

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service



NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

1. Name of Property

historic name: The Electric Building

other name/site number: Montana Power Building

2. Location

street & number: 113-115 Broadway

vicinity: n/a

city/town: Billings

state: Montana code: MT county: Yellowstone code: zip code: 59101

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.

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal agency or bureau

(See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

In my opinion, the property meets does not meet the National Register criteria.

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 see continuation sheet
- removed from the National Register see continuation sheet
- other (explain):

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

Edson H. Beall

3/1/02

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private	Number of Resources within Property	
	Contributing	Noncontributing
Category of Property: Building	<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u> building(s)
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: n/a	<u> </u>	<u> </u> sites
	<u> </u>	<u> </u> structures
	<u> </u>	<u> </u> objects
Name of related multiple property listing: n/a	<u> 1 </u>	<u> </u> TOTAL

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions:	Current Functions:
COMMERCIAL/Office Building	COMMERCIAL/Office Building, Restaurant

7. Description

Architectural Classification:
Modern Movement/Early Modern

Materials:
foundation:
walls: Glazed concrete block, brick
roof: Asphalt
other: Glass storefront, panels

Narrative Description

The Electric Building is a five-story commercial block of eclectic early Modern design. The building is 50' wide and 140' deep with five full floors and a basement that extends out under the front sidewalk to the street. The vault structure in the basement is common to buildings in the area. The plan is rectangular with the floors inset at the sides on floors two through five, to provide light wells. The roof is single sloped from front to back with an elevator penthouse and two towers. Rooftop mechanical units and communication towers have been added to the roofline.

The building is of concrete floor and column construction with brick side and rear walls. The west (primary) façade is finished with terra cotta-faced concrete block. The front façade is broken into three parts with flanking vertical elements that are reflected in the lower bay and extend above the main roofline terminating in capped towers. The bays are edged with tapering columns at the base that blend into the wall plane at the top. These bays have a single window at each floor and an additional unit at the cornice. Surrounding the window units and between the units are translucent glass panels. The drawings indicate ornate medallions in the top units. (Terra cotta medallions were found in the building but it is not clear that they were ever installed.)

The center section of the building has four windows across each floor with Ionic capped columns between and indirect lighting below. This section is banded by indirect lighting and capped with a cornice supported on gothic arches above the illuminated letters. The building is capped with a decorative parapet and centered flagpole on an ornamental base.

The base of the building has been substantially altered. The façade still has the three-part division but the materials and door locations have been altered. The main floor is primarily painted aluminum storefront material with wood doors set at various locations across the front. A retractable canopy and plaster soffits visually breaks the street level from the upper level.

Much of the unique character of the façade is created by the indirect lighting system. Strands of incandescent lights once illuminated vertical panels, under window units and cut out letters on the front façade. The panels were made of translucent milk glass and have been sealed shut over time, making it impossible to replace burnt out lights. The building has not been illuminated for many years. The discovery of colored bulbs in building storage indicates that the panels might have had different colors for holidays or events.

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The ground floor is fully spanned by a non-original storefront, likely added in the 1970s. The storefront incorporates plate glass units framed with dark aluminum, and sliding wood doors. On floors two through five, the original fenestration on the west elevation was originally double-hung windows, these have been replaced with metal double-hung units. The windows are single-pane wire glass units in industrial frames at the sides and rear. Most are original, however some have been removed and replaced.

On the interior, the walls are wood framed. The main floor originally was composed of a large central lobby that led to offices and workrooms. The lobby was once heavily trimmed in marble. In the northwest corner, a secondary lobby serviced the building's one elevator and one stair tower. This portion of the first floor remains as originally planned, and marble is still present on some parts of the stairway. The rest of the main floor was converted to serve a single tenant, a brewery and restaurant, in 1994.

