

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

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National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900a). Type all entries.

1. Name of Property

historic name Mills Tower Historic District  
other names/site number \_\_\_\_\_

2. Location

street & number E. Rocksylvania, approx. 1/3 mile E. of Freight House  not for publication  
city, town Iowa Falls  vicinity  
state IOWA code 019 county Hardin code 083 zip code 50126

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> district	<u>2</u>	<u>4</u> buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	_____	_____ sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	_____	_____ structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	_____	_____ objects
		<u>2</u>	<u>4</u> Total

Name of related multiple property listing: The Advent & Development of Railroads in Iowa 1855-1940 listed in the National Register 0

4. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.  
[Signature] 7/21/90  
Signature of certifying official Date  
Bureau of Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.  
\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of commenting or other official Date  
\_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau

5. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby, certify that this property is:  
 entered in the National Register. Beth Boland 9/6/90  
 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

**6. Function or Use**

Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Transportation/Rail-Related  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Transportation/Rail-Related  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**7. Description**

Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)

Other: 2-story frame interlocking tower  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
walls Other: Clapboard  
\_\_\_\_\_  
roof Asphalt  
other \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Describe present and historic physical appearance.

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

**8. Statement of Significance**

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

nationally     statewide     locally

Applicable National Register Criteria     A     B     C     D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)     A     B     C     D     E     F     G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Transportation

Period of Significance

c. 1909

c. 1909-c. 1920

Significant Dates

1909

1909

Cultural Affiliation

None.

Significant Person

None.

Architect/Builder

Illinois Central Railroad

Unknown.

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above.

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

See continuation sheet

## 9. Major Bibliographical References

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

### 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 # \_\_\_\_\_

See continuation sheet

### Primary location of additional data:

- State historic preservation office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other

### Specify repository:

Iowa Site Inventory

## 10. Geographical Data

Acres of property 1.79 Acres.

### UTM References

A 

115	479660	4707680
Zone	Easting	Northing

C 

115	479480	4707600
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B 

115	479655	4707620
Zone	Easting	Northing

D 

115	479480	4707625
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See continuation sheet

### Verbal Boundary Description

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

See continuation sheet

### Boundary Justification

See Continuation Sheet, attached.

See continuation sheet

## 11. Form Prepared By

name/title T. A. Cunning, with N. L. Pitsch, J. Beranek, and D. Clark  
organization PHR Associates date 1 December 1989  
street & number 725 Garden Street telephone 805-965-2357  
city or town Santa Barbara state California zip code 93101

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

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### Summary of District:

Mills Tower Historic District encompasses the eastern portion of the Illinois Central railroad yard, on the eastern edge of Iowa Falls. The Illinois Central runs generally east-west here while the CNW line intersects the IC in a northeast-southwest direction, both its approaches curving gently to the west. The directly area north, east and south of Mills Tower and the three buildings closest to it is mostly unused land covered with weeds and trees. The area surrounding the westernmost structures in the district is more industrial. Farther to the north, west and south of the district the neighborhood becomes residential. The IC yard extends westward from the crossing diamond, until it reaches the Iowa River bridge at the hydroelectric plant.

This small district consists of six structures, which date to the last two periods of Iowa railroad history (The Advent and Development of Railroads in Iowa 1855-1940, "The Golden Age of Steam Railroading: c. 1890-c. 1920" and "Efficiency, Improvement and Retrenchment: c. 1921-1940"). All six buildings are of wood frame construction, and of utilitarian design. Mills Tower and the signal maintainer's house are both sided with clapboard and have hipped roofs, characteristic of Illinois Central structures built during the period c. 1890-c. 1920. The remaining structures are drop sided, have gabled roofs, and clearly date to the post-1940s period of Illinois Central architecture (MPD, "The Illinois Central, A Line Study: 1855-1940s").

The district's integrity is exceptionally good. Most alterations to the district have been to Mills Tower, the oldest of the group. Perhaps the railroad altered the buildings in this portion of its yard so little because they were intended to be completely functional, and have required few modifications. The following is a description of the structures within the district.

