

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determination for individual properties and districts. See instruction 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 Bluebird Theater

other names/site number Blue Bird Theater; Thompson Theater; 5DV4519

### 2. Location

street & number 3315-3317 E. Colfax Avenue [N/A] not for publication

city or town Denver [N/A] vicinity

state Colorado code CO county Denver code 031 zip code 80206

### 3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this [X] 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 [X] meets [ ] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [ ] nationally [ ] statewide [X] locally.  
( See continuation sheet for additional comments [ ].)

[Signature] State Historic Preservation Officer December 24, 1996  
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or 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:

[V] 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  
See continuation sheet [ ].

for  
Signature of the keeper Date  
Edson H. Beall 1.31.97

Bluebird Theater  
Name of Property

Denver, CO  
County/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 count previously listed resources.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1	0	buildings
0	0	sites
0	0	structures
0	0	objects
1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing.

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

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register.

0

6. Function or Use

Historic Function  
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

Current Functions  
(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater

7. Description

Architectural Classification  
(Enter categories from instructions)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY  
AMERICAN MOVEMENTS

Materials  
(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK  
walls BRICK  
roof ASPHALT  
other TERRA COTTA

Narrative Description

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

Bluebird Theater  
**Name of Property**

Denver, CO  
**County/State**

## 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.

### Narrative Statement of Significance

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

## 9. Major Bibliographic 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

# \_\_\_\_\_

### Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

ARCHITECTURE

### Periods of Significance

1914 - 1945

### Significant Dates

N/A

### Significant Person(s)

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above).

Huffman, Harry

### Cultural Affiliation

N/A

### Architect/Builder

Edbrooke, Harry W.J.

### Primary location of additional data:

State Historic Preservation Office

Other State Agency

Federal Agency

Local Government

University

Other:

Name of repository:

Colorado Historical Society

Denver Public Library

Bluebird Theater  
Name of Property

Denver, CO  
County/State

## 10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

### UTM References

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

1. Zone 13 Easting 504480 Northing 4398740      2. Zone      Easting      Northing

3. Zone      Easting      Northing      4. Zone      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 Margot Wright

organization Bluebird Theater date 12/9/1994

street & number 1633 York Street telephone 303-333-7749

city or town Denver state Colorado zip code 80206

### 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 Christopher Swank, Bluebird Restoration Corporation

street & number 1633 York Street telephone 303-333-7749

city or town Denver state Colorado zip code 80206

**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.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 1

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

### DESCRIPTION

The Bluebird Theater is a two-story, rectangular plan, 45 ft. x 100 ft., flat roofed, brick building located mid-block on the north side of E. Colfax Ave. between Adams and Cook Streets. The theater fronts south onto Colfax, is bordered on the east by an alley, on the west by a narrow pedestrian walkway and on the north by a one-story garage. The area on Colfax around the theater is composed largely of one-story commercial storefronts, most dating from the first half of the 20th century. Mainly single-family residences fill the two block area to the north which terminates at City Park. The east, north and west theater facades are of red brick and nearly devoid of fenestration. The Colfax Avenue facade is of light tan brick with bronze brick and terra cotta accents. The symmetrical facade is divided into three bays by brick pilasters with terra cotta capitals. The first-story end bays contain small storefronts consisting of a single, slightly recessed glazed door, a small display window, and a glazed advertising case. The center bay contains two, glazed, theater entry doors flanking two tall, narrow display windows. The outside bays on the upper-story each contain two one-over-one wood sash windows with stained glass in the upper light. The middle bay contains four one-over-one wood sash windows. The facade is topped by a small decorative terra cotta cornice with four evenly spaced terra cotta finials with flame-shaped light globes. A large, lighted marquee extends over the theater entry. The interior contains a front lobby area which opens onto a terraced main floor stepping down to a raised stage. Stairs rise from each side of the lobby to provide access to the balcony. Original interior designs and materials include entry mosaic tile; balcony stairs, balustrades, and film projection booth; decorative wall murals; lighted wall sconces; and pilasters with decorative plaster capitals.

