

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service
**National Register of Historic Places
Registration Form**

1. Name of Property

historic name Rodgers Theatre Building

other names/site number N/A

2. Location

street & number 204, 214, 216, 218, 220, 222 and 224 N. Broadway [N/A] not for publication

city or town Poplar Bluff [N/A] vicinity

state Missouri code MO county Butler code 023 zip code 63901

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended, I hereby certify that this nomination [] request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property meets [] does not meet the National Register criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant [] nationally [] statewide locally.
(See continuation sheet for additional comments [].)

Claire F. Blackwell 11 June 2001

Signature of certifying official/Title Claire F. Blackwell/Deputy SRPO Date

Missouri Department of Natural Resources
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:

Signature of the Keeper

Date

[] 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 [].

Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

5. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property		
		Contributing	Noncontributing	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	1	0	buildings
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district			
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	0	0	sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	0	0	structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	0	0	objects
		1	0	Total

Name of related multiple property listing.

N/A

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register.

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater
COMMERCE/TRADE: business
COMMERCE/TRADE: specialty store

Current Functions

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theater
COMMERCE/TRADE: business

7. Description

Architectural Classification

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Moderne

MODERN MOVEMENT: Art Deco

Materials

foundation Concrete

walls Brick
Stone

roof Asphalt

other _____

See continuation sheet [x].

See continuation sheet [].

Narrative Description

See continuation sheet [x].

Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

- 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

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

See continuation sheet [x].

Areas of Significance

Architecture

Period of Significance

1949

Significant Dates

1949

Significant Person(s)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Graf, Hugo K.
Stephens, Edgar & Sons

9. Major Bibliographic References

Bibliography

See continuation sheet [x].

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

Primary location of additional data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State Agency
- Federal Agency
- Local Government
- University
- Other:
Name of repository:

Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property less than one acre

UTM References

A. Zone	Easting	Northing	B. Zone	Easting	Northing
15	732700	4070900			

C. Zone	Easting	Northing	D. 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 Becky L. Snider, Ph.D.
 organization Becky L. Snider Consulting LLC date February, 2001
 street & number 507 South Garth Avenue telephone 573-256-1105
 city or town Columbia state Missouri zip code 65203

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 FOP for any additional items)

Property Owner

(Complete this item at the request of SHPO or FOP.)

name Butler County, Missouri c/o John Dunivan, County Clerk
 street & number Butler County Courthouse telephone (573) 686-8050
 city or town Poplar Bluff state MO zip code 63901

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National Park Service

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Summary:

The Rodgers Theatre Building is located on the northeast corner of the intersection of North Broadway Street and Pine Street in downtown Poplar Bluff, Missouri. The large multi-use building contains a theatre and five commercial spaces. The theatre address is 204 North Broadway; the addresses of the attached commercial spaces are 212, 214, 216, 218, 222 and 224 North Broadway. However, several of the commercial spaces have been combined. The building, which opened June 1, 1949, was designed by St. Louis architect Hugo K. Graf and was constructed by Edgar Stephens & Sons, Inc, a general contracting firm based in Cairo, Illinois.

The Rodgers Theatre Building is a three-story brick and concrete commercial building with Art Deco and Art Moderne stylistic elements. The building's main facade is dominated by a large illuminated marquee and glass ziggurat tower set against a colorful background of corrugated metal panels. The interior of the theatre also demonstrates the influence of late modernistic design. The lobby is circular in plan; many interior walls have rounded corners; hallways are curved rather than straight; and the interior detailing includes metal and glass accents.

From 1949 until 1998, the Rodgers Theatre was in continuous use as a movie theatre. It was also used occasionally for live entertainment. However, in 1998, after building a modern multi-screen cinema complex on the outskirts of Poplar Bluff, Kerasotes Theatres, the second owner of the building, decided to close the theatre. Several months later, the company donated the building to Butler County, and a non-profit group was established to restore and manage the building. Although it is in need of restoration, the Rodgers Theatre Building is in excellent structural condition, and it retains much of its original character.

Elaboration

The Rodgers Theatre Building, located at North Broadway Street and Pine Street, occupies a rectangular urban lot in the historic commercial section of Poplar Bluff. The building, which covers the west half of the block between Pine and Oak Streets, is located one block north of the courthouse square. The buildings in the immediate surrounding area of the theatre building are late-nineteenth and early twentieth century commercial and institutional buildings. To the east of the Rodgers Theatre Building, there is a two story commercial building and a parking lot. On the south, west and north, the building sits directly on the sidewalk. The sidewalk is wide on the north and west sides of the building, but, on the south side of the building, the sidewalk that separates the Rodgers Theatre Building from Pine Street is so narrow that the theatre marquee has been damaged a number of times by passing trucks.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

The basic shape of the building is rectangular, but the main facade on the southwest corner is a concave elliptical form. The building is approximately 98 feet wide by 208 feet deep. It consists of three main sections; the facade and theatre marquee, the theatre, and the office block. The building sits on a concrete foundation; it has concrete block walls covered with brick, and a flat roof. According to an article about the building, which was published the day before it opened,

The walls of the building, which contain not only the theatre but also a drug store and four other business locations, contain 215,625 common brick and 55,057 yellow face brick. These are backed up with 10,545 eight-inch cinder blocks, 1,500 six-inch blocks, and 11,185 four-inch blocks.¹

The facade and theatre marquee section forms the southwest corner of the Rodgers Theatre Building. The sweeping curve of the facade is juxtaposed by the prominent triangular marquee and the ziggurat tower. The facade, which is three stories tall, consists of two large rectangular piers and a concave, elliptical-shaped curtain wall. (See Photo Nos. 1,2) The piers are faced with Bedford stone. They have no applied ornamentation, but each has three poster cases on the side that faces the sidewalk. The north pier also has a poster case on the side that faces the entrance plaza. Above the marquee, the curved section of the facade is formed by a metal framework faced with corrugated metal panels. The eleven panels are painted in alternating colors - yellow, green, blue, and red - and they are spaced such that there is a gap of several inches between each panel. Below the marquee, the curved section of the facade is divided into two bays. (See Photo No. 6) Each bay contains an entrance to a different part of the building. The theatre is entered through the east bay, and the largest of the commercial spaces is entered through the north bay. The east bay has two sets of double doors surrounded by black Carrara glass. Each of the double doors is solid walnut and has two large porthole windows and bands of silver metal hardware. The west bay has a centered doorway flanked by storefront windows. The door and windows appear to be modern replacements, but the stone-faced bulkheads below the windows and black Carrara glass above the door and windows appear to be original.

The theatre marquee, with its prominent ziggurat tower, resembles the bow of a ship. (See Photo Nos. 1, 2.) The horizontal marquee, which is triangular in plan, projects out from the curved facade to the street corner and shelters the building's entire entrance plaza. The rectangular ticket booth sits in the middle of the plaza and acts as a supporting post for the marquee. (See Photo No. 5.) It is currently boarded over, but it appears to be intact beneath this

¹"Many Firms Had Part In Theatre Work," Daily American Republic. May 31, 1949, Rodgers Theatre Section, p. 1.

