

PH0368482

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

RECEIVED DEC 21 1976

DATE ENTERED SEP 13 1977

**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

Mystic Theatre (Preferred)

AND/OR COMMON

Marmarth Theatre

**2 LOCATION**

STREET & NUMBER

Main Street

\_\_\_ NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN

Marmarth

CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

1

\_\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

North Dakota

CODE  
38

COUNTY  
Slope

CODE  
087

**3 CLASSIFICATION**

**CATEGORY**

- \_\_\_ DISTRICT
- BUILDING(S)
- \_\_\_ STRUCTURE
- \_\_\_ SITE
- \_\_\_ OBJECT

**OWNERSHIP**

- \_\_\_ PUBLIC
- PRIVATE
- \_\_\_ BOTH
- PUBLIC ACQUISITION**
- \_\_\_ IN PROCESS
- \_\_\_ BEING CONSIDERED

**STATUS**

- \_\_\_ OCCUPIED
- UNOCCUPIED
- \_\_\_ WORK IN PROGRESS
- ACCESSIBLE**
- YES: RESTRICTED
- \_\_\_ YES: UNRESTRICTED
- \_\_\_ NO

**PRESENT USE**

- \_\_\_ AGRICULTURE
- MUSEUM
- \_\_\_ COMMERCIAL
- \_\_\_ PARK
- \_\_\_ EDUCATIONAL
- \_\_\_ PRIVATE RESIDENCE
- ENTERTAINMENT
- \_\_\_ RELIGIOUS
- \_\_\_ GOVERNMENT
- \_\_\_ SCIENTIFIC
- \_\_\_ INDUSTRIAL
- \_\_\_ TRANSPORTATION
- \_\_\_ MILITARY
- \_\_\_ OTHER:

**4 OWNER OF PROPERTY**

NAME

Marmarth Historical Society

STREET & NUMBER

Post Office Box 56

CITY, TOWN

Marmarth

\_\_\_ VICINITY OF

STATE

North Dakota 58643

**5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

COURTHOUSE,  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC.

Slope County Courthouse

STREET & NUMBER

Post Office Box J J

CITY, TOWN

Amidon

STATE

North Dakota 58620

**6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS**

TITLE

North Dakota Historic Sites Survey

DATE

1975

\_\_\_ FEDERAL  STATE \_\_\_ COUNTY \_\_\_ LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR  
SURVEY RECORDS

State Historical Society of North Dakota  
Liberty Memorial Building

CITY, TOWN

Bismarck

STATE

North Dakota 58505

# 7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

## DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Mystic Theatre measures 26 by 76 feet, with framing consisting chiefly of two-by-six lumber, a structural system which even prior to recent restoration rendered the building unusually solid. The roof covering is board and tar paper, and the facade (southwest) and side elevations are stuccoed. Stucco on the rear has fallen away, exposing the stucco board (grooved wooden panels) which was an early and unsuccessful technique for holding stucco in place. At some time in the past the boarding was overlaid on the facade and sides with wire mesh framing and the stucco reapplied. A platform with steps has been constructed at the elevated rear door within the last year in order to comply with safety requirements for a second exit. The facade of the theatre (repainted its original white) features a galvanized metal cornice with egg-and-dart and bead-and-reel moldings, paterae, and enriched consoles. The archivolt of the facade basket arch is marked with fret banding and the soffit illuminated with a string of eleven multi-colored lights. Eventually the damaged plaster on the ceiling of the entry recessed behind the arch will be replaced with stucco. The centered semihexagonal ticket booth consists of a dark brown stucco base; three windows beneath a row of seven lights; and a ribbed dome roof of composition board painted gilt. Suspended inside the booth is the theatre's sole remaining original light fixture: a clear glass globe is a morning glory design of Art Nouveau inspiration. The two billboards flanking the doors are also original, although it has been necessary to refit the doors themselves with a number of glass panes and muntins. The latter were made by a local carpenter who carefully matched the grooved surface of the members still intact.

Inside the lobby, two structural changes have in one instance created a new space and in the other eliminated an alteration to the plan as first built. The area of the new concession stand, recessed behind the northeast wall of the lobby, was taken from the rear of the auditorium and replaces ten seats. The walls of the stand are covered with scalloped cloth and the service bar rests on two red cedar posts. The bottom half of the west stairway to the balcony was cut off some time after construction of the building and the space taken for a popcorn machine, but the steps have now been restored. Because of plaster deterioration, walls and ceiling of the lobby have been sheathed and coated with a textured spray. The walls also feature dark brown wainscoting below decorative fabric panels. The four-by-six uprights supporting the lobby ceiling include one bearing the words Yellowstone Trail, indicating it was originally a marker for the national highway of that name which was one of the major coast-to-coast automobile routes of the early 20th century.