The mid-block location of the Bluebird eliminated the necessity of designing decorative side and rear elevations. These elevations are of red brick except for the Colfax Ave. end of the walls where the light tan bricks of the facade wrap around the corner for a distance of approximately 12 feet. The east elevation contains three grade level entrances; two second-story windows with brick sills and two second-story recessed ventilation grates, also with brick sills. The brick walls extend above the roof to form a parapet wall capped with brick coping. The terra cotta cornice from the south facade wraps around the first 12 feet of the elevation. The light tan pilaster which delineates this southern-most bay is topped by a terra cotta finial with a flame-shaped light globe. The west elevation is nearly a mirror image of the east with the exception of a brick chimney which rises from the parapet wall at the northern-most corner. The north (rear) elevation is a solid brick wall without fenestration. A one-story garage from the adjoining property to the north abuts the wall.

The south (Colfax Ave.) facade is predominantly of light tan brick with accents provided by bronze brick and blonde terra cotta. The bronze brick is used to accent the vertical courses in the pilasters, in the corners of the spandrels below the second-story windows, and in the panels

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 7 Page 2

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

below the cornice. The cornice is of glazed blonde terra cotta in a paneled pattern along the fascia and a delicate leaf pattern along the soffit. Four evenly spaced terra cotta finials accent the cornice top and support flame-shaped light globes.

Additional facade accent is achieved through the use of stained glass in the upper light of the second-story one-over-one sash windows. The diamond pattern is not original to the building but was installed in 1994 as a replacement for the historic stained glass.

The facade also contains a large, lighted theater marquee which extends from below the middle bay of second-story windows out over the sidewalk above the main entry. The marquee contains large sign boards visible from the east and west along Colfax Ave. The sign boards are topped with the word "Bluebird" written in script and outlined in blue neon. A string of flashing lights emanates at the front top of the marquee and flows along the bottom of the sign and across the full width of the facade.

The appearance of the facade is currently quit close to the original. During the 1970s most of the facade was covered with new materials when the theater featured adult films. The upper-story windows were covered by wood panels. The first-story area was completely covered by vertical wood siding, aluminum theater doors and flanking modern picture windows. A small wood-shingled mansard roof divided the width of the facade. Dark brown paint covered all the exposed facade brick.

In 1994, a Federal Investment Tax Credit project reversed most of the 1970s alterations. Removal of the modern materials revealed a largely intact, though deteriorated, facade. The brown paint was removed chemically from the brick. The preservation of other original materials and the restoration of some missing elements based on historic photographs resulted in the current appearance of the facade.

The interior consists of an entrance lobby with flanking ticket office and restrooms in the former storefront space. The entry mosaic tile is believed to be original. The theater space was terraced in 1994 to accommodate table seating. The upper terrace contains a large bar area and two restrooms. The theater floor steps down to an enlarged stage which covers the area formerly containing a small orchestra pit and now filled by a walk-in beer cooler. The original proscenium arch remains and is decorated with an elaborate fresco containing several dancing cherubs and the original theater owner's initials—"J.T." (for John Thompson). The balcony is accessed by stairs from both sides of the lobby. The original balcony chairs were replaced in 1994 with reupholstered chairs from the Beth Ha Medrosh Hagodol Synagogue in Denver. The balcony retains its original theater seating, brass railing, and stairway balustrades. The historic movie projection room remains. The former men's restroom is now a coffee bar and the women's lounge was completely upgraded.

The modern acoustical wall draperies were removed as part of the rehabilitation project and the plaster walls repaired. A faux marble treatment was applied to the side wall pilasters and the plaster capitals were repaired. The existing highly decorative lighted wall sconces with the face of comedy were repaired and preserved. Several existing wall murals were restored. The murals are

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 7 Page 3

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

located to the sides of the stage and in the balcony stairwells. An additional mural on the rear wall on the balcony was covered with plaster.