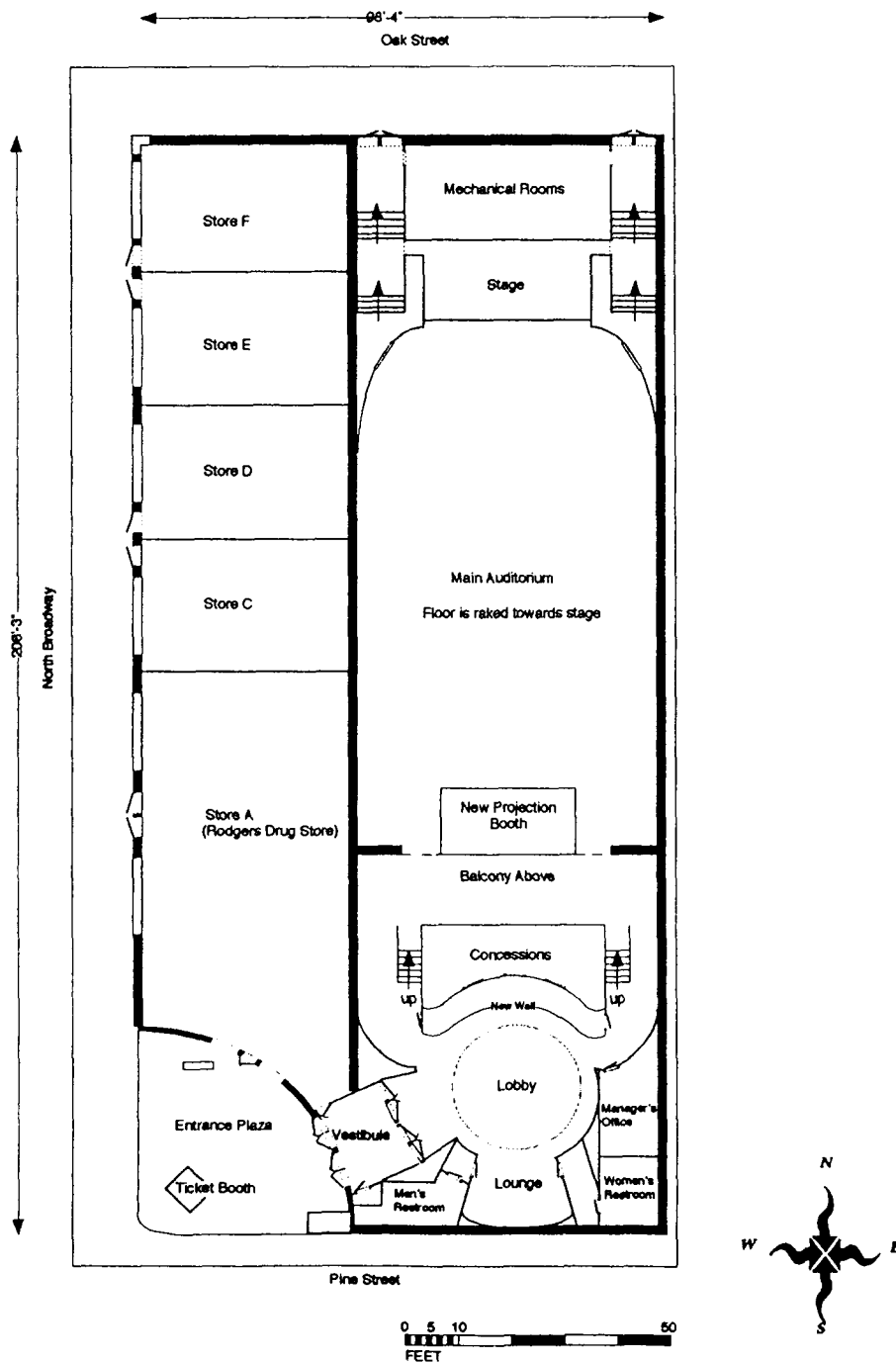
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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Figure One: Building Plan - Ground Floor. Drawn by Becky L. Snider



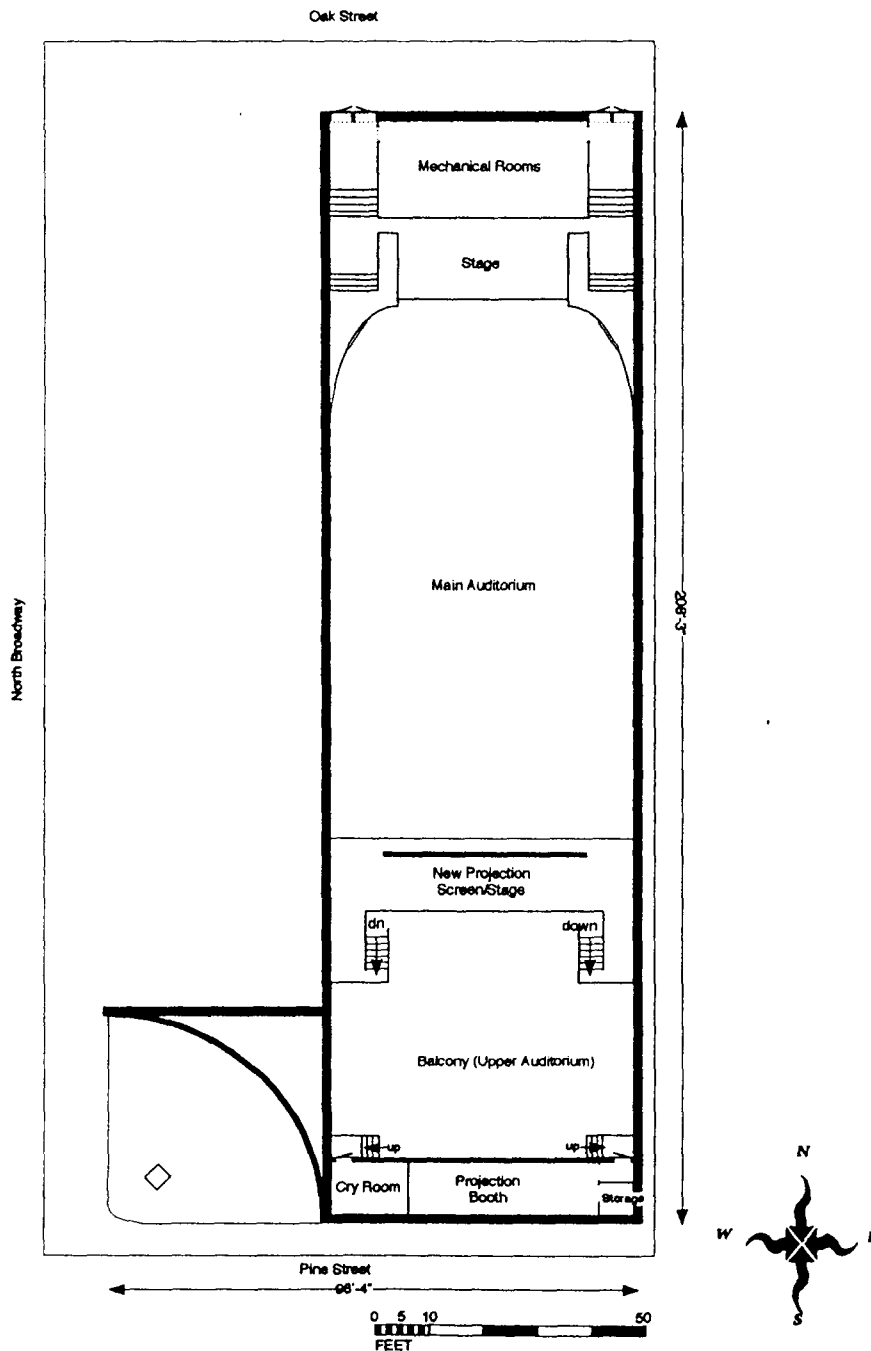
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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Figure Two: Building Plan - Upper Level. Drawn by Becky L. Snider



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Rodgers Theatre
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protective cover. Although the front of the marquee has been damaged and all of the lightbulbs have been removed, the marquee is still very much intact. (See Photo No. 3) Two bands of bare light bulbs on a yellow background run along the top and bottom of the red metal marquee. Each side of the marquee has a long rectangular space, which is backlit, for advertising the theatre's current attractions. The rounded corner of the marquee is decorated with a scrolled red "R" set on a yellow background, yellow floral-motif detailing, and a tiara-like cornice. On the underside of the marquee, dozens of recessed spotlights are set into the ceiling to illuminate the entrance plaza. (See Photo No. 6.) On top of the marquee, a 36 foot tall ziggurat-shaped tower sits directly above the ticket booth. (See Photo Nos 1-3.) The tower was one of the many parts of the theatre that was described in detail in the article about the building which appeared in the May 31, 1949 Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic.

Above the marquee, a glass tower rises 36 feet 2 inches above the roof. This tower contains one and one half tons of corrugated decorative glass, to which seven letters of plastic, electrically lighted, are attached to spell out the name RODGERS. Each letter stands two feet, nine inches high, and [the] tower is surmounted by a stainless steel globe-shaped ornament enclosing a red neon beacon.²

The theatre section of the building represents the largest portion of the building encompassing 11,648 square feet. This section is three stories tall; it is located on the east half of the building; and it extends the entire depth of the building. It encompasses the lobby and concession area, the auditorium and the stage. (See Figures One and Two.) The exterior walls of the west and south elevations of the theatre section are yellow face brick, but the walls of the north and east elevations are red common brick. (See Photo Nos. 1, 4, 17-20.) Although these walls have no applied ornamentation, there are brick quoins at the corners, brick pilasters on the east and west walls, and wide bands of raised bricks on the south elevation. The south elevation also has three equally-spaced small windows on the third floor and two poster cases on the first floor.

Just inside the double doors to the theatre, there is a vestibule with a domed ceiling and recessed lighting. (See Photo No. 7.) A doorway on the north wall of the vestibule leads into the largest of the commercial spaces. From the vestibule, a second set of double doors, identical in design to those that lead into the theatre section from the entrance plaza, opens onto the theatre lobby. The lobby is circular in plan and it has a domed ceiling with recessed lighting. (See Photo Nos. 8, 9.) A ten-sided concession stand sits in the middle of the lobby; it is a modern addition to the building. The original curved concession stand to the north of the lobby

² Ibid.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

is still in place, but a wall with decorative glass panels has been built in front of it. (See Photo Nos. 9, 10.) A lounge area and the restrooms are south of the lobby. The original mural pictured in the 1949 newspaper article about the building can be seen where the wallpaper that was applied over it is peeling away. The caption under the newspaper photo reads: "An English hunting scene mural occupies the south wall of the ornate lounge just to the right of the main foyer as the theatre is entered."³ Curving hallways lead from the northwest and northeast sides of the lobby to the auditoriums.