The floor plan for floors two through five consists of a lobby area serving the stair and elevator, a central corridor running the length of the building, and flanking office spaces. Doorways with overhead transoms opened onto this hallway; mosaic tile covered the floor. The upper floors were remodeled in 1971 when a ducted heating system was installed. Ceilings were dropped two feet to accommodate this improvement, prompting the removal of transoms and covering the ornamental plaster. Some doorways were moved and new flush wooden doors were installed reusing the original hardware. The interior acquired a modernized look – woodwork was painted black and tile flooring was covered with carpeting.

The Electric Building is located on Broadway Street, a primary commercial thoroughfare in the heart of Billings historic downtown. The building is taller than most other buildings in the vicinity, and stands between other commercial buildings to the north and south. The rear of the building (east) faces onto an alley. A metal fire escape is located off the alley on the east side.

Integrity

The Electric Building retains a very high degree of its historic integrity, remaining a key anchor on the Broadway corridor in downtown Billings. On the exterior, the terra cotta façade is visually commanding, with the elaborate ornamentation, original window patterning, and illuminating milk glass panels all perfectly intact. Despite alterations to the storefront, which are common throughout Billings's commercial district, the building conveys a very strong sense of its historic design and associations with the Montana Power Company.

On the interior, unfortunate losses were sustained during insensitive remodeling of the early 1970s. However, the high ceilings throughout, marbled stairwell and original spatial divisions on the upper floors have been retained. Some of the changes are in process of reversal as part of a current tax act project.

8.
Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Areas of Significance: Architecture, Commerce

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): n/a

Period(s) of Significance: 1916 - 1950

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1916

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: John G. Link

Narrative Statement of Significance

The Electric Building is one of Montana's finest buildings from the early Modern period and a wonderful testament to the significance of the Montana Power Company in the history of this rural state. Built in 1914 for the newly-formed Montana Power Company, the illuminated front façade drew attention to the growing importance of the Montana Power Company as the key regional provider of hydro- and coal-produced electricity. Locally, the Electric Building was an important anchor to the northern expansion of the Billings commercial district; a showpiece that influenced other 4-6 story buildings built in the area during the early 20th century.

The building is also significant for the ways that its distinctive, vigorous early Modern design represents the work of the preeminent 20th century Montana architect, John G. Link. Together with his partner Charles S. Haire, Link was among the most prolific and influential architects working in Montana during the first decades of the 20th century. The Electric Building, with its novel illuminated façade, is a testament to Link's technical mastery and architectural creativity. For these reasons, the Electric Block is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, according to Criteria A and C.

Foundations of Billings

*"Billings is situated on the north bank of the Yellowstone River, at a point on the Northern Pacific railroad 915 miles west of St. Paul and about midway between that city and the terminus of the road at Puget sound. The town is located upon a gently sloping plain at the eastern extremity of the most beautiful of Montana valleys – the Clark Fork bottom – north of the town a line of rugged cliffs, the bank of a once wide Yellowstone, divides the bottom lands along the river from a higher plateau."*¹

Born in 1882, the city of Billings was a rail hub founded by the Northern Pacific Railroad on a site originally known as Clark's Fork Bottom. Eclipsing the earlier settlement of Coulson just to the northeast, the town of Billings was laid out around the rail line by the Montana and Minnesota Land & Improvement Company. With land holdings on both sides of the tracks, the city was laid out with the rail line running down the center, and the main streets of Montana and Minnesota fronting onto the rails.

Heman Clark, agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, arrived in Billings on April 1, 1882. Detailing the creation of the Billings townsite to hopeful settlers, he announced the railroad's plan for a townsite envisioned to hold 20,000 inhabitants. The railroad would develop eight or nine sawmills, a 16-mile irrigation system and rail spurs to nearby mines, and name it all in honor of past NP president, Frederick Billings. Clark's arrival "lit the fuse of a crazed land boom"² as buyers competed to purchase town properties. By May 1882, the first three buildings were erected in town – a railroad headquarters, H. Clark's townsite office and mercantile, and a lone residence.³ In August 1882, when the NP line was completed to Billings many new residents had already arrived. Buildings to house new arrivals were hastily constructed south of the tracks, while commercial buildings and hotels were located close to the hub of railroad activities. By the end of the following year, the newspaper reported some 400 buildings, occupied by over 1500 citizens. Downtown occupied an area of about nine blocks, split evenly north and south of the railroad tracks. First log and frame, and later, brick and stone business buildings were built along the rail corridor in late Victorian styles.