**A.) Mills Tower, c. 1909. Contributing.** Mills Tower is a two-story, utilitarian building located at the crossing of the Illinois Central's main line with a branch of the Chicago & North Western. It was designed by the Illinois Central Railroad and built around 1909, perhaps by the company's bridge and building department. Mills is an interlocking tower, which electrically locks tracks along a segment of line, in a switching yard, at a junction or at a crossing to all but the train using the track at that time. The tower is actually located along the IC tracks, just southwest of the crossing diamond.

The tower is rectangular, measuring 25'8" wide by 17'4" deep, and faces north. Its foundation is concrete; its walls are clapboard. It has a hipped roof with asphalt shingles and a brick stove chimney in the south roof slope. Entries to both floors are on the east side; the second floor is reached by a new exterior wood stairway. The second floor has six 1/1 double-hung windows on each side, except the east, which has one

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

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door in the righthand bay. On the north and south sides a panel of clapboard divides the windows into two groups of three, whereas on the east and west sides the band of windows is continuous. The first floor has few windows, all of which are boarded over. The two doors are five-panel wood, and are not original.

"Mills" is painted on a wood signboard on both east and west sides; "CRI&P" is stencilled below, alerting IC engineers coming from both directions to the railroad line they are about to cross. The number "1475" is also stencilled on one of the tower's walls. The Illinois Central numbered all of the buildings at each of its stations following its massive overhaul of equipment and facilities in the 1940s, which improved the building engineer's filing system no doubt. Buildings with numbers in the 1400s are associated with Mills Tower. Numbers in the 1500s belong to the Iowa Falls station. All buildings are numbered from east to west; that is, numbers originate with the IC line's origin in Chicago and get larger as the buildings get farther away.

The first floor was once used for offices and appears to be storage space at present. The second floor is the control room, as its many windows attest. Interior walls and ceilings are covered with false-bead tongue-in-groove boards, and the floors are hardwood. The key feature of the tower has always been the original electric control board sitting in the middle of the room. The board is still used today, and according to railroad employees has had no alterations.

Since Mills Tower electrically controls a number of switches the tower has three power poles around it. Wires run from the tower over the tracks to the line of poles running along the north side of the IC line. A large metal train order signal stands right next to the building, on the north side. Next to the tracks and just west of the crossing diamond is a smaller metal pole with two slender metal hoops. Train orders for the next segment of track were (and perhaps still are) tied loosely to the hoops so the engineer could grasp the papers with his hand while the train slowed down for the crossing. The historic electrical equipment, train order signal and train order hoops are all included in the district.

To the west of Mills Tower are five other Illinois Central railroad yard buildings, three of which are included in this nomination. These are:

**B. Coal House, c. 1945.** Non-contributing due to age. Building \* 1476. One-story, rectangular, one-bay gablefront facing north. Concrete foundation, drop-sided walls, asphalt-shingled gable roof. Short central entry with small coal door overhead. (Basis for date of construction is visual guess.)

**C. Outhouse, c. 1976.** Non-contributing due to age. Building \* 1477. One-story, rectangular, one-bay eavefront facing east. No foundation, drop-sided walls, asphalt-

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 3

---

shingled gable roof. Central entry. This structure is portable, and was moved to this location after 1976 (James Beranek, 1976 sketch map of site).

**D. Signal Maintainers and Supply House, c. 1912.** Contributing. Building # 1478 is a one-story, rectangular, three by one-bay structure facing north. It has a concrete foundation, clapboard siding, and hipped roof with asphalt shingles. The center-bay entry has a window to the east; to the west are hinged double doors for storage of a track speeder (hand car). Windows are on the building's east and west ends. Fenestration consists of assorted 6/6 and 4/6 double hung-wood sash. Doors are exterior-braced with panels of diagonal, false-bead tongue-in-groove boards beneath. Door and window surrounds are simple boards with a single bead in the lintels. A stove pipe rises from south roofslope near ridgeline. The half-story shed attached to southeast corner contains kerosene drums.

The east end of building was an "office" for the switchtender; the west end was his supply room. Rails for a trackspeeder run from the supply room to the main track at a 90-degree angle. This building is now used as a tool shed. Another signal maintainers & supply house (Survey number 42-13C) in Ackley is nearly identical to this. (CCP has a standard building plan for these structures in its building files; it is drawing # A-371, File # 24, drawn by J. A. Taggert, and dated March 1912.)