The theatre has been divided into two auditoriums - a large lower auditorium seating approximately 800 and a small second floor auditorium that seats approximately 400. (See Photo Nos. 11, 12, 15.) The original auditorium is basically intact, but a wall has been built in front of the original balcony railing to divide the orchestra level and balcony into two separate spaces. (See Figures One and Two.) A new projection room was also constructed at the back of the large auditorium. The original theatre seats are still in place in both auditoriums, but the carpeting has been removed. The walls and ceiling are covered with interlocking fiberboard tiles. The original wall treatments were not described in the 1949 article about the building, but it is likely that the walls were plastered and these tiles were a later addition. Despite the fact that a new projection screen has been installed in front of the balcony railing, the upper seating area is also little changed and the stairs to the balcony still retain their backlit, glass block risers. (See Photo No. 14.) The original projection booth and the "cry room" are still in place at the back of the balcony. (See Photo Nos. 16, 17.)

The stage of the Rodgers Theatre has changed little since the building was constructed. (See Photo No. 13.) The proscenium opening measures 36 feet wide by 22 feet tall. Because the theatre was built primarily to be a movie theatre, the stage, at 17 feet deep, is fairly small, and it is sparsely equipped. There is a set of footlights around the apron of the stage, one row of striplights above the stage and several worklights on the back wall. The stage has no loft for flying scenery, but it has a grid from which drapery, scenery and lighting can be hung. Behind the stage, there are several large rooms containing the building's mechanical equipment. Hallways on either side of the stage provide performer access to the stage, and they lead to emergency exits for the theatre.

The office block section of the Rodgers Theatre Building is one story tall, and it is located on the west side of the building. (See Photo Nos. 18-20.) It extends from the north side of the entrance plaza to the north end of the building. The office block is divided into five commercial spaces. The largest space, originally the Rodgers Drug Store, is located just to the north of the entrance plaza. (Store A on Figure One) Part of this space has been combined with the commercial space directly to the north and the interior of this space has been extensively remodeled. (See Photo No. 21) This space is currently vacant. The other four commercial

³ Ibid.

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**Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri**

spaces have been combined into two offices. (Store C, D, E, F on Figure One) The Butler County Public Defender occupies one office and University of Missouri Extension occupies the other. Although the interiors of these spaces have been remodeled, the exterior of the office block section of the building has changed little since it was constructed. The facade and basic fenestration patterns are still intact.

The Rodgers Theatre Building has lost some of the luxurious qualities that it once had. However, it still retains many of its defining characteristics and looks on the outside much as it did when it was constructed in 1949. The building remains an excellent example of a Late Modern movie theatre, and it is one of the only Art Deco/Art Moderne buildings in Poplar Bluff.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Summary:

The Rodgers Theatre Building, located in downtown Poplar Bluff, Butler County, Missouri, is significant under Criterion C in the area of ARCHITECTURE. The multi-use building, which was constructed in 1949, is one of the very few Art Deco/Art Moderne buildings in the city, and it is the work of noted St. Louis architect, Hugo K. Graf. The simple, cubic form of the building, the use of concrete, brick, glass, glass block and metal as building materials, and the nautical motifs in the form and ornamentation identify it as an Art Moderne building. The building is also the only remaining historic theatre in downtown Poplar Bluff. Currently, the building, which is now owned by Butler County, is vacant. A non-profit group has been established to restore the building and to manage its operation once it is put back in use. The period of significance of 1949 is based on the construction date established from the original architectural plans and from an article about the theatre's grand opening published in the local newspaper. The Rodgers Theatre Building is a contributing building, and it is the only resource on the property. The building retains integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

Elaboration:

History

The first permanent settlement of the area now known as Poplar Bluff, Missouri was established in 1819, but, until the 1850s, the area was only sparsely settled. In 1850, Poplar Bluff was selected to be the seat of Butler County, Missouri. The fledgling town of Poplar Bluff was selected over the more populous community of Cane Creek because it was located at the geographical center of the county and at the navigational head of the Black River.⁴ A log courthouse was built, and the town was laid out in a grid plan along the Black River. After the county seat was established and new roads were constructed, settlers from Kentucky, Tennessee, and Illinois began to move to the area.

⁴ Thomason and Associates, "Poplar Bluff, Missouri: Architectural and Historical Inventory Survey Report." July, 1990 (On file at the State Historic Preservation Office Cultural Resources Inventory, Jefferson City, Missouri), p. 3.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

The city grew slowly until the close of the Civil War....The city incorporated in 1870 and two railroads came into the city by 1872: the St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railway from the north, and the Cairo and Fulton Railroad from Cairo, Illinois, from the east. The railroads provided Poplar Bluff with ready transportation and made the rich timber areas in the region more accessible.⁵

As a result of the establishment of the railroads and the growth of the timber industry in the area, Poplar Bluff became a thriving commercial center by the 1880s. The town grew quickly during the last decades of the nineteenth century and first decade of the twentieth century, but by 1910, the area's timber had been largely depleted and many lumbermills had closed.⁶ Although the town's growth and economy slowed as a result of this loss, Poplar Bluff continued to draw a variety of industries to the area, and it remains today a major manufacturing and commercial area in Southeast Missouri."⁷

Walter Rodgers was born in 1875, and he began his career in show business eighteen years later. In 1893, Rodgers, in partnership with Clarence Medley, purchased a phonograph and began exhibiting it in lodge halls, churches, and schools. ⁸ Later, Rodgers and Medley added an X-ray machine to their display.

In 1896, came the motion picture and it opened up an entirely new field to the young man who wanted to entertain the public. [Rodgers] bought out his partner, sold his phonograph and X-Ray machine and bought a movie projector and opened up a "store show" in New Orleans, later moving to Chattanooga, Tennessee.⁹

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

⁸ "Entertainment Career of Rodgers Family Climaxed by Completion of New Theatre," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, May 31, 1949, Rodgers Theatre Section, p. 1.

⁹ Ibid.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Around 1900, Rodgers met and married his wife, Grace, and they purchased a theatre in Jonesboro, Arkansas. After hearing about the booming economy of the town, the Rodgerses visited Poplar Bluff, Missouri and tried to lease the Criterion Theatre from W. N. Barron. Barron refused their offer, but several years later after the theatre was damaged in a fire

Barron wired Rodgers he was ready to lease the show to him if he was still interested. So, in March of 1914, Walter and Grace Rodgers arrived in Poplar Bluff with their son, Carson, who was then 7 years old. Walter supervised the repairing of the theatre, installed a stage and started running vaudeville acts and motion pictures. Walter took care of the many duties connected with the operation of such a theatre and Grace bought the films and kept the books. Thus began the first link in the chain of movie houses that Grace and Walter Rodgers were to own and operate in Southeast Missouri and Southern Illinois.¹⁰

Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, the Rodgers purchased or leased three more theatres in Poplar Bluff, a theatre in Caruthersville, Missouri, a theatre in Anna, Illinois, a theatre in Carbondale, Illinois, part interest in a theatre in Blytheville, Arkansas, and a chain of theatres in Cairo, Illinois.¹¹ In the early 1920s, the Rodgers family moved their home and company headquarters to Cairo, Illinois, but they continued to maintain strong ties to Poplar Bluff.

According to an article about the Rodgers family, the construction of the Rodgers Theatre represented "the crowning glory and the climax of achievement of a man who has spent 50 years of his life in show business."¹² Walter Rodgers saw the construction of the Rodgers Theatre as a way to thank the citizens of Poplar Bluff for their support over the years. In an interview for the local paper, Rodgers said:

The citizens of Poplar Bluff and vicinity have been good to me and my business and by erecting this new theatre I believe I have in some small measure repaid them for their confidence in me and the type of entertainment I have given them since 1914.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 2.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 2.

¹² Ibid., p. 1.

¹³ Ibid., p. 2.

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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Figure Three: Photo of Hugo K. Graf from The St. Louis Story, by McCune Gill, p. 641.



HUGO K. GRAF, A.A.A.

St. Louis architect Hugo K. Graf designed the Rodgers Theatre Building, and Edgar Stephens & Sons, a Cairo, Illinois contracting firm, supervised the construction of the building. Graf was one of St. Louis' most prominent architects in the early twentieth century. (See Figure Three) According to McCune Gill, author of The St. Louis Story,

When "Architectural Forum," the leading magazine in its field, made a poll to determine the outstanding figures in a variety of professions and businesses, Hugo K. Graf emerged as one of the five leaders in architecture in the Metropolitan St. Louis area.¹⁴

Early in his career, Graf was associated with some of St. Louis' most prominent architects including William B. Ittner, and the architectural firm of Klipstein, Rathman, Cope and Stewardson. In 1914, he and Henry W. Hall opened their own architectural practice known as

¹⁴ McCune Gill, The St. Louis Story. Hopkinsville, KY and St. Louis: Historical Record Association, 1952, p. 640.