The building retains sufficient integrity, particularly on the exterior, to convey its historical and architectural significance.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 4

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

### SIGNIFICANCE

The Bluebird Theater is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A in the area of recreation and entertainment for its association with the early history of movie theaters in Denver. The 1914 Bluebird was the first Denver Theater designed specifically for the exhibition of movies. The theater is eligible under Criterion B for its association with premier movie theater owner and promoter Harry Huffman. Huffman acquired the Bluebird to begin the city's first and largest locally owned chain of movie theaters. The theater is also eligible under Criterion C for its architectural significance as the first theater designed by master Denver architect, Harry W.J. Edbrooke. The theater represents the first of what would become a discernable type of entertainment venue, the neighborhood movie theater.

### **Brief History of Neighborhood Theaters in Denver and the Bluebird Theater.**

Before 1910, most of Denver's movie and vaudeville theaters were downtown, on or near Curtis Street, then known as Theater Row. These theaters hosted operas, nickelodeons, stock theater, vaudeville acts and various other forms of live entertainment. By the 1920s newsreels and multi-reel motion pictures were attracting growing crowds of theater goers. Movies were on their way to becoming big business. As the movie business expanded, so did theater locations. Several theaters opened along or near East Colfax Avenue, Denver's premier commercial corridor. In addition to the Bluebird, these theaters included the Colfax, at 710 East Colfax; the Seventeenth Avenue, at 1231 East 17th Avenue; the York, at 2221 East Colfax; and the Ogden, at 935 E. Colfax Avenue.<sup>1</sup> Of all these, only the Bluebird and the Ogden survive.

The Bluebird Theater has been an integral part in the development of the Capitol Hill, Congress Park and City Park neighborhoods, and continues to mirror their history. The Bluebird was the first neighborhood theater to be built specifically to show movies. In fact, it was the first theater in all of Denver designed and built solely to exhibit movies. From its opening in 1914 through the 1920s, the theater attracted audiences from a wide area for its playbill of second-run films.<sup>2</sup>

The theater is associated with an era when the automobile was a minor factor in the living patterns of urban dwellers. It was built with little regard for automobile parking. Neither the Chicago-born architect, Harry W.J. Edbrooke, nor the theater's first owner, John Thompson, recognized back in 1913-14 the huge impact cars would eventually make on urban living patterns. East Colfax Avenue was a major streetcar line when the Bluebird first opened its doors.

---

<sup>1</sup> Forrest H. Johnson. *Denver's Old Theater Row*. Denver: B. Lay Litho, 1970, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Goodstein. *Denver's Capitol Hill*. Denver: Stuart McPhail Publications, 1988, p. 111.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 5

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

During the 1930s, as more and more theaters were built in Denver, the Bluebird focused on playing second-run films which catered to a neighborhood audience. Films began their Denver engagements in the major downtown theaters and moved to the smaller neighborhood theaters as audiences thinned. Many of the Bluebird patrons were local residents who usually walked to the theater from their homes.

The 1930s were also the decade of the Great Depression. During these financially tough years motion picture houses strove to provide escape from the normal trials of life compounded by the economic depression.<sup>3</sup>

Ralph Batschelet, then manager of the Bluebird, created a number of promotions to maintain the Bluebird's audiences.<sup>4</sup> While moderately successful, they were not filling the theater. So Batschelet focused his promotional skill on the most fundamental concerns of his audience: food, clothing and other items of everyday household use. He called the promotion the Deluxe County Store Giveaway. Essentially, it was a raffle, to which Batschelet found a way to give a color of legality, something that turned out to be crucial in the development of Bank Nights.<sup>5</sup> Although giveaways and raffles had been used in movie theaters occasionally, the Bluebird country store idea worked so spectacularly well that variations of it were used throughout the Harry Huffman chain of theaters of which the Bluebird was a part.<sup>6</sup> The Bluebird type of giveaway was a successful part of the national movement of theater Bank Nights which trace their beginnings to the Egyptian Theater in Delta, Colorado. Bank Night-type promotions became such an important part of the image of movie theaters in American popular culture that it helped transform film from an art medium to a mass medium.<sup>7</sup>