Enclosed quarter-turn stairways with stairwells sheathed in matched vertical boarding lead from the lobby to the balcony. The latter, which seats twenty, has a curved railing with rectangular wooden balusters painted gilt and is supported by metal rods attached to a tie-beam in the ceiling. As built, the balcony seems to have been a continuous horseshoe but probably acquired its present 2-part division in the 1939 remodeling of the projection area into a fireproof concrete room. The original projector, a "Peerless Automatic Arc Control" manufactured by J.E. McAuley, Chicago, still functions on the principle of an arc welder, with light produced from an electrical arc through the use of carbons. The sound equipment was apparently installed in 1930, in July of which year the Marmarth newspaper began advertising that the theatre offered the best in that innovation.

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CONTINUATION SHEET

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The auditorium has 187 seats, the first six rows of which are wooden and imitation leather opera chairs thought to be original. The remainder are considerably more elaborate, with cast iron frames, black leather cushions, shaped wooden headrails, and red wooden armrests. The pine tongue-and-groove floor is bare except for red carpeting in the two side aisles. On the northwest and southeast walls are wood-framed panels, 8 by 8½ feet, in which the original plaster fill has been replaced with flocked paper in a crimson foliate design on a gold ground. Smaller panels flank the stage and extend beneath the overhang of the balcony, the curved apron of which is also covered with the flocked paper above gilt wooden banding. An original floral stenciled border has been reproduced in dark brown paint beneath the panels, and the remainder of the wall to the baseboards is plaster painted dull gold. The metal ceiling, stamped in a pattern of squares and diamonds, retains its first coat of pale yellow; the cornice is blue with a border of small handpainted yellow flowers. Lighting was originally provided by incandescent bulbs suspended from the ceiling, but fixtures chosen for the restoration consist of three 5-arm hurricane lamp chandeliers and a series of individual wall hurricane lamps. Heating was first obtained from a large coal stove, the thimble hole for which (now sealed) is still visible in the north corner wall of the auditorium. A later coal furnace, installed in an unfinished excavation beneath the northeast end of the building, was subsequently converted to gas and produces warm air through grilles beneath the stage.

A flight of steps on the southeast wall leads up to a corridor beside the stage. The latter can be cleared of its motion picture screen by means of hinges attached to a two-by-six ceiling beam. The plain 3-part flat currently in use is new, but backstage there are also about a dozen scenic panels (painted canvas on wooden frames) which date from the heyday of the theatre and some of which bear the names of vaudeville troupes. The present footlights are replacements made by the president of the Marmarth Historical Society and consist of light bulbs with gilt-painted backings cut from sheet metal. The treasurer of the society contributed two canvas backdrops, hand-painting one with a rose-colored banner reading Mystic Theatre and the other with a scene of moonlight-on-water. The gold velvet stage curtain was the joint sewing project of a number of society members. An upright piano, placed left of the stage, was donated to the theatre by the secretary of the society.

# 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/HUMANITARIAN	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> THEATER	
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)	
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION			

SPECIFIC DATES      1914

BUILDER/ARCHITECT      Guy Johnson

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

The early prosperity and the lingering decline of Marmarth, North Dakota, a town founded in 1902 in a bend of the Little Missouri River in the southern Badlands, are reflected in the history of its Mystic Theatre. Both town and theatre were built to last, with the former boasting such assets as a park and landscaped boulevard, extensive public utilities, and imposing masonry commercial blocks. The theatre, although frame and stucco, was sturdily constructed and remains so today, despite its age, locale, and years of neglect. Unusual among early North Dakota theatres because it was specifically intended for the showing of motion pictures, the building is thus stylistically significant as a vernacular expression of what the February 13, 1914, Marmarth Mail termed "a playhouse of the movie sort" ("Possibility for New Industry," p.1).