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Rodgers Theatre
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Hall and Graf, Architects.¹⁵ Graf served with the United States Engineers during World War I and then with Reserve Officers Corps for ten years after the war. In 1934, he opened his own independent architectural practice.¹⁶

Graf designed all types of buildings, but he was particularly noted for his designs of public and industrial buildings. These designs included the stage and lighting towers of the Municipal Opera in St. Louis, the Service Building, Stadium and Memorial Park for Webster Groves, the Webster Groves City Hall, the Rand Johnson Memorial Building at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, and the remodeling of the interior of the University Club of St. Louis. He also

designed plants for the Leschen Rope Company, Key Boiler Company, Stout Sign Company, International Shoe Company, Jackes-Evans Manufacturing Company, Hussman Refrigerator Company, Standard Brands, Grocers Warehouse Company, Majestic Manufacturing Company, International Business Machines Corporation, and such retail stores as Peck and Peck and the Aeolian Company.¹⁷

On May 31, 1949, the day before the grand opening of the Rodgers Theatre, the local newspaper published a special section devoted exclusively to event. The "Rodgers Theatre Section" in the May 31, 1949 Daily American Republic included a description of all aspects of the Rodgers Theatre Building including the Rodgers Drug Store, a history of the Rodgers family, and a variety of congratulatory messages from local businesses and businesses that participated in the construction of the building. (See Figures Four and Five.) In addition, the week of the grand opening, many local businesses advertised "Rodgers Theatre Days" specials.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 642.

¹⁶ "In Memoriam: Hugo Koch Graf," Missouri Historical Society Bulletin. Volume IX, July, 1953, p. 402.

¹⁷ McCune Gill, The St. Louis Story. Hopkinsville, KY and St. Louis: Historical Record Association, 1952, p. 642.

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Rodgers Theatre
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Figure Four: Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic, May 31, 1949, Rodgers Theatre Section, p. 1.



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Rodgers Theatre
Butler County, Missouri

Figure Five: Advertisement from Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic, May 31, 1949,
Rodgers Theatre Section, p. 5, 6

Best Wishes
to
Rodgers Theatre

All exterior and interior millwork and cabi-
net work used in this building
furnished by

Gravois Planing
Mill Co.

Gravois at Juniata St. Louis, Mo.

We did the
Painting and
Decorating

of the New
Theatre Building
We, and the Citizens of Poplar Bluff are proud
of the Rodgers Theatre

W. F. Priest

Build with
Concrete
Blocks

Use Only the Famous
"KATTER-BLOX"

Produced
1023 Jefferson St.
Success
AND
Best Wishes
TO THE
Rodgers Theatre

The theatre was described as "an extra super luxury picture palace" and the Rodgers Drug Store was said to be "ultra modern."¹⁸ Among the amenities of the theatre that were particularly mentioned were the "spacious circular lobby," the seats which were "of the most advanced theatre type," and the cry room which was "a special inducement to mothers with small children to attend the show."¹⁹ The opening of the Rodgers Drug Store generated almost as much excitement as the opening of the theatre. The Rodgers Drug Store was stocked with "a complete line of highest quality merchandise," but the store's major attraction was the "40-

¹⁸ "First Public Show Will Be Wednesday Night," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, June 2, 1949, p. 1.

"Rodgers Drug Store One of Area's Finest," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, May 31, 1949, p. 4.

¹⁹ "First Public Show Will Be Wednesday Night," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, May 31, 1949, p. 1.

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Rodgers Theatre
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Figure Six: Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic, May 31, 1949, Rodgers Theatre Section
p. 4.



foot soda fountain."²⁰ (See Figure Six.) The four other commercial spaces were also considered very appealing real estate and were all leased by the time the building was finished. The first tenants were: Corrigan Insurance Agency, Jack Hinchey, CPA, Bostic and Palmer, and Missouri and Arkansas Electric Co-Operative.²¹

²⁰ "Rodgers Drug Store One of Area's Finest," Daily American Republic.
Poplar Bluff, Missouri, May 31, 1949, p. 4.

²¹ Ibid.

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Rodgers Theatre
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Figure Seven: Poplar Bluff Daily American Republic, June 1, 1949, p. 3.

RODGERS THEATRE
POPLAR BLUFF, MO.
THURSDAY AND FRIDAY, JUNE 2-3

THE WEST'S MOST EXCITING ADVENTURE!
FROM THE SCREEN THAT BROUGHT YOU "CANYON PASSAGE"

Zane Grey's
RED CANYON
COLOR BY TECHNICOLOR

ANN BLYTH • HOWARD DUFF
GEORGE BRENT • LEGAT BUCHANAN • LANE EARLE

Shows Open 1:45 P.M. - 7:30 P.M. - 9:30 P.M.
Closes 11:30 P.M.

THIS THEATRE IS COOLED BY REFRIGERATION

GENERAL PRICES FOR THE RODGERS THEATRE, POPLAR BLUFF, MO.
Shows Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday - Admission Adults 50c
Children 25c (All taxes included). Shows Open 1:45 P.M., Show Starts 2:00 P.M.,
Closes 11:30 P.M.

Saturday - Bargain Day for All the Family
Admission Adults 25c, Children 10c, All Taxes Included. Shows Open 1:45 P.M., Show
Starts 2:00 P.M., Closes 11:30 P.M.

The grand opening of the Rodgers Theatre was held June 1, 1949. More than 1,800 people attended the two showings of "Red Canyon."²² (See Figure Seven.) E. W. Robinson, the mayor of Poplar Bluff, purchased the first ticket and dedicated the theatre. The Poplar Bluff Municipal Band entertained both the ticketholders waiting to see the show as well as the thousands of local citizens who showed up for the festivities.²³

²² "Rodgers Theatre Opening Draws Crowd of More Than 1800 Persons," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, June 2, 1949, p. 1.

²³ Ibid.

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The Rodgers Family owned and operated the Rodgers Theatre into the mid-1960's. By the time the Rodgers Theatre opened in 1949, Carson Rodgers, Walter and Grace Rodgers' son, had taken over management of I.W. Rodgers Theatres. Walter Rodgers died in 1958 and his son died just six years later. After Carson Rodgers' death in 1964, the I. W. Rodgers Theatres chain was sold to Kerasotes Theatres. The company owned and operated the theatre from the mid-1960s until 1998. During Kerasotes Theatres ownership of the building, the auditorium was divided and the second screen was added.

On May 14, 1998, the Rodgers Theatre met the fate of many historic theatres; it was replaced by a multi-screen theatre complex.²⁴ However, instead of demolishing the theatre, Kerasotes Theatres offered to donate the building to Butler County. After assessing the structural integrity of the building, Butler County took over ownership of the building with the intent that the commercial spaces would be used for county offices and the theatre would be made available to local cultural organizations. A non-profit organization, The Rodgers Theatre Inc., was established to restore the theatre and to manage its operation. This group must raise the money for the rehabilitation of the building, but the county will pay for building maintenance and insurance.

Architectural Significance

The Rodgers Theatre Building demonstrates the distinctive stylistic characteristics of both Art Deco and Art Moderne. In A Field Guide to American Houses, the authors, Virginia & Lee McAlester, group Art Deco and Art Moderne together in a category they label "Modernistic" According to the McAlesters,

the earlier form was the Art Deco, which was common in public and commercial buildings in the 1920s and early 1930's.... After about 1930, Art Moderne became the prevalent Modernistic form.²⁵

Although the ideas and designs that became known as Art Deco or Modernistic can be traced back to the turn of the century in Europe, two specific events are generally credited for the dissemination of the Art Deco style in the United States: the Chicago Tribune Design Competition in 1922 and the *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes* which was

²⁴ "Rodgers Closing Ends An Era," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, May 15, 1998, p. 1.

²⁵ Virginia and Lee McAlester. A Field Guide to American Houses. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984) p. 465.

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Rodgers Theatre
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held in Paris in 1925.²⁶ Although first prize in the Tribune competition went to a Gothic design, second place was awarded to an Art Deco design by Finnish architect Eliel Saarinen. Many prominent architects believed that Saarinen's design should have won the competition. His design was widely publicized and the style quickly caught on as the latest architectural fashion.

In the 1920s, the movies became big business and theatre owners began commissioning architects to design spectacular, highly opulent picture palaces. These original picture palaces were masterpieces of design, but they generally followed the established styles. "The mixed qualities of jungle primitivism and machine-inspired design that originated at the Paris exposition were not apparent in American movie theaters until 1930."²⁷ However, the style quickly became popular and "art deco [and later Art Moderne] was found everywhere as a theater style because association with motion pictures universally carried connotations of 'modernity.'"²⁸ These modernistic styles remained a popular choice of theatre designers well into the 1950s.