This structure is related in function and time period to Mills Tower, but is not directly associated with the tower. The signal maintainers & supply building, like Mills Tower, was designed to house switches but it served mainly as a storage/office for the switchtender, whereas the tower actually controls switches. The signal maintainers and supply house is near the tower because the IC's general rail yard is here; it is not a support building for the tower, and has nothing to do with the functioning of Mills Tower.

**D. Oil House, c. 1945.** Non-contributing due to age. Building # 1479 lies across the tracks from, and to the west of, the signal maintainer's house. It is one-story, rectangular, one by one-bay, gablefront. It has no foundation, false-bevel drop siding, and rolled asphalt roofing. A hinged double door entry in the south gable end is off-center; a small shuttered opening on the west side is the only other opening. (The construction date for this structure is based on visual guess.)

**E. Tool House, c. 1945.** Non-contributing due to age. Building # 1480 also lies to the west of the signal maintainer's house, across the tracks. A set of hand car (or track speeder) rails separates the tool house from the oil house. It is one-story, L-shaped, four by one-bay. It rests on ties, has drop siding and an asphalt shingled, gable roof. The eastern gablefront half is for hand car storage, while the western half is the

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 4

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sectionman's office and tool room. A brick stove chimney is at the roof ridge of this ell. (The construction date for this building is based on visual guess.)

Mills Tower and the five buildings immediately west of it possess nearly all of their historic integrity. There are no apparent modifications to the outbuildings, other than the application of the standard Illinois Central gun-metal grey paint to the signal maintainers and supply house. No substantial changes have been made to the tower's exterior. The only alterations appear to be newer doors and stairway; the tower's interior looks intact.\* All modifications have been made by the IC or by its successor, the Chicago Central & Pacific Railroad. [The CCP purchased all of the IC's Iowa mileage in 1985.] CCP employees refer to the tower as a "relic" and a "fossil." The tower is in danger of being replaced with an automatic interlocker, as CCP plans a series of cost-cutting moves including a reduction of employees. As a part of the reduction, the company "is taking steps toward closing Mills Tower in Iowa Falls, to which [the] CNW will undoubtedly be receptive" (The Mixed Train, p. 13). Since the building is in good condition it could be easily restored to its original appearance and adapted to some other use.

\* After a search among the building plans located in the Chicago, Central & Pacific offices in Waterloo, no plans for Mills Tower or any other wooden towers were found. No historic photographs are known to exist of the tower. The historic floor plan and appearance of the structure are unknown, though it does not seem to have been modified.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

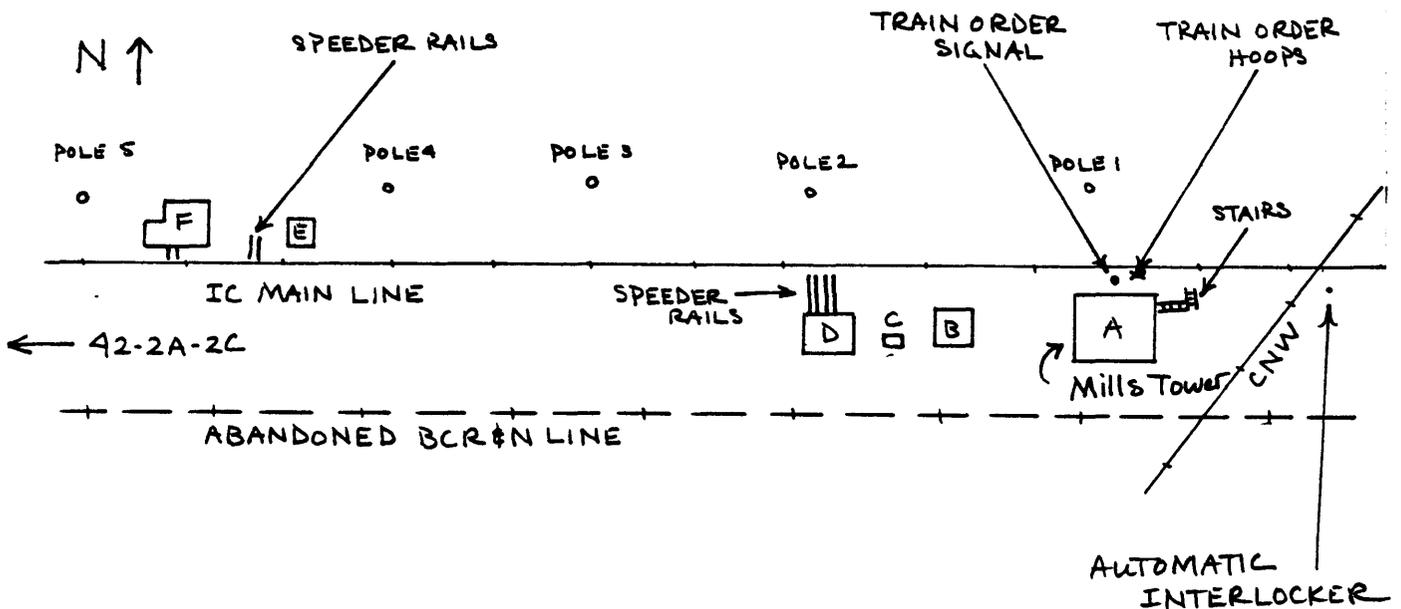
# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 5

