the iron grid 60 feet above the stage. Another feature is the "waterfall" or "watercrest" curtain and its own intricate counterweighting and flying mechanism. Below and behind the stage were dressing rooms, orchestra practice rooms, property rooms, and assorted spaces for mechanical equipment.

To the right of the orchestra pit was the Kimball two manual Theatre organ. Normally, this would have been mounted on its own lifting device, allowing it to rise out of the floor to its own accompaniment at the beginning of the show and silently disappear at the end. However, although the pit for this mechanism was installed, the lift was omitted, again for budgetary reasons. The organ chambers on either side of the stage contained over 1000 pipes (1/2" to 16' high), numerous percussion and sound effects with a full size piano, marimba and xylophone. The installation contained six miles of wiring, weighed ten tons, and was drive by a five horsepower blower motor. The lighted organ grilles (two) had 20 shutters behind each.

While the greater part of the main facade remains unchanged to this day, several of the storefronts along the commercial (north) wing have been modernized since the original construction.

The structure shows minimal signs of aging, even though it has had 56 years of continuous use. The lighting system, flying system, and the organ are being restored, and have been used to enhance the week-end movie showings and preserve the spirit in which the building was built.

# 8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400–1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500–1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600–1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700–1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800–1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900–	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

**Specific dates** 1924

**Builder/Architect** Harry E. Lerner/K.V. Vitlum

**Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)**

The Lerner Theatre is historically significant as an example of a style of building associated with major 20th century cultural phenomena. Architecturally, the building is unique in its area, and the theatre contains a number of rare and interesting features. Lerner constructed the theatre in 1924 to house vaudeville shows. The building featured electricity generated by water power, water cooling, an ornate exterior facade, 1400 lights in a circular ceiling, and a magnificent orchestra pit. By the late 1920s it had evolved into a motion picture palace. The theatre was successful until the Depression. Warner Brothers purchased it in 1932, but they soon went bankrupt. Modifications made by Warners included a rare waterfall curtain. The theatre survived the 1950s and 1960s, a period when many others across the nation were destroyed because they were economically inefficient. Completely renovated, it now provides a beautiful example of a vaudeville and movie palace of the 1920s, when they were one of the most popular places of entertainment available.

Harry E. Lerner commissioned Chicago architect, K. V. Vitlum, to design the Lerner Theatre. Previously, Lerner had been manager of the Bucklen Theatre, now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and of the LaSalle and Oliver Theatres in South Bend. He intended to build the most modern entertainment center possible; one that would rival any theatre in the midwest in size and luxury. Original drawings of the proposed building show a central theatre structure flanked by two-story wings on either side. Despite these plans, budget constraints ultimately dictated that only one wing was built. The Lerner Theatre was still an architectural marvel in many ways. The imposing Beaux Arts Classical Facade with its terra cotta facing is rather plain when compared with those on some other theatres of the period, including Grauman's in Hollywood, the Roxy in New York City, and the Majestic in San Antonio, but it is unique in northern Indiana. The interior featured over 1400 lights set in a domed ceiling, and seating for 2200 viewers. Direct current generators run by water power provided all the electricity needed, and river water ran through coils installed in the walls to cool the building during the summer. Lerner also purchased what organist Harold Jolles later called "the finest Kimball (organ) ever heard," to provide musical accompaniment. Additionally, the theatre featured a massive orchestra pit, a nursery, and an elaborate reception room on the mezzanine.

The Lerner Theatre opened on November 27, 1924, as a vaudeville theatre. Elkhart was on a major railroad, and this fact allowed the theatre access to many shows on the road between New York and Chicago. Extant documents indicate that Harry Houdini, Al Jolson, Buster Keaton, and the Clyde Beatty Circus entertained local citizens at the Lerner. As the medium changed, however, the Lerner evolved into a movie palace toward the end of the decade.

Lerner did well with the theatre until the Great Depression. He then sold it to Warner Brothers in 1932. Warners renamed it the Elco, redecorated in red and gold, and added one of the theatre's most unique features, the waterfall or watercrest curtain. This curtain is one of the few remaining in the county still in operable condition. Warner Brothers soon went bankrupt, however, and the Indiana-Illinois Theatre took control. Since 1961 the building has been owned by Miller Theaters, Inc.

Continued

# 9. Major Bibliographical References

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

**ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED**  
**UTM NOT VERIFIED**

# 10. Geographical Data

Acreeage of nominated property Less than 1 acre

Quadrangle name Elkhart

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A 

1	6	5	8	5	5	9	5	4	6	1	4	9	7	0
Zone		Easting				Northing								

B 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

C 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

D 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

E 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

F 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

G 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

H 

Zone		Easting				Northing								

Verbal boundary description and justification

SEE CONTINUATION SHEET

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state code county code

state code county code

# 11. Form Prepared By

name/title Bill Brown, AIA, Project Manager; Terry Herschberger, Project Coordinator

organization LeRoy Troyer and Associates date 6-30-80

street & number 415 Lincolnway East telephone 219/259-9976

city or town Mishawaka state Indiana 46544

# 12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national  state  local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *Joseph W. Coland*

title Indiana State Historic Preservation Officer

date 8-28-80

For HCRS use only

I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

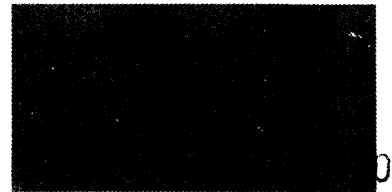
*Anna Marie Brugel*  
Keeper of the National Register

date October 2, 1980

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

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Continuation sheet Lerner Theatre

Item number 8, Significance

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The Lerner Theatre is an excellent example of a structure that became popular during the early 20th century, and it was associated with two significant cultural phenomena—movies and vaudeville. To meet the demands of an entertainment-hungry people, many of these buildings were built prior to World War II. Few remain. Many were torn down in the 1950s and 1960s because they were expensive to maintain and operate. Others exist in deteriorating urban areas. Because of this fact, its association with America's cultural past, and its numerous architectural features unique in the Elkhart region, the Lerner Theatre deserves a place on the National Register.

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Continuation sheet Lerner Theatre

Item number 9, Bibliog.Ref.

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The Best Remaining Seats, Ben M. Hall, Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., publisher, 1961

"Six Miles of Wire Connect Parts of New Theatre Organ", The Elkhart Truth, November 25, 1924

"Doors of New Theatre Will Open Thursday", The Elkhart Truth, November 26, 1924

"Harold Jolles", American Theatre Organ Society Magazine, December, 1974

Interview with Mr. William P. Miller, owner of Theatre, who acquired it from Harry Lerner

"A.M.", The Elkhart Truth, August 9, 1980

"Progress Number", The Elkhart Truth, October, 1924

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Continuation sheet Lerner Theatre

Item number 10, Geographical <sup>Data</sup> Page 3

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Beginning at the southeast corner of Main and Franklin Streets in the City of Elkhart; thence southerly, along the East line of South Main Street, One hundred seventy one (171) feet; thence easterly, parallel with the north line of said Out Lot Twenty one (21), one hundred sixty (160) feet to the West line of a public alley, to the southerly line of Franklin Street, thence westerly, One hundred Sixty (160) feet to the place of beginning. It is understood that the South line of the above described property is the center line of the North Wall of the three story brick building known as the Curtis Building.