The term Art Deco is derived from the name of the 1925 Paris *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, an exhibition of decorative arts and architecture predominately by European artists. American artists and architects as well as department store buyers and industrial designers attended the exposition and returned to the United States infused with new ideas and eager to incorporate those ideas into their own designs.²⁹ "The exposition included examples of modern architecture, innovative fashion and fabric design, and interior decoration and furniture design"³⁰ It was organized to showcase works of originality and modernity. "Promotional literature for the 'Expo Deco' stated that 'reproductions, imitations, and counterfeits of ancient styles will be strictly prohibited.'"³¹ Emphasis on the future rather

²⁶ Elayne H. Varian. American Art Deco Architecture. (New York: Finch College Museum of Art, 1975) n. p.

²⁷ Naylor, David, American Picture Palaces: The Architecture of Fantasy. (New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1981) p. 141.

²⁸ Alan Gowans, Styles and Types of North American Architecture. (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992) p. 252.

²⁹ Robert Heide and John Gilman, Popular Art Deco: Depression Era Style and Design. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1991) p. 15.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 23.

³¹ John C. Poppeliers et. al. What Style is it? A Guide to American Architecture. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1983) p. 88.

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Rodgers Theatre
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than the past and the use of ornament to promote a sentiment of modernity were the Art Deco style's principal characteristics.

Art Deco architects particularly disdained Beaux-Arts classicism which had become the norm in architectural design. However, “

insofar as most of America's Art Deco structures were produced by architects directly or indirectly educated within the Parisian Beaux-Arts system, it [is] not surprising that when these architects turned their attention to the “new” language of design (as almost all of them did after 1925), the forms they produced were, to a considerable degree, derived from classical precedent.³²

Although Art Deco's proponents eschewed the use of historical styles, they drew inspiration from both ancient and exotic sources. Mayan, Aztec and Native American motifs were particularly popular in American Art Deco architectural ornamentation.

According to Steven J. Phillips, author of Old House Dictionary: An Illustrated Guide to American Domestic Architecture 1600 to 1940, the principal characteristics of American Art Deco architecture are “an overall linear, angular, vertical appearance, stepped facade; extensive use of zig-zags, chevrons, lozenges, and volutes as decorative elements; and vertical projections above the roofline.”³³ Polychromatic effects were often an integral part of the design. The Art Deco influence on the design of the Rodgers Theatre is most apparent on the facade and theatre marquee section of the building. The ziggurat tower, a common Art Deco form, extends more than thirty-six feet above the marquee and gives the building a sense of height and verticality. Furthermore, the bold alternating colored panels of the facade and the contrasting colors on the theatre marquee are much more characteristic of earlier Art Deco styling than the later Art Moderne.

Art Moderne, the Modernistic style that followed Art Deco, gained popularity in the 1930's. Art Moderne, also called Streamline Moderne, developed out of the necessity for frugality brought on by the Depression. It was a continuation of the ideas started by the Art Deco style without the ornamental extravagances of the earlier style. In addition to the rejection of historical styles and the promotion of futuristic ideas, the Art Moderne style placed an additional emphasis on machine imagery and mass-production. Many Art Moderne buildings were inspired by and modeled after the new aerodynamic shapes of modern modes of transportation

³² David Gebhard, The National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America. (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1996) p. 1.

³³ Steven J. Phillips, Old House Dictionary: An Illustrated Guide to American Domestic Architecture (1600-1940). (Washington: The Preservation Press, 1994) p. 18.

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including the automobiles and passenger liners. Furthermore, Art Moderne was one more step towards the complete rejection of ornamentation of the International Style, which was already gaining prominence in Europe as the Art Moderne style developed in the United States. The Art Moderne style is characterized by "an overall streamline appearance, asymmetrical facade, smooth wall surfaces with rounded corners, sparsity of ornamentation (often confined to horizontal grooves or metal strips on walls), flat roof, windows that frequently wrap around corners, and a curved canopy over the front door.³⁴

"In most building types, both the horizontal streamlined Art Moderne and the vertical, zigzagged Art Deco influences occur in combination."³⁵ Such is the case with the Rodgers Theatre Building. However, the Art Moderne influence dominates the design of the Rodgers Theatre Building. The horizontality of the building's form, the curvilinear shapes used in the plan and the sparsity of ornamentation shows the building's primary allegiance to the Art Moderne style. Furthermore, much of the building's detailing is also Art Moderne. The use of nautical motifs can be seen in the porthole windows of the theatre doors and in the theatre marquee, which, with the ziggurat tower, resembles the bow of a ship. In addition, the marquee, in essence, forms a canopy over the front entrance, a common feature in Art Moderne designs. Finally, the chrome trim on the doors and the glass blocks in the balcony stairs are remnants of the building's interior Art Moderne detailing. The two features of the Rodgers Theatre Building which are stylistically closer to Art Deco than to Art Moderne are the ziggurat-shaped tower which projects above the roofline and the vibrant polychromed facade and theatre marquee.

According to the 1990 "Architectural and Historical Inventory Survey Report," the Rodgers Theatre Building is one of the few significant commercial buildings from the 1930s and early 1940s Poplar Bluff; it is one of only two Art Moderne buildings in town; and it is the only intact historic theatre remaining in downtown Poplar Bluff.³⁶ The Rodgers Theatre is in excellent condition, and, even though it will no longer be used as a movie theatre, it is a wonderful reminder of the days when a trip to the theatre was a very special occasion. Thanks to the generosity of Kerasotes Theatres and to the foresight of the commissioners of Butler County, the theatre may one day be restored to its original glory.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 19.

³⁵ McAlester, p. 466.

³⁶ Thomason and Associates, "Poplar Bluff, Missouri: Architectural and Historical Inventory Survey Report." July, 1990 (On file at the State Historic Preservation Office Cultural Resources Inventory, Jefferson City, Missouri), p. 3.

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SOURCES:

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SOURCES continued.

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"Rodgers Theatre Opening Draws Crowd of More Than 1800 Persons," Daily American Republic. Poplar Bluff, Missouri, June 2, 1949, p. 1.

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10. Geographical Data

Verbal Boundary Description:

All of the west half of Lots 25 and 26 in the Original Town, now City of Poplar Bluff, Butler County, Missouri.

Boundary Justification:

The current boundaries represent all of the property historically associated with the building.

Photographs

The following information is the same for all photographs:

Rodgers Theatre Building
204-224 North Broadway
Poplar Bluff, Butler County, Missouri
Photographs taken by Becky L. Snider
January, 2001
Negatives on file with: Becky L. Snider Consulting LLC
507 South Garth Ave.
Columbia, MO 65203

List of Photographs

Camera Angles are indicated on the Photo Key Map

1. South and west elevations, building facade and theatre marquee, facing northeast.
2. Facade and theatre marquee, facing northeast.
3. Theatre marquee and glass tower detail, facing north.
4. North and east elevations, facing southwest.
5. Entrance plaza and ticket booth, facing northeast.
6. Facade - bottom section, north and east bays, facing north.
7. Theatre vestibule, facing west.

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Photographs continued.

8. Theatre lobby, facing southeast.
9. Theatre lobby, facing northeast.
10. Original concession stand windows, facing west.
11. Main auditorium, facing north.
12. Main auditorium, facing east.
13. Stage, facing east.
14. Stairs to balcony, facing north.
15. Balcony (upper auditorium), facing south.
16. Outside cry room, facing south.
17. Original projection booth at rear of balcony, facing east.
18. West elevation, south commercial space (Rodgers Drug Store), facing east.
19. Interior of south commercial space, facing east.
20. West elevation, facing northeast.
21. West elevation facing east.