CFN-259-1116

Mills Tower Historic District  
E. Rocksylvania, Iowa Falls, Iowa

SKTECH MAP OF BUILDINGS IN DISTRICT



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 1

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### **INTRODUCTION:**

Mills Tower is a good example of the second generation utilitarian support structures the Illinois Central built between the 1880s and 1930s to control traffic along their lines (MPD, "The Golden Age of Steam Railroading: c. 1890-c. 1920" and "The Illinois Central, A Line Study: 1855-1940s"), and is significant under Criterion C. Its clapboard siding and original equipment are indications that it belongs to the second generation. The c. 1912 signal maintainers and supply house is another example of the IC's utilitarian second generation buildings. For this reason it too is significant under Criterion C, and is a contributing building in the Mills Tower district.

Mills Tower is also the only interlocking tower left in Iowa, out of nearly seventy in operation at various times and places. Since the 1880s Iowa has been criss-crossed with main lines of several large railroads, and interlocking towers at major junctions, along with those in the biggest switching yards, once dotted the state. Technological improvements and the general atrophy of the railroad business together have produced a more centralized dispatching and signalling system than before, rendering "manned" interlocking towers obsolete. Five other towers exist in the state, but Mills is the only interlocker left.

Mills Tower is also locally significant under Criterion A, since it is one of the last physical reminders of the events that led to the state's only major north-south passenger line, the "Spine Line." Its existence stems directly from the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad's desire to link Minneapolis-St. Paul to Kansas City during the height of the golden age of steam railroading in Iowa (MPD, "The Golden Age of Steam Railroading: c. 1890-c. 1920").

### **BACKGROUND:**

The story of Mills Tower really begins long before its c. 1909 construction date. In 1866 the Dubuque & Sioux City Railroad, an affiliate of the Illinois Central, laid its rails into Iowa Falls. One year later the Iowa Falls & Sioux City, a separate company but still associated with the Illinois Central, took up where the DSC left off and by 1870 the western arm of the IC did indeed extend to Sioux City. For the next fourteen years the IC enjoyed a monopoly on traffic through Iowa Falls.

Enter the Burlington, Cedar Rapids & Northern. In 1880 an affiliate of that company, the Cedar Rapids, Iowa Falls & North Western entered Iowa Falls. Two years later the CRIFNW expanded its line to Estherville, intersecting the IC's main line in the process, which required a controlled crossing. Iowa Falls Junction was the crossing created in 1882; it was located somewhere west of Mills Tower, between the tower and the Illinois Central freight house. "Little is known about this first crossing, but since both lines

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 2

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had Main Line status, it is doubtless that in time some sort of tower was established" (Pitsch, p. 1). [The old grade and tower foundation are indiscernible on the ground.]