The connection between the Deluxe County Store Giveaways and Bank Nights is direct. Chuck Yeager, a manager of a few theaters in Huffman's chain, often found himself harried because of all the theaters for which he was responsible. On one occasion, Yeager was short on time to solicit prizes for the giveaway, so he put up a relatively small amount of cash from the funds of the theater. To his surprise, the cash night drew a larger audience than had nights featuring merchandise. Somewhat cautiously, he tried it again the next month, and the cash once again drew the biggest audiences of the month. As a consequence, Bank Nights became a regular feature of the Huffman theaters. This type of promotion continued for 613 weeks at the Bluebird, long after the technique ceased to be used in much of the country.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Thomas J. Noel and Barbara S. Norgren. *Denver, the City Beautiful*. Denver: Historic Denver, Inc., 1987, p. 130.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Batschelet. *The Flick and I*. Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1981, p. 13, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Batschelet, p.11.

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. McElwaine. \_\_\_\_\_ New York: Times Books, 1984, p.208.

<sup>7</sup> Batschelet, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *The War Bond Program*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Treasury, 1947.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 6

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

In the early 1940s, the Bluebird was part of a national movement again, this time in connection with another mass phenomenon prominent in the nation's history—the sale of War Bonds. War bonds were essentially very small U.S. government obligations with long maturity dates. The bonds were issued to help fund the war effort and to keep domestic inflation in check. The program was introduced in an era when national policy was oriented strongly in damping the demand for consumer goods in order to devote the production capacity of the economy to war materials. In essence, the War Bond program of World War II was designed to persuade American consumers to tax themselves voluntarily. The effort to market the bonds called for promotional skills and federal officials tried numerous ways to enlist people with such skills. In one of the earliest such efforts, theaters in Huffman's chain were invited to compete on the basis of the number of bonds sold per seat. The Bluebird was the winner with 13 bonds sold per seat.<sup>9</sup>

The neighborhood around the Bluebird prospered in the late 1940s and 1950s. During the 1960s, the surrounding neighborhood began a long economic decline as original and long term residents of the homes were replaced by new owners and renters. The Bluebird became simply a house which showed second-run films at discount prices. Maintenance of the theater was deferred, and it suffered from hard use by increasing numbers of children and adolescents.

In the latter part of the 1960s, an attempt was made to use the Bluebird as an arts theater, but various factors, including a growing mistrust of the neighborhood by outsiders, caused that attempt to sour financially. In the 1970s, the theater showed sexually explicit films.<sup>10</sup>

Revival of the area began in the 1970s with the formation of Capitol Hill United Neighborhoods (CHUN) and the election of Cathy Donohue to the City Council, where she became very responsive to neighborhood concerns expressed through CHUN. The Bluebird's XXX rated film programming was one of CHUN's early targets, and the theater attracted many civic and religious protests as well.

The Bluebird's closure in 1987 was occasioned by the financial failure of its owner in an unrelated real estate project.<sup>11</sup> The reopening of the theater, featuring high quality arts and live entertainment parallels and signalizes the changed status of the surrounding neighborhood. The newest residents are typically quite young families with children, with high levels of educational achievement and professional or technical occupations. Thus, in providing a home for this type of entertainment and recreation, the Bluebird continues to reflect the history of the East Colfax

---

<sup>9</sup> Dwyer reminiscence, January, 1994.

<sup>10</sup> "History," Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist, Denver, undated, p.5.

<sup>11</sup> David Naylor, *American Picture Palaces, the Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1981.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 7

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

Avenue neighborhoods. With the new renovations and improvements to the theater and the surrounding area, the Bluebird should return to its former popularity and success.