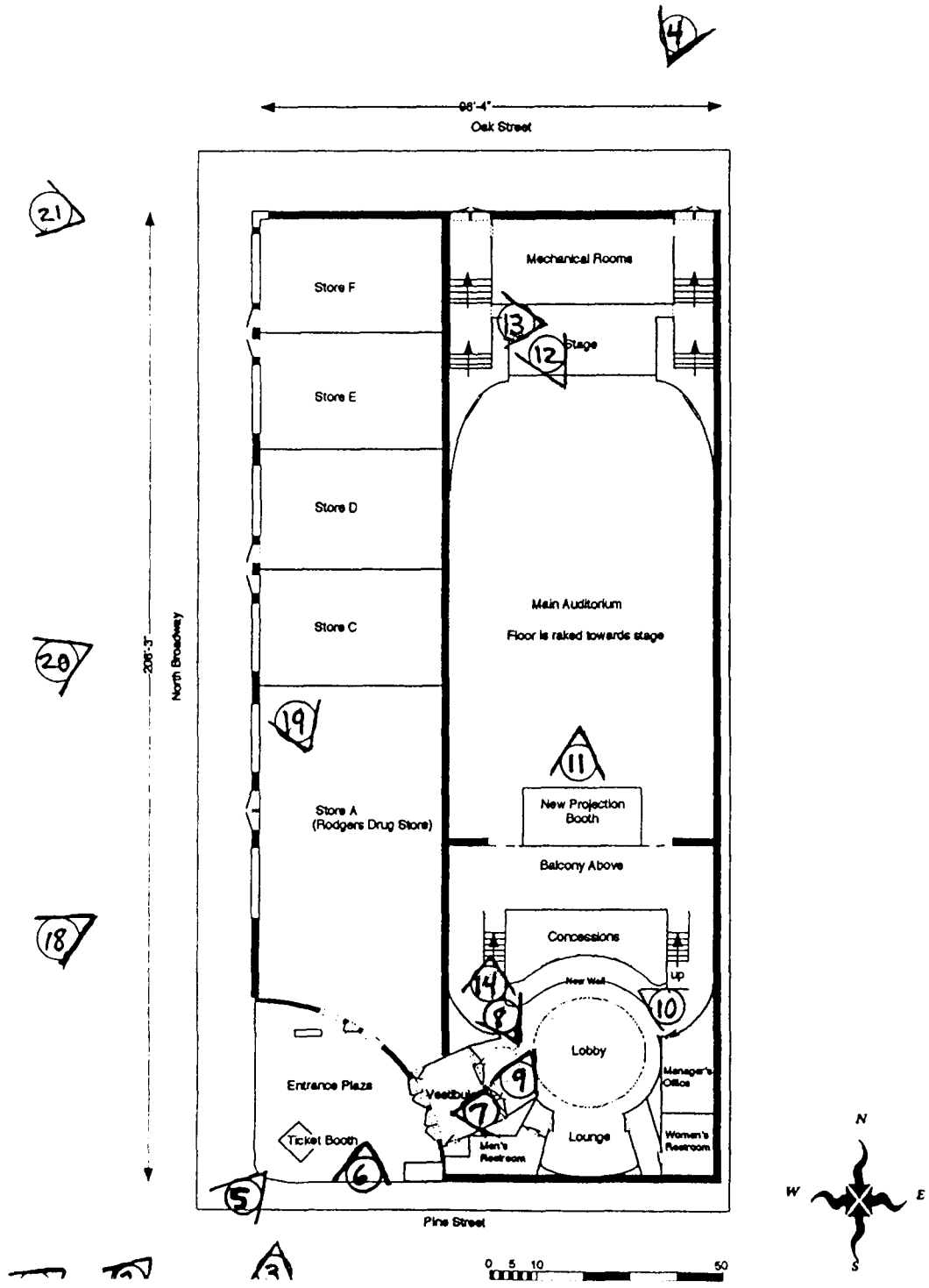
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Rodgers Theatre
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Figure Eight. Photo Key Map - Ground Floor Drawn by Becky L. Snider



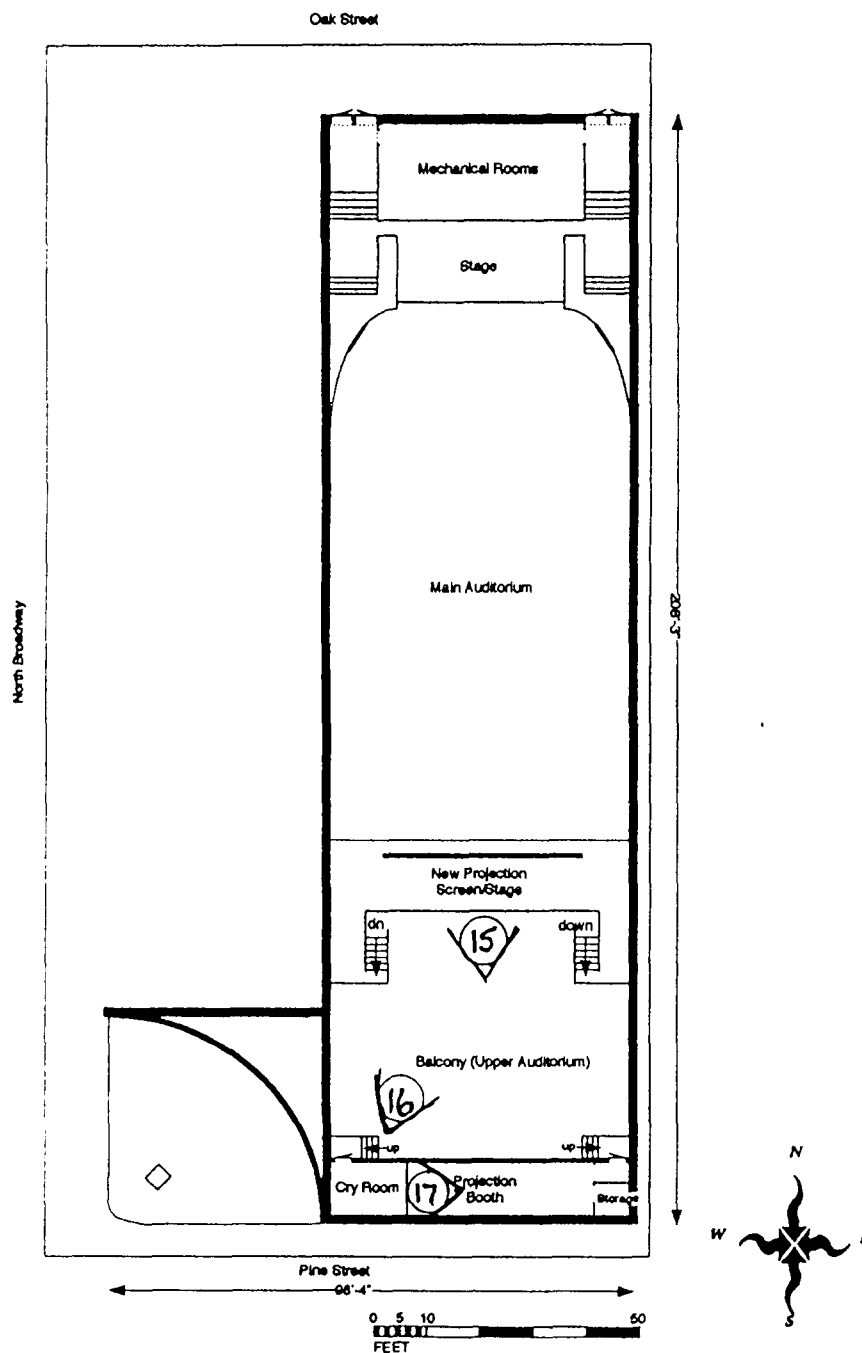
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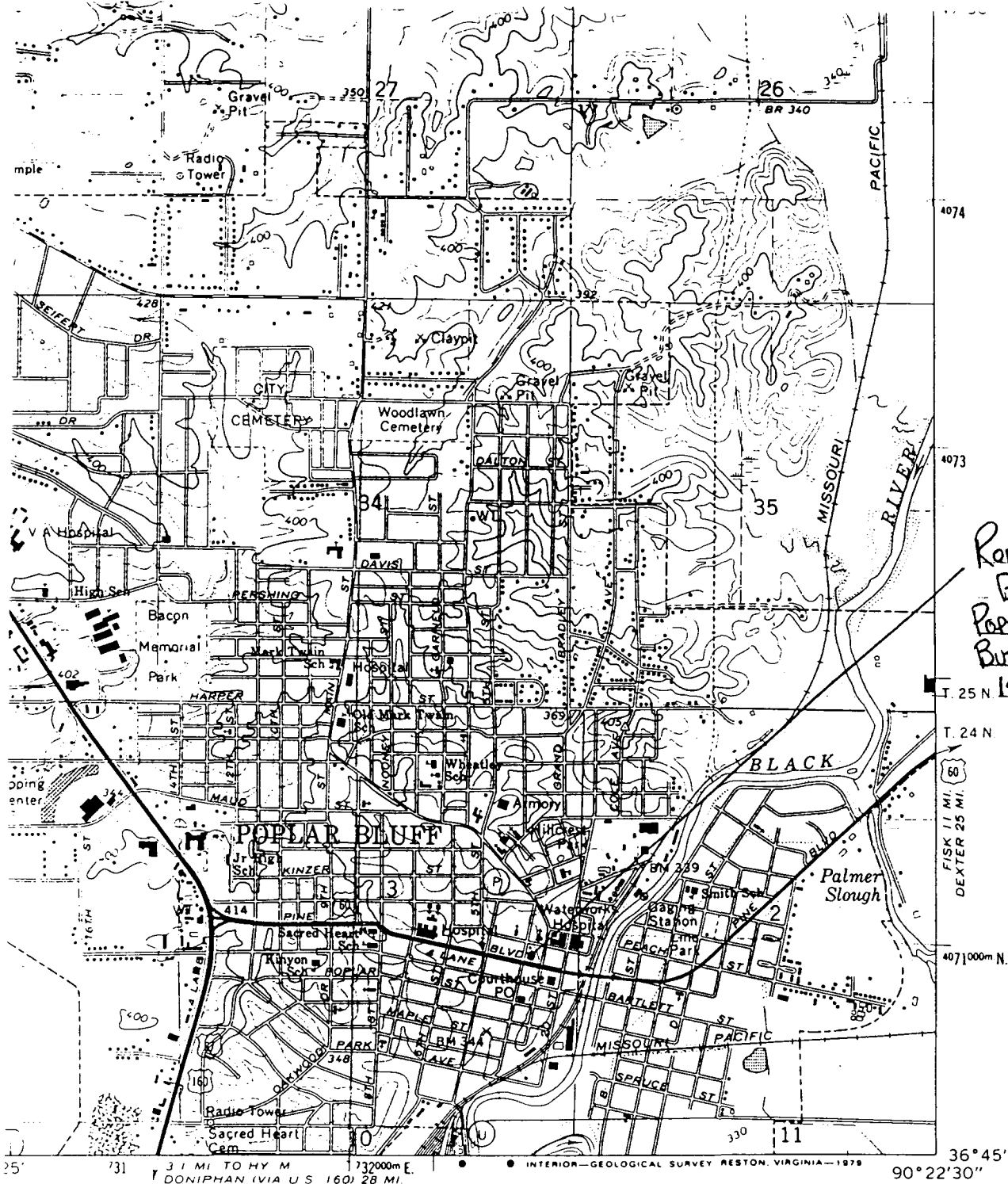
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Figure Nine. Photo Key Map - Upper Level Drawn by Becky L. Snider