1 D. Leubrie, Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Nov. 19, 1888.

2 Van West, *Capitalism on the Frontier*, p. 180.

3 Hendry & Fell, *Billings Directory 1883; History of the Yellowstone Valley*, p. 292.

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In 1893, Billings was named county seat of Yellowstone County and by the turn of the twentieth century, the town included “a water works, electric lights, graded streets, efficient fire department, excellent schools and churches, good society, [and] an intelligent class of people.”⁴ The population spread into the flats north of the downtown and the north side neighborhood became increasingly attractive with frame and brick homes of a number of prominent citizens scattered through the area. In 1900, the U.S. census counted a population of 3,221 Billings residents.

Billings rapidly took the lead as a transportation hub for the large agricultural region in surrounding eastern Montana and northern Wyoming. Livestock was the keystone of the local economy, and cattle ranching and sheep growing dominated the high plains country around Billings. In addition, the railroad linked by spur lines to mining districts in the nearby mountains. Silver from the Judith Basin, White Sulphur Springs and Cooke City mines flowed through Billings, along with coal from the Red Lodge coalfields.

These extractive and agricultural industries supported a solid business community in Billings, and growth of the downtown reflected the brisk pace of commerce. The commercial heart of town remained centered on Montana and Minnesota Avenues but began to stretch on a perpendicular course up Broadway. The north side of the tracks became a finance, shopping, hotel and office district while the rail yards, warehouses, manufacturing and the Yegen Brothers’ mercantile establishment concentrated south of the tracks and to the east of the Montana Avenue businesses. And on the expanding north end, a substantial granite courthouse and a new city hall and fire house were built during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The year 1909 was a momentous one in Billings history. That year, the Great Northern Railway built through Montana to Billings and beyond, Congress passed the Enlarged Homestead Act, and the Fourth Annual Dryland Farming Congress was held in Billings that year. In the heartland of dry farming, Billings’ population boomed as hopeful homesteaders flooded the plains. By the 1910 census, Billings was ranked the sixth-fastest growing community in the nation and the population bulged at 10,031. During the decade that followed the population swelled to almost 18,000 before dropping back to 15,100 in 1920.

During the boom years of the 1910s, the streetscape of the city was transformed. Increasingly, older buildings and empty lots on the edges of the downtown gave way to larger, multi-story commercial blocks and hotels. The new downtown Union Depot to serve the expanding rail services, the Northern and Grand Hotels, a new Billings Opera House, an expanded Babcock Theater, the Bank of Montana and the Masonic Temple are among the impressive buildings erected during this era.

Geographically, the boundaries of the downtown pushed northward. Rivaling the best of the new architecture, the Montana Power Company’s new building at 113-115 North Broadway became an anchor to the developing north end of the Broadway corridor.

Electrifying Montana

The advent of electrical power in Montana dates back to 1879, when Mr. C.C. Ruthrauff gave a demonstration of the Brush Dynamo Electric Machine for mining industry representatives at the Alice mine hoist house in Butte. Operated on steam power, the “singular yet simple looking contrivance” would power a string of “thirteen or fourteen lights in all, by which it is claimed the surroundings of the mines and mills will be illuminated at night with a brilliancy almost equal to that of the sun.” The *Butte Miner* went on to predict, “this new method of illumination is in a fair way to drive to distraction the gas companies and oil merchants of the whole world.”⁵

Within three years, Butte Electric Light and Power Company organized to supply electrical lighting and power to the mining industry and the greater community. The demand for electrical power mounted rapidly in the emergent communities in the territory — Helena saw its first electrical power in 1882, followed by Great Falls, Billings and Livingston in 1887, Bozeman in 1888 and Missoula in

⁴ D. Leubric, Chicago *Inter-Ocean*, Nov 19, 1888.