### Harry Huffman and the Bluebird Theater

The theater's second owner, Harry Huffman became the most powerful single voice in the development of popular entertainment and culture in Denver during the first-half of the 20th century. Huffman began his long business career as a registered pharmacist. He and his wife operated a drugstore on West Colfax. After viewing his first motion picture, Huffman realized that movies were going to become a popular and permanent fixture in American culture. In hopes of drawing attention to his drugstore, Huffman purchased the Bide-a-Wee Theater, located next door to the drugstore. The Bide-a-Wee (now demolished) began as a nickelodeon theater. Huffman so integrated the theater into his drugstore operation that for many years his clerks were required to sing parts in the silent films shown at the theater.

Huffman enjoyed the success which came with the operation of the Bide-a-Wee and began looking for additional movie interests. The first movie theater he acquired was the Thompson Theater which he purchased from a successful grocer named John Thompson in the spring of 1921. Huffman renamed it the Bluebird (for several years the name was spelled as two word-- Blue Bird). The Bluebird was the theater that put Huffman into the chain movie theater business, even though it was only a two unit chain. Following the Bluebird acquisition, Huffman withdrew from active management of the drugstore and devoted himself to his movie interests. Many movie theaters were built in Denver between 1925 and 1930,<sup>12</sup> and the future theater magnate slowly gained controlling interest in two additional movie theaters before building his own majestic Aladdin Theater on East Colfax, not far from the Bluebird. Huffman built the Aladdin Theater in 1926 as the nation's first theater to be awarded a contract to display talking movies with the Vitaphone sound system. Though three theaters in the nation actually used the system before construction on the Aladdin was complete, the Aladdin was Denver's first theater to feature talking movies.<sup>13</sup> The ornate theater was apparently modeled after the Taj Mahal. It was torn down in 1984, despite protests from various neighborhood groups.

By 1933, Huffman, known to some as the "Sid Grauman of Denver,"<sup>14</sup> operated a chain of seven Denver theaters: the Bide-a-Wee, Bluebird, Aladdin, America, Colorado, Rialto, and the Orpheum. In the same year, Huffman formed Broadway Amusement Enterprises, Inc. with

---

<sup>12</sup> Steve Massing, ed. *The Aladdin Theater: an inventory of the papers of Harry E. Huffman (1883-1969)*, Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1991, p.2.

<sup>13</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, June 18, 1933, p.7.

<sup>14</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, June 18, 1933, p.7.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 8

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

partners Arthur Jacobson and Harold Wilbur.<sup>15</sup> Only four years later, Huffman owned or managed the Broadway, Denver, Paramount, Rialto, Bluebird, Aladdin, Orpheum, Tabor and Bide-a-Wee theaters simultaneously.<sup>16</sup> In that same year, Huffman, a man of "vision and unusual business acumen,"<sup>17</sup> merged the seven theaters he owned with five Fox theaters in Colorado to create the Fox-Intermountain Theaters where he served as General Manager until his retirement in 1950.<sup>18</sup> According to Hal Davis, a Colfax merchant who knew Huffman well, the Bluebird remained the "apple of his eye."<sup>19</sup>

At one time or another, Huffman was the owner of most of Denver's major movie theaters, radio station KLZ and one of Denver's first commercial television stations (KLZ-TV, now known as KMGH Channel 7)<sup>20</sup> which began broadcasting in 1953 under the ownership of the Aladdin Radio and Television Company. Huffman was a principal investor and chaired the Aladdin Co. His personality and tastes left a wide mark on the character of the city's popular entertainment from the 1920s to the 1960s.

Huffman's involvement extended beyond Denver's entertainment scene. In 1930 Huffman was named to the Board of Directors of the American National Bank. During World War II he served on Governor John Vivian's Committee for Public Health and was specifically influential in educating the public on eye problems. Huffman himself suffered from glaucoma. Huffman served as President of the Denver Aviation and Vacation Exposition and was a founding member of the Denver Convention and Visitors Bureau and served as its president for 13 years.<sup>21</sup> Needless to say, Huffman's influence was felt throughout the Rocky Mountain West.