RODGERS THEATRE
 BUILDING
 POPLAR BLUFF
 BUTLER COUNTY, MO
 T. 25 N. 15 R. 732700 / 4070900

T. 24 N
 FISK 11 MI. N. MI.
 DEXTER 25 MI.
 4071000 N.

3.1 MI TO HY M DONIPHAN (VIA U.S. 160) 28 MI.

ROAD CLASSIFICATION

- Primary highway, all weather, hard surface _____
- Secondary highway, all weather, hard surface _____
- Light-duty road, all weather, improved surface _____
- Unimproved road, fair or dry weather _____

- Interstate Route
- ◻ U. S. Route
- State Route



POPLAR BLUFF, MO.
 SW/4 POPLAR BLUFF 15' QUADRANGLE
 N3645—W9022.5/7.5

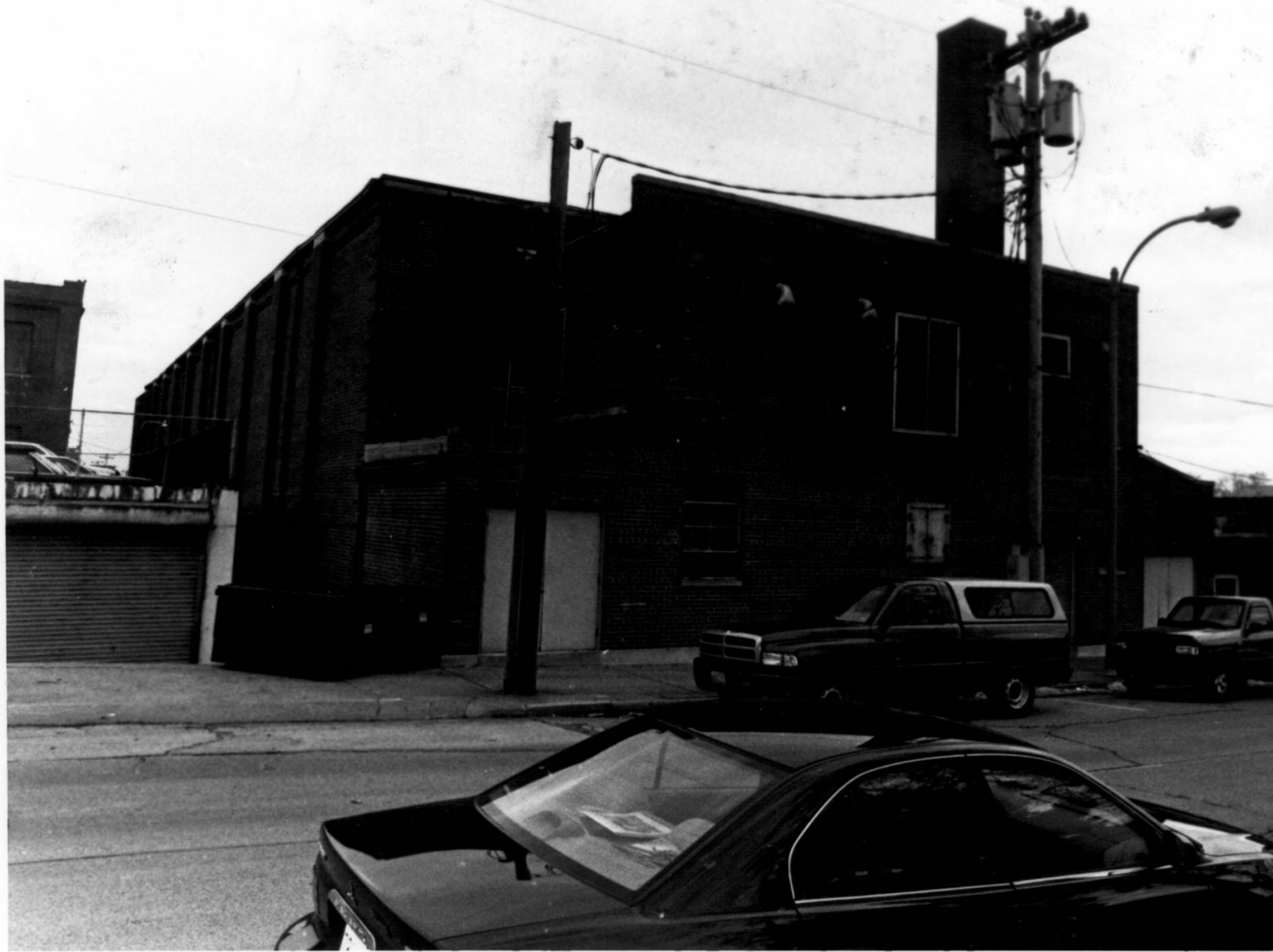
1966
 PHOTOREVISED 1979
 AMS 7957 IV SW—SERIES V879