The railroad map in Iowa Falls grew even more complicated in 1899 when E. S. Ellsworth, a prominent Iowa Falls citizen and founder of Ellsworth College, organized the Des Moines Iowa Falls & Northern with the assistance of Rock Island bankers George P. Fernald and Co. in Boston. It is likely that Ellsworth wanted to link Iowa Falls to the state capital, and the RI wanted a direct route between the grain and flour milling centers of Kansas City and St. Paul, into which the DMIFN fit nicely. Corporate headquarters of the little road were in Iowa Falls and the Globe Construction Company, E. O. Ellsworth president, contracted to lay the tracks and erect the depots. Construction commenced in May 1901 and the line opened to traffic in August 1903. Because it was a small, 70-mile railroad the DMIFN was soon dubbed "the Short Line."

In 1903 the Rock Island purchased the BCRN, including the trackage of the old CRIFNW which the BCRN had just purchased itself in 1902. The assumption of the BCRN mileage gave the RI access to the agricultural areas of Northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota but was not convenient with the Kansas City-St. Paul route. Therefore, in 1905, the company incorporated the St. Paul & Des Moines Railroad to acquire the DMIFN and continue the line to St. Paul. Ellsworth's "Short Line" was finally deeded to the new company in 1908. Within the year crews laid tracks to Clear Lake Junction, near Mason City, from which point the RI pieced together a road to take it northward into St. Paul.

The DMIFN had been using the Illinois Central bridge over the Iowa River but when the St. Paul & Des Moines connected the two cities in 1909, it was clear that the RI subsidiary required its own Iowa River span. Accordingly in 1909 the SPDM erected a bridge just south of the IC's. The completion of the road and the bridge created a whole new IC-RI crossing. The old BCRN route through Iowa Falls became the RI's secondary route compared to the new Des Moines-St. Paul route, and since more traffic now crossed the IC main line just east of the existing Iowa Falls Junction that tower was unnecessary.

Mills Tower probably replaced Iowa Falls Junction in 1909, although no actual construction date is known. Railroad etiquette generally specifies that the senior road (the first one there) may opt to build the interlocking tower at a crossing or instruct the junior road to do so. Senior roads tended to let junior roads build and maintain towers, since most companies were reluctant to incur unnecessary costs. Mills Tower is unusual because in this case, the Illinois Central elected to build and maintain the tower, charging the late-coming Rock Island subsidiary a fee for its expenses. Feeling the pressure of "invasion" by the Rock Island-supported companies, it may have chosen to build the tower in order to retain its hold of traffic through and generated by Iowa Falls.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 3

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Unlike the first tower, which "was doubtless of the 'Armstrong' variety" (having manually-operated levers) Mills Tower employed electrically-operated levers (Pitsch, p. 1).<sup>\*</sup> The Illinois Central's first such interlocking tower was installed in Rockford, Illinois, in 1889 and by 1909 electric control boards and switch levers were probably standard equipment for interlocking towers. These towers were almost always two stories tall, with windows all around the second floor, and of either frame or brick construction. Hipped roofs seem to be common. Brick towers were likely newer than wooden ones. (Further assessments of Mills Tower are complicated by the fact that no other interlocking towers remain in Iowa for comparison.)

Mills governed the switches in the IC yard west of the tower as well as the older Rock Island (BCRN) crossing with the IC. Because of Mills Tower, there is no signal at the Illinois Central's Iowa Falls depot and its trackside bay window is more decorative than functional; trains only stopped at the depot if they were passenger trains. Mills probably also operated the switches along a portion of the IC main line east and west of Iowa Falls. It may, too, have been responsible for the switch at the interchange between the new RI and the old RI (BCRN) interchange south of the tower.

The signal maintainers and supply house was built shortly after Mills Tower, c. 1912. Its function was similar to Mills Tower, housing a switchtender and his signalling equipment, and represents the same architectural period and building techniques that Mills Tower does, but it is not a support building for the tower. The two structures are related by time period and building type, but there is no direct association between them. This building was a typical railroad yard building, and is included in this nomination by virtue of its age and proximity to the tower; it exists independent of the tower. Another IC signal maintainers and supply house is located in Ackley; it is nearly identical to this one, and bears evidence of the old red and gold Illinois Central paint scheme.