### Architectural Significance

Denver's Bluebird was designed by Harry W.J. Edbrooke in 1914. Edbrooke (1873-1946) was born in Chicago, joining a family of well-known architects. His father, Willoughby, and uncles, Frank and George, were all architects. Among his numerous accomplishments, Willoughby designed prominent buildings at Notre Dame University, the old Washington D.C. Post Office, and others. He designed the Tabor Block at 16th and Larimer Streets in Denver and the Tabor Opera

---

<sup>15</sup> "Ancient and Holy Things Fade Into the Splendor Harry Huffman Brings to Denver Theaters," *Rocky Mountain News*, center spread of the rotogravure section, 1934, date uncertain. From the Huffman Collection, Stephen Hart Library, Colorado Historical Society.

<sup>16</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, 1933, p.7.

<sup>17</sup> *Rocky Mountain News*, July 3, 1949, p.4.

<sup>18</sup> Hal Davis, interviewed December, 1993.

<sup>19</sup> Massing, p.4.

<sup>20</sup> Massings, p.3.

<sup>21</sup> Noel and Norgren, p.196.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 9

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

House at 16th and Curtis Streets, the latter described as the finest building for theater purposes in the country. His uncle, Frank E. Edbrooke, came to Denver to supervise the opera house construction and went on to become one of Denver's most highly acclaimed architects.<sup>22</sup>

After attending the University of Illinois for two years, Harry continued his education at the Armour Institute of Technology where he mastered the rudiments of architecture, graduating in 1898. He worked as a draftsman for architects William K. Fellows and Howard Van Doren Shaw in Chicago before opening his own office in 1904. In 1908, his uncle Frank invited him to join in his Denver practice. Harry accepted and stayed until his uncle's retirement in 1913, at which time he established an independent practice.<sup>23</sup> Withey and Withey, in their Biographical Dictionary of American Architects, have credited Harry as the designer of two National Register listed buildings: the First National Bank Building, at 820 17th Street, and the Gas and Electric Building, at 910 15th Street. Noel and Norgren reported in Denver, The City Beautiful, that these structures were built in 1910 and the building permit applications carry the name of Frank E. Edbrooke and Company.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, if Harry had an association with these projects, it was under the aegis of his uncle's firm.

Independently, Harry Edbrooke later designed several buildings in Denver. These include the 1917 Ogden Theatre (National Register); the W.H. Kistler Stationery Store, at 1636 Champa Street; the National Register listed A.T. Lewis Dry Goods Company building, later known as the Denver and Rio Grande Building, at 1531 Stout Street; a country home for John C. Shaffer; and several buildings for Dr. J.H. Tilden's School for Teaching Medicine (National Register).<sup>25</sup> He also designed the Valverde and Adams Street (Harrington) schools, the Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist building, and the Rexall Drug Store (Rainbow Grocery) at East Colfax and York.<sup>26</sup>

Edbrooke, who was a member of the Colorado Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and served for a year as advisory architect to the state of Colorado. Stone's History of Colorado describes Edbrooke as having "...attained eminence in his profession, actuated ever by a laudable ambition that has promoted close study and has led to most desirable results."<sup>27</sup>

The range of architectural styles used in Edbrooke's building designs is fairly eclectic and several examples of his expertise remain on the Denver landscape. He employed late 19th century

---

<sup>22</sup> W.F. Stone, ed., *History of Colorado*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1981, p. 220-222; Noel and Norgren, p. 196.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Henry F. Withey and Elsie Rathburn Withey, *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects Deceased*, Detroit: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1970 (facsimile edition of 1956 printing). p. 189; Noel and Norgren, p. 196.

<sup>25</sup> Stone, p. 220.

<sup>26</sup> Noel and Norgren, p. 196.

<sup>27</sup> Stone, pp. 220-222.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 10

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

forms in the majority of his buildings but also used variations of the Chicago School and Mediterranean Revival. Mediterranean elements are found in the design of the Valverde School and the Rexall Drug Store. Nowhere, however, is affinity for this style more creatively expressed than in the Ogden Theater, where the attention to detail and decor, both on the exterior and interior, is notable.