⁵ Montana Power Co, “The Story of Montana Power”, 1940, p. 8.

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1889.⁶ Overwhelmingly, however, it was the mining of Butte copper and demand for refinement that created the greatest market, and to meet that need, hydroelectric generating plants on the Missouri River were rapidly planned. Montana's first hydroelectric generator was erected at Black Eagle Falls in 1891 and by 1900, there were several independent producers located around the state.⁷

Electrical power was developed in Billings in connection with efforts to establish adequate water supply for the new townsite. Founded in 1882 as a rail hub on the Northern Pacific Railroad line, Billings sat out on the dry alkali flats above the Yellowstone River. The first organized attempt to supply water by the Montana Artesian Well Company failed in 1883, when they drilled a dry well to a depth of nearly 900 feet. Billings Water Power Company, organized in 1885, took over a small irrigation canal that had been built by P.W. McAdow in the late 1870s as an improvement for land he claimed under the Desert Land Act for the settlement of Coulson⁸. Billings Water Power Company completed a canal from the Yellowstone River to pump a million gallons of water daily into the city. A hydroelectric generator was built at the canal's end, and by January 1887, electrical current flowed into the city.⁹

Other small producers came on line during this era. The Yegen Brothers built a hydroelectric plant on the Yellowstone River, which they incorporated in 1907 as the Yellowstone River Power Company with commercial and residential customers in the city of Billings. The Montana Trading Company built a flourmill powered by a hydroelectric generator in 1900, and seventy miles up the Yellowstone, the Big Timber Electric Light and Power Company produced hydro- and steam-generated power.¹⁰

Billings Water Power Co. sold its generating plant and distribution lines to the Billings & Montana Power Company in 1908 when they consolidated all of these local small producers along with the Columbus Distribution System under their ownership. The following year, a line was built from Billings to Livingston that linked to the Madison River Power Company, and the capacity of the Yellowstone River generation system was increased to six units with an output of 3,000 horsepower.¹¹

In 1912, John D. Ryan, president of the Amalgamated Copper Company (later Anaconda Copper Mining Company) oversaw the merger of the state's largest electrical producers and the Montana Power Company was born. By merging Butte Electric & Power, Missouri River Electric & Power, Madison River Power and Billings & Eastern Montana Power, Ryan created a statewide power monopoly over Montana's electrical industry that stood for almost a century. Although Montana Power was never a subsidiary to the mighty Anaconda Company, the relationship between the companies was close, with Ryan at the helm as president of both companies until his death in 1933. Montana Power was positioned to supply power to Anaconda and to the electrified Milwaukee Railroad, for which Ryan served as a director.¹²

As electrical power became available to households in Montana's cities and towns, Billings and eastern Montana pioneered the advent of electric cookery. George A. Hughes, an inventor in Glendive, Montana was one of the first to experiment with electric cooking stoves. He patented a design for his invention, which was fashioned from an oil stove that he refitted with open coil electrical burners. His electric range was manufactured in Chicago and exhibited in St. Louis in 1910. The homemakers of Billings pioneered his new design, after the first railroad carload of electric cooking ranges to be sold in the nation was hauled into Billings in 1912 and sold there. The arrival of the stoves coincided with a performance by a visiting circus. In one of the more unusual moments in the history of electrical appliances, a few of the first 200 stoves to arrive were actually unloaded from the rail cars, strapped to circus

⁶ Fletcher, "Sinews that Serve", p.

⁷ Montana Power Co, 1940, p. 8.

⁸ West, Capitalism on the Frontier, p. 154.