The Mystic was the project of Guy Johnson (1891-1971), a Nebraska-born professional baseball pitcher who settled in Marmarth and erected the theatre within two months in the spring of 1914. For the April 22 opening, the Marmarth Mail reported that "The house was packed for both performances. The Mail is informed that the Mystic will run nightly. The house, when completed, will be a nifty little play house and will accomodate about 200 persons at a seating" ("Mystic Theatre Opens Its Doors," April 24, 1914, p.1). The public was soon eagerly attending such offerings as Gypsy Blood, a 3-reel romantic epic "starring Asta Nelson in the leading role in one of the movie masterpieces of the world" (advertisement, Marmarth Mail, May 15, 1914, p.3). The quality of the features was praised as being "exceptionally high...far better than the films shown in the average movie house" ("Local Happenings," Marmarth Mail, June 26, 1914, p.3).

The Mystic made the transition to sound in 1930, but by the end of the decade, signs of its waning popularity had emerged. After being closed several months for remodeling to bring it up to state safety standards (a new fireproof projection booth and conduits for electrical wiring), the theatre reopened only on a part-time basis in July, 1939. Its diminished schedule reflected local changes which had already been at work for a number of years, altering the character of Marmarth itself. The town owes both its rise and fall to the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway, which in 1907 made Marmarth a terminal point complete with roundhouse and car repair shops. The community quickly flourished in its role as regional trading center, its population growing from 790 in 1910 to 1318 ten years later. As early as 1915, Marmarth boasted department, hardware, grocery, drug, and jewelry stores, and also a meat market; two hotels; schools; churches; half a dozen restaurants; lumber yards; an automobile repair garage, as well as livery and feed barns; banks; a grain elevator; an opera house - and the year-old Mystic Theatre. In 1922, however, local railroad machinists and carmen went on strike, during

## 9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

Maddox, Dawn. Personal inspection, April 22-23, 1976.

Marmarth Historical Society, Marmarth, North Dakota, 58643.

Mr. Roy Williams, President. Personal interview, April 23, 1976.

Mrs. Frieda Striebel, Secretary. Files.

State Historical Society of North Dakota, Liberty Memorial Building, Bismarck, North Dakota, 58505: Mystic Theatre Subject File.

## 10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY Less than 1 acre.

UTM REFERENCES Not available because blue preliminary USGS map issued. Longitude: 103 55' 29" Latitude: 46 17' 49"

A	<u>1</u> <u>3</u>			B			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING
C				D			
	ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING		ZONE	EASTING	NORTHING

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

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

Dawn Maddox, Architectural Historian

ORGANIZATION

State Historical Society of North Dakota

DATE

October 25, 1976

STREET & NUMBER

Liberty Memorial Building

TELEPHONE

(701)224-2666

CITY OR TOWN

Bismarck

STATE

North Dakota 58505

## 12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL     

STATE     

LOCAL X

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 National Park Service.

STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER SIGNATURE

*James E. Sherry*

TITLE N.D. State Historic Preservation Officer

DATE December 15, 1976

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER

ATTEST

*Charles A. Brown*

DATE

8/13/77

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

DATE

8-2-77

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

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the course of which town progress was halted. The Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul took work that needed to be done to other locations, including Mobridge, South Dakota. In the end, the 65 striking workers were never rehired and the railroad shops were closed.

By 1930, Marmarth's population had dwindled to 721, less than in 1910, and as the years passed, its decline was accelerated by the advent of vehicular transportation and competition from two more successful neighbors: Bowman, North Dakota, 27 miles east, and Baker, Montana, 20 miles west. Under new names (the Palace and later the Marmarth), the Mystic Theatre held on for a time, but eventually deprived of its patrons by demographic and economic factors which depleted the town, it finally closed in the early 1950s.

Marmarth is now a community of less than 300, but from that number and from the surrounding countryside have come the members of the Marmarth Historical Society, organized in May, 1975, to preserve something of the town's fast-vanishing physical heritage. The Mystic Theatre, derelict for over two decades, is the society's Bicentennial project, on which it has wholeheartedly expended its resources for the past year. The newly restored building was given a grand reopening by the society and by the North Dakota Bicentennial Commission on April 22, 1976 (the 62nd anniversary of the original opening), with local talent presenting a vaudeville show. On opening night and on three additional evenings, the theatre was sold out to audiences which included visitors from North Dakota cities several hundred miles distant and from eastern Montana and northwestern South Dakota. Honored guests were Mrs. Guy Johnson, widow of the builder of the theatre, and Leo Merz, who donated it to the historical society, their presence emphasizing the spirit of continuity and cooperation which the Mystic now symbolizes. The Marmarth Historical Society hopes to nurture that spirit by making the theatre a "working museum," the accommodations and excellent acoustics of which will be adaptable to a variety of uses, including public entertainment and town meetings.