(HANLEYVILLE)
 755' III NE







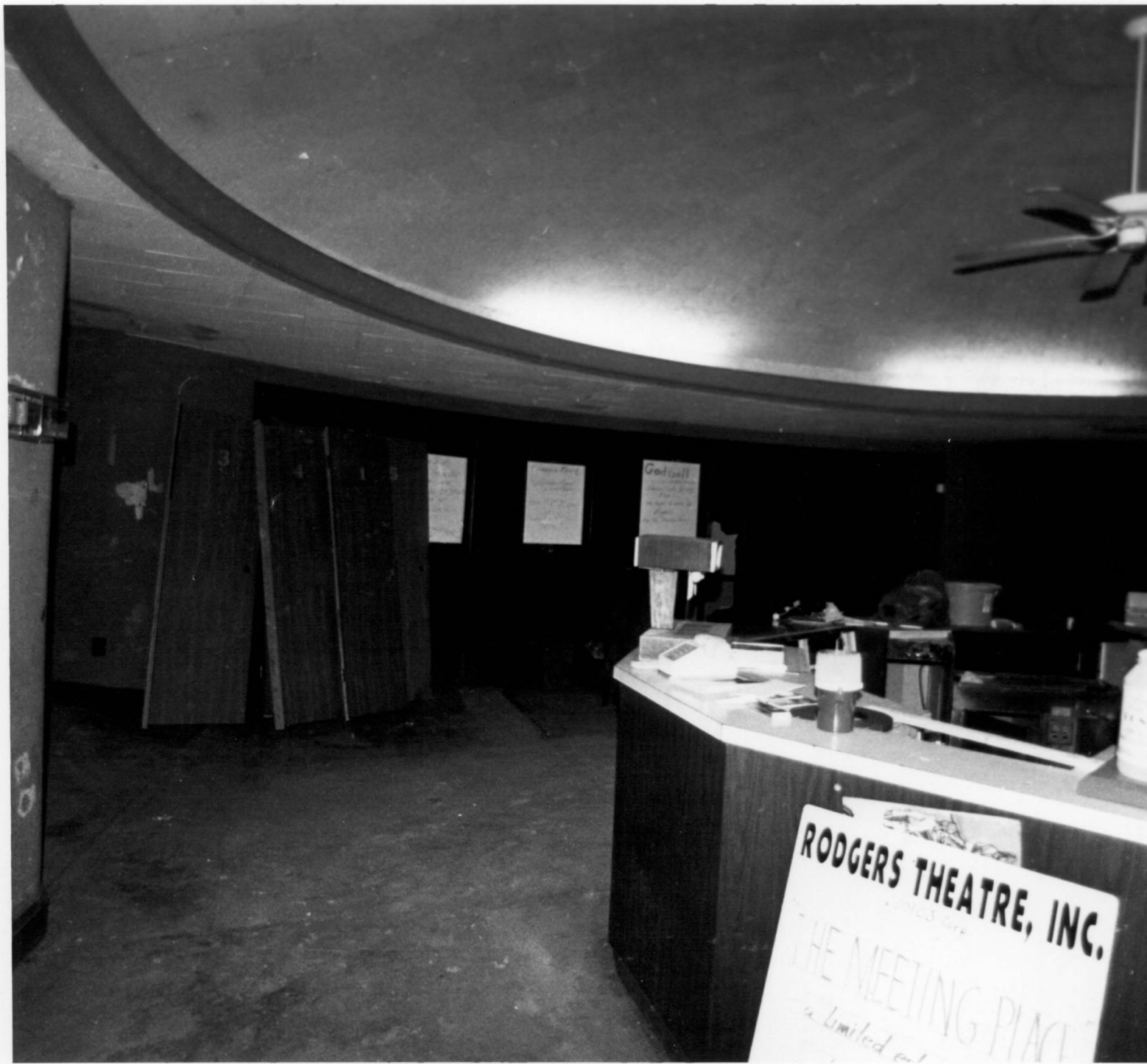




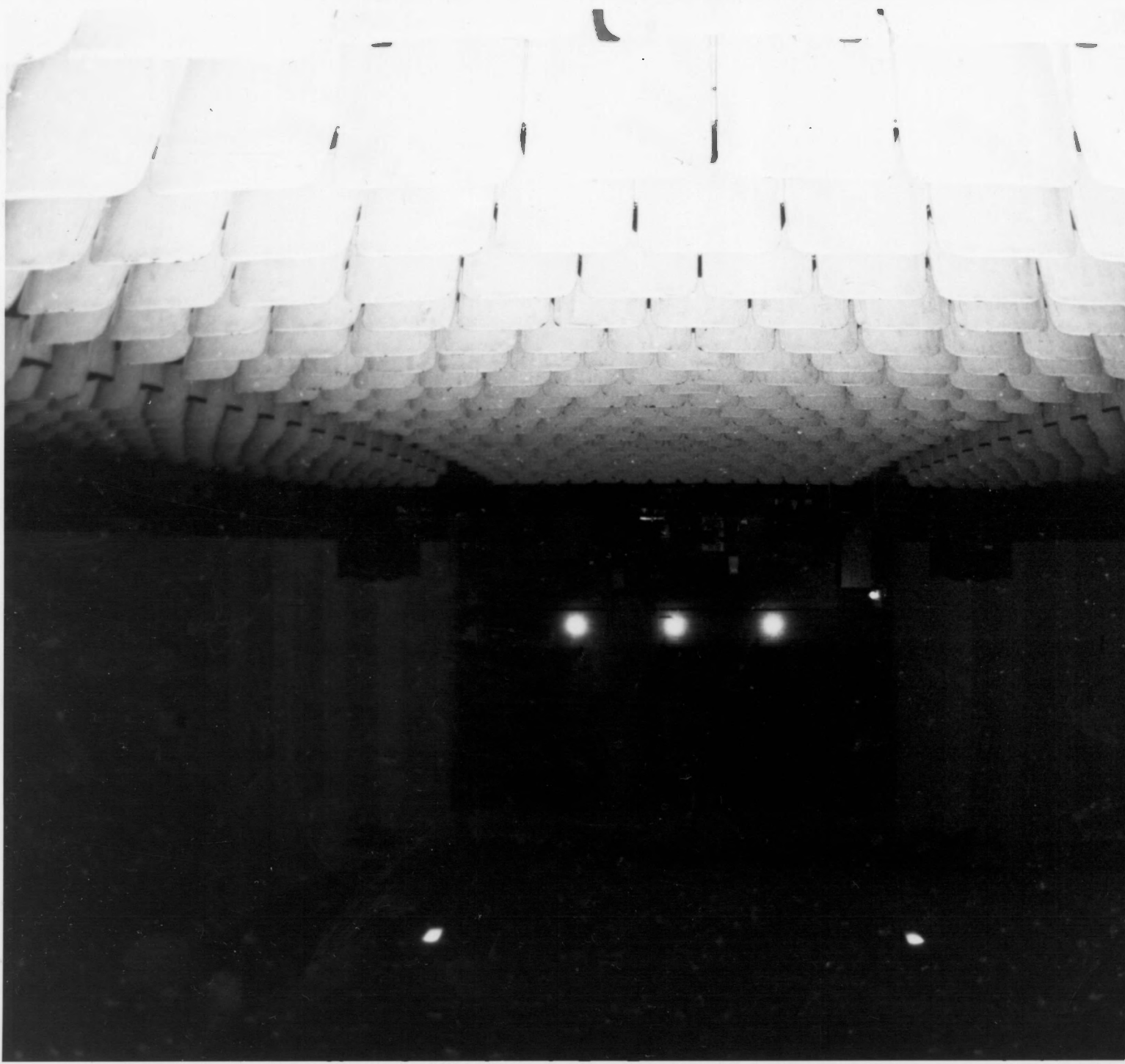








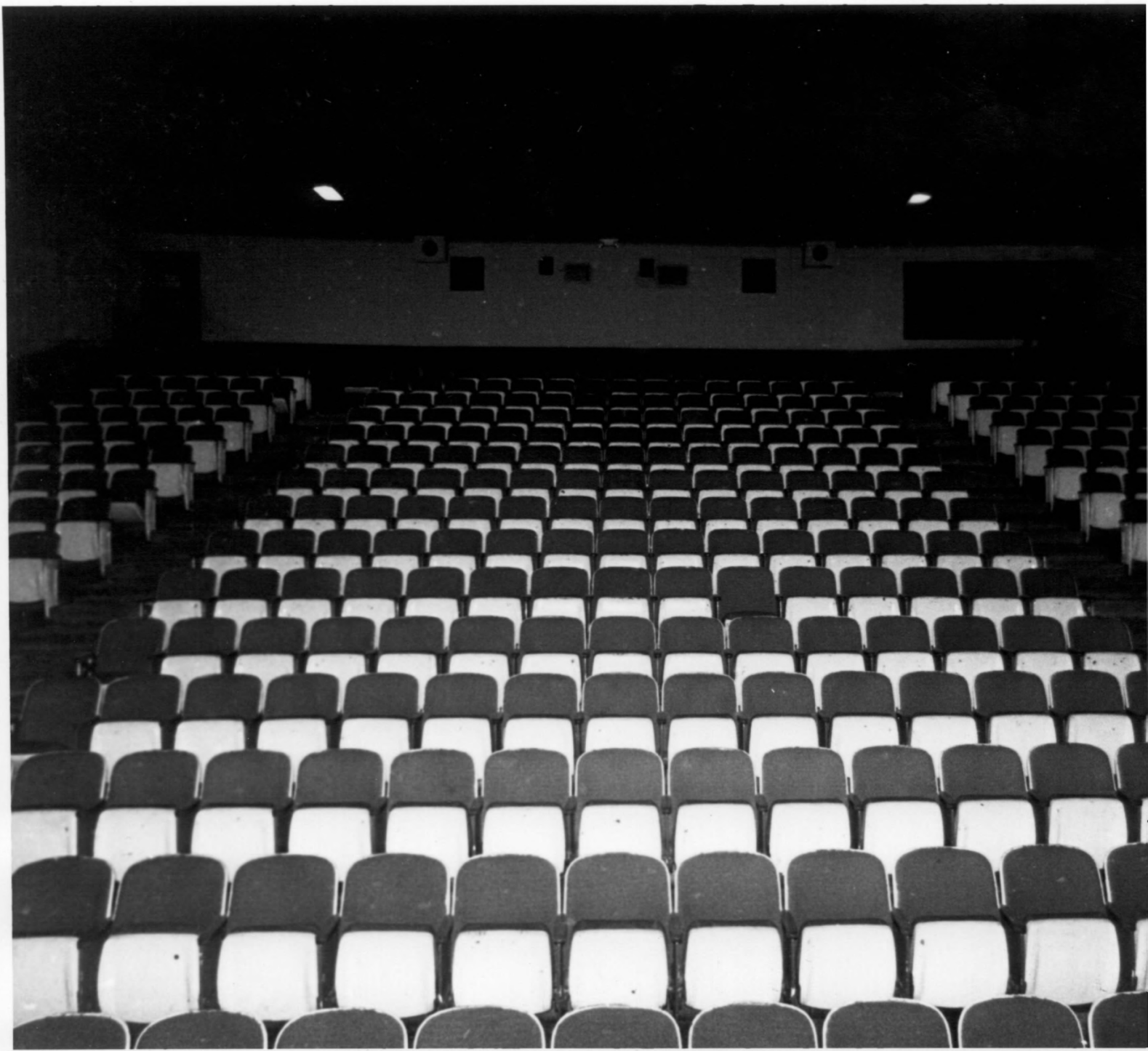






















Small Business