⁹ Montana Power Company, Vertical Files, Montana Historical Society Library.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Malone, Roeder & Lang, Montana: A History of Two Centuries, p. 323.

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camels and paraded through downtown Billings.¹³ Electric stoves took their place in kitchens across Montana, and Montana Power regularly ran cooking schools and contests to promote the sales of these time-saving appliances.

The years that followed saw the spread of electrical power to every part of the state. Industry continued to dominate the primary portion of Montana Power's market supply, and the mining sector remained the foremost consumers. In 1940, 70 % of Montana power production went to mining, smelting, reduction and refining, in contrast with 4% for commercial and 4% for residential customers. During the New Deal, the Rural Electrification Administration aided rural customers long beyond the reach of power transmission. Beginning in 1936 the REA extended loans to farm coops and supported construction of rural distribution systems. In 1935 there were fewer than 3,000 farms with electrical power in Montana; by 1939, the number had more than doubled. Eventually there were more than two dozen rural electric cooperatives carrying power to all corners of this large rural state.

Controlling production and transmission of electricity through the end of the 20th century, Montana Power grew into a major corporation. During the 1970s, the Montana Power Company expanded its production with the construction of coal-fired generating plants at Colstrip, Montana. These giant generators provided power to customers in the state and sold the excess power throughout the Northwest. At the close of the century, plans were set in motion for deregulation of the state's electrical industry. After gaining the approval of Montana's legislature to deregulate, Montana Power announced plans in December 1997 to sell its production facilities. In August 1998, the company reorganized around telecommunications services and natural gas production. And three months later, in Nov 1998, Pennsylvania Power and Light purchased Montana's electrical generating plants.¹⁴

John Gustave Link

During the first century of the city's history, a few prolific architects left an indelible mark on downtown Billings. Most prominent among them was John Gustave Link. Bavarian by birth, Link studied architecture at the Royal Academy at Landau. He came to the United States in 1887, and settled in Butte, Montana in 1896. Link teamed up with Charles S. Haire in 1905 and the following year moved to Billings to establish an office. For years, Link & Haire was the leading architectural firm in the state, with offices in Billings, Helena, Missoula, Butte and Lewistown. They designed over 1000 buildings statewide, including 18 of the 56 county courthouses.

More than any others, it was the vision of Link & Haire that shaped the buildings of downtown Billings. The firm was responsible for many outstanding designs spanning a period of four decades, from the Parmly Billings Library in 1898, to the City Hall in 1938-39. In between there were well over a hundred buildings, including such notables as the Billings Brewery (1899), Northern Hotel (1902-04), Stapleton Building (1904), Hart-Albin Building (1917) and the New Grand Hotel (1921). Among these, the Electric Building, designed by Link for the newly formed Montana Power Company, was a standout.

Rising to a height of five stories, the Electric Building dominated the streetscape on the northern end of Billings' downtown. Taller and grander than most of its nearby neighbors, the design of the façade conveyed the growing importance and reliance of the region upon electrical power. Constructed during the early Modern period in 20th century architecture, the building is complicated and visually interesting. In form, the building breaks into a two part vertical block with square corner bays that enframe the upper stories. Stylistically, the design is transitional in its influences. It references Classical period revival with its Classical engaged columns, Corinthian capitals and crowning cornice with its Gothic-arched embellishments. At the same time it looks toward the future and the Art Deco style which became popular after 1925, emphasizing the vertical elements of the façade and form, its hard terra cotta finish

¹³ MPC, The Story of Montana Power, p. 26.

¹⁴ *Montana Standard*, Aug 27, 1998; *Helena Independent Record*, Nov 3, 1998.

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and the stepped back terminus to the façade. And finally, the illuminating milk glass panels are fluidly integrated into the design, setting the building apart from all others in the city, while pronouncing the mission of the original occupants.

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BUILDING FOR MONTANA POWER CO.
DILLINGS MONT.

HINK & SHILOH
ARCHITECTS



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