### Bluebird Theater

In the Bluebird Theater, Edbrooke combined the basic form of a two-story commercial structure adapted to fit the needs of a movie theater. References to earlier vaudeville theaters and nickelodeons may be seen as well as hints of the Art Deco exuberance that maybe theaters would display in the later teens through the 1930s.

The construction of the Bluebird Theater came at an important transition point in the evolution of theater operation. The motion picture had advanced beyond a mere curiosity and was beginning to establish itself as an important entertainment medium. The days of showing movies between vaudeville acts and in vacant storefronts were passing. Movie exhibitors were looking to develop theaters specifically designed for the exhibition of multi-reel film presentations. The Bluebird was the first theater in Denver designed specifically to show movies.

The basic form of the building is rooted in late 19th century commercial storefront design, the original venue for the nickelodeon. However, the original sloped floor indicates an initial intended use as a theater and this is borne out by the building permit approving the construction of a moviehouse.

Edbrooke designed a somewhat eclectic building with references to the recently ended Victorian era, Neo-Classical allusions and hints of the geometric exuberance that would come to characterize the Art Deco. The basic two-story commercial storefront is topped by a fairly typical early 20th century terra cotta cornice. The cornice itself supports several terra cotta urn-like finials which might be considered to be a Victorian decorative touch. Similarly, the stained glass in the second-story facade windows is also associated with Victorian era architecture. Neo-Classicism is represented by the pilasters with Classically inspired capitals that divide the facade into three bays. The use of multi-color brick on the facade suggests the geometric and polychromatic patterning that would come to characterize Art Deco theater design over the next two decades. The eclecticism of the Bluebird Theater represents the transition from the Victorian era of the late 19th century to the Art Deco exuberance of the 1920s and 1930s.

The Bluebird predates the larger exotic movie palaces like Denver's 1930 Paramount Theater. Even when compared to Edbrooke's later movie theater, the 1917 Ogden, the Bluebird is noticeably simpler in style and construction. Its smaller size and lack of exotic references set it apart from later, more elaborate neighborhood theaters, such as the Aladdin (1926) and the Mayan (1930).

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8 Page 11

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

The building shows one feature reflecting the experience of the Edbrooke family in rebuilding Chicago after the city's major fire. The Bluebird is a steel-trussed building with solid masonry walls and ornamentation. There is a minimum of wood used throughout.

The most significant exterior alterations occurred between 1934 and 1937. At that time, the exterior signage was removed, along with the building's crowning Bluebird and the flush mounted decorative torches and were replaced with the present marquee. Later, four of the stained glass windows which appear in the 1933 photo were covered with wood and the entire exterior was painted. During the 1994 restoration, the facade was returned to its appearance at the time the present marquee was added. The neon lighting was repaired and put back in service. The wood frames were removed from the windows and the original designs were restored. The electric lights on top of the building were also restored to working order.

The existing marquee, though not an original feature of the theater, deserves comment for its own architectural significance. It is one of the few remaining blinking, flashing light type theater marquees in the city which remains in operable condition. Apparently, it was put on the building sometime between 1934 and 1937. Huffman put a huge bluebird on top of the building along with its new electrified sign after he purchased it. This decoration was removed no later than 1937, and nothing of it remains. Several photos taken between 1934 and 1942 show the present marquee. A building permit authorizing the sign has not been located. Assuming the late-thirties date is correct, the Bluebird marquee appears to be the oldest of its type on East Colfax.