A new company, the St. Paul & Kansas City Short Line Railroad, was "incorporated in the interest of the Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific" to purchase the St. Paul & Des Moines in 1911. The final step occurred in September 1913 with the advent of "through service, in conjunction with the CRI&P...between the Twin Cities and Kansas City." In November of that year the company was leased to the Rock Island, and thereafter the line was totally operated by the RI. The company's investment in this line via Iowa

\* The only manually operated tower left in the state is a c. 1940 tower in Dubuque which governs street crossings over the Chicago, Central & Pacific tracks and the Milwaukee (now the Soo Line) tracks. Unlike Mills, which controls rail traffic, this tower is a crossing tower, which controls automobile-rail intersections only.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

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Falls soon proved a profitable one since it became "the backbone of Iowa's only major north-south passenger route" (Bryant). Because of this, the line's nickname eventually evolved from the "Short Line" into the "Spine Line." The SPKCSL was finally purchased outright by the Rock Island in 1948, and Rock Island passenger trains rolled past Mills Tower until the 1960s.

Since that time only freight trains ramble by the tower, on both the IC and RI tracks. The Chicago & North Western acquired the Spine Line from the bankrupt Rock Island in the early '80s; the Chicago Central & Pacific bought the Illinois Central's main line, among others, in 1985, and these two railroads are now operators of the lines controlled by Mills Tower. Interestingly, the junction here is still called the Illinois Central-Rock Island crossing although it is now used by the CNW and the CCP, a common practice in the railroad business.

The original BCRN tracks were abandoned in 1985 so Mills Tower is now primarily responsible for the crossing and CCP yard traffic. Both railroads stationed their dispatchers at more centrally located places in their systems between the 1960s and 1980s because communications and signalling systems became more sophisticated, and railroad business declined. Switches are now computer-controlled by one dispatcher per division or by train crews in radio communication with the dispatcher. Mills Tower is an antique in the modern world of railroad signalling, but since the junction handles several trains a day and is located midway between division points the tower still serves a purpose.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Mills Tower is a good example of the buildings railroads constructed to control inter-railroad traffic at major junctions, but it is also unusual in that the senior rather than the junior railroad built and maintained the tower. The tower is still operational because the CCP continues to govern switches from its control room, but also because the rail company is probably unable to afford demolition of the tower and replacement with an automatic interlocker. Mills Tower is a typical yet atypical representative of the signalling systems Iowa railroads once used to regulate traffic. It is one of the last representatives of the events leading to the rise of the state's only major north-south passenger line. Today Mills Tower reigns as the last interlocking tower still standing in Iowa, but most important is the feeling of an earlier period in Iowa railroad history that the tower invokes in those who see it in command of the Illinois Central-Rock Island junction.



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9 Page 1

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Berg, Walter G. Buildings and Structures of American Railroads. New York: John Willey and Sons, 1893, p. 39-40.

Bryant, Ray L. A Preliminary Guide to Iowa Railroads 1850-1972. Bryant, 1984.

Corliss, Carlton J. Main Line of Mid-America, The Story of the Illinois Central. New York: Creative Age Press, 1950.

Nichols, I. A. History of Iowa Falls, 1900-1950. Iowa Falls: Hecht Printing Co., 1956, pp. 24-30.

"Northwestern Lines." The Mixed Train Spring 1988, p. 13.

Pitsch, Nicholas L. "A Short History of Mills Tower and Vicinity." Unpublished manuscript, October 1, 1989.

Switchlamp. Volume No. 6, 1987.

Wiley, Debora. "Waiting and Watching." Des Moines Register May 19, 1990.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10 Page 1

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**Verbal Boundary Description:** Mills Tower Historic District is a rectangle measuring 600' by 130', and with the following boundaries:

Beginning at the automatic interlocker 10' southeast of the CCP-CNW crossing diamond, and running south 60';

Thence west, paralleling the CCP tracks, for a distance of 600';

Thence north 130' to the telephone line on the north side of the CCP tracks;

Thence east 600' following the line of telephone poles and paralleling the CCP tracks;

Thence south 70' to the point of beginning.

(The southern boundary of the district lies 26' south of the south elevation of Mills Tower, and the western boundary lies 40' west of the tool house (F).

**Boundary Justification:**

This nomination includes Mills Tower (A) and its related train order signal and train order hoops, and the five outbuildings (B-F) west of Mills Tower mentioned in Section 7. It includes all hand car (track speeder) rails extending away from the main CCP track and the mainline tracks.