### Conclusion

The Bluebird Theater was the first building in Capitol Hill built specifically for showing movies and played a leading part in the emerging movie industry. The theater's association with movie theater operator Harry Huffman represents his important contributions to the growth and development of movie theater operation in Denver. The theater's architect, Harry W.J. Edbrooke, was influential in the city's architectural development. The theater's innovative design represents a transition between Late Victorian and Art Deco styles popular during the 1920s and 1930s. The theater also represents the transition of the movie theater from the storefront nickelodeon and vaudeville house to a venue of its own.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 9 Page 12

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Batschelet, Ralph. *The Flick and I*. Smithtown, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1981.
- City and County of Denver. "Landmark Preservation Ordinance, 1992" (as amended).
- Davis, Hal. Interviewed by Margot Wright in December, 1993.
- Dwyer, James. Interviewed by Margot Wright in January, 1994.
- Green, Harvey. *The Uncertainty of Everyday Life, 1915-1945*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Goodstein, Phil. *Denver's Capitol Hill*. Denver: Stuart McPhail Publications, 1988.
- History*. Denver: Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist, undated.
- Johnson, Forrest H. *Denver's Old Theater Row*. Denver: B. Lay Litho, 1970.
- Massing, Steve, ed. "The Aladdin Theater, an inventory of the papers of Harry E. Huffman (1883-1969)." Denver: Colorado Historical Society, 1991.
- Naylor, David. *American Picture Palaces, the Architecture of Fantasy*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1981.
- Noel, Thomas J. and Barbara S. Norgren. *Denver, the City Beautiful*. Denver: Historic Denver, Inc., 1987.
- Photographs and articles from Ralph Batschelet's scrapbook.
- Rocky Mountain News*, Denver.  
June 18, 1933, p.7.  
July 3, 1949, p.4.
- Stone, W.F. *History of Colorado*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1918.
- Tate, Marsha. "Ogden Theatre National Register Nomination." Unpublished, Colorado Historical Society, 1995.
- War Bond Program*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Treasury, 1947.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number 9 & 10 Page 13

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

Withey, Henry F. and Elsie Rathburn Withey. *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased)*. Detroit: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1970 (facsimile edition of 1956 printing).

**GEOGRAPHICAL DATA**

**Verbal Boundary Description**

Easterly fifty feet of Lots 20 to 23 inclusive, Block 18, East Colfax Avenue Park Subdivision, also known as the Bluebird Theater, 3325-2217 East Colfax Avenue, City and County of Denver, Colorado.

**Boundary Justification**

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Bluebird Theater.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Page 14 Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

### PHOTOGRAPH LOG

The following information pertains to photographs numbers 1-12, except as noted:

Name of Property: Bluebird Theater  
Location: Denver County, Colo.  
Photographer: Margot Wright  
Date of Photographs: 12/1/94  
Negatives: Bluebird Restoration Corp., 1633 York St., Denver, CO 80206

<u>Photo No.</u>	<u>Information</u>
1	Interior view of wall mural to left of stage.
2	South (Colfax Ave.) facade, view to the north.
3	Marquee, view to the east.
4	Interior view from balcony, view to the north.
5	Marquee detail, view to the northeast.
6	Second-story window facade detail, view to the north.
7	South (Colfax Ave.) facade, view to the north.
8	Photographer: Dale Heckendorn Date of Photograph: 1/4/96 Negatives: Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 South (Colfax Ave.) facade, view to the northwest.
9	Photographer: Dale Heckendorn Date of Photograph: 1/4/96 Negatives: Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 East elevation, view to the southwest.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Page 15

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

---

<u>Photo No.</u>	<u>Information</u>
10	Photographer: Dale Heckendorn Date of Photograph: 1/4/96 Negatives: Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 East elevation, view to the northwest.
11	Photographer: Dale Heckendorn Date of Photograph: 1/4/96 Negatives: Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 North (rear) elevation, view to the southwest.
12	Photographer: Dale Heckendorn Date of Photograph: 1/4/96 Negatives: Colorado History Museum, 1300 Broadway, Denver, CO 80203 West elevation, view to the east.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Bluebird Theater  
Denver County, Colorado

Section number Additional Documentation Page 16

## USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

Englewood, Colo.  
7.5 Minute Quad  
Photorevised 1980

