

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

For NPS use only

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

received

date entered

See instructions in *How to Complete National Register Forms*
Type all entries—complete applicable sections

1. Name

historic

and/or common Vesper-Buick Auto Company Building

2. Location

street & number 3900-12 West Pine not for publication

city, town St. Louis vicinity of

state MO code 29 county City of St. Louis code 510

3. Classification

Category	Ownership	Status	Present Use	
<input type="checkbox"/> district	<input type="checkbox"/> public	<input type="checkbox"/> occupied	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> museum
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unoccupied	<input type="checkbox"/> commercial	<input type="checkbox"/> park
<input type="checkbox"/> structure	<input type="checkbox"/> both	<input type="checkbox"/> work in progress	<input type="checkbox"/> educational	<input type="checkbox"/> private residence
<input type="checkbox"/> site	Public Acquisition	Accessible	<input type="checkbox"/> entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> religious
<input type="checkbox"/> object	<input type="checkbox"/> in process	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> yes: restricted	<input type="checkbox"/> government	<input type="checkbox"/> scientific
	<input type="checkbox"/> being considered	<input type="checkbox"/> yes: unrestricted	<input type="checkbox"/> industrial	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A	<input type="checkbox"/> no	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other: vacant

4. Owner of Property

name Saul Brodsky

street & number 9933 Litzinger Road

city, town St. Louis vicinity of state MO 63124

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. St. Louis City Hall

street & number Market Street at Tucker Boulevard

city, town St. Louis state MO 63103

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title Missouri State Historical Survey has this property been determined eligible? ☐ yes ☒ nodate July 1986 ☐ federal ☒ state ☐ county ☐ local

depository for survey records Missouri Department of Natural Resources

city, town P.O. Box 176 Jefferson City, MO 65102 state

7. Description

Condition

☐ excellent
☒ good
☐ fair

☐ deteriorated
☐ ruins
☐ unexposed

Check one

☐ unaltered
☒ altered

Check one

☒ original site
☐ moved date _____

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

The Vesper-Buick Auto Company Building is a one and two story commercial building located on the southwest corner of Vandeventer and West Pine Streets in midtown St. Louis. The building was constructed in 1927 with a reinforced concrete frame, floors and roof; the stucco exterior is articulated in Spanish Colonial Revival style. The building survives with only minor alterations which do not detract significantly from its integrity of design.

The overall dimensions of the building measure approximately 212 feet on the east and west elevations and 150 feet on the north and south elevations. The two story portion extends eight bays on the east (Vandeventer) elevation and three bays on the north (West Pine) elevation where it joins a one-story, three bay section (Fig. 1; Photo #1). The original triple arched openings of the one-story section are set back approximately 15 feet behind an exterior wall with rectangular openings, probably added in 1941 (Fig. 1). A green tile parapet masks a flat roof covering the entire structure. (A tile parapet still exists on the one story section although it is partially concealed from view by the later wall.)

The principal entrance is angled at the northeast corner of the building. Richly detailed Spanish Baroque terra cotta ornament frames the doorway and covers the surface of a high curvilinear parapet above the door (Photos #1 and 2). Terra cotta also embellishes the cornice above the showroom, fashioned into cartouches with the company monogram, V B. Small casement windows covered with decorative iron grillwork flank the main entrance. The 3 X 3 bay area of the original showroom is defined by fluted pilasters headed with ornamental capitals which divide the large plate glass windows. Ornamental iron used as a frame for these windows (partially boarded) is fashioned into small spindles dividing lights in the transoms above. A side entrance is located on the east (Vandeventer) elevation; it is given emphasis by a curvilinear parapet embellished with terra cotta. A band of small windows open to a second floor office (Fig. 1; Photo #1, left). The doorway of the side entrance has been altered. The four large bays adjoining the side entrance on the south were originally reserved for the Parts Department (Fig. 1); now boarded, these openings feature multi-light industrial windows framed in metal. The rear (south) elevation (Photo #3) also employs large multi-light windows and exposes the reinforced concrete frame. The west elevation (Photo #3, left foreground) is an unarticulated brick wall.

On the interior the showroom and four offices survive with original architectural detailing (Fig. 1). The showroom is installed with a well-preserved glazed ceramic tile floor in muted beige and green tones. Reinforced concrete structural columns (now partially concealed by sheathing and a dropped ceiling) retain original decorative plaster coverings, although some have been damaged by moisture. The showroom is bordered by rows of

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original floodlights in the ceiling and by a plaster cornice embellished with cartouches with the company monogram, V B. The angled main entrance also features ornamental plasterwork. Three first floor offices at the side of the showroom retain original dark oak paneling. One located outside the southwest corner of the showroom also displays a decorative plaster frieze and a skylight covered with ornamental iron grillwork. Dark oak paneling covers walls of a second floor office fronting on Vandeventer Avenue (Fig. 1). A decorative iron railing survives on a second floor balcony overlooking the showroom. No other architecturally significant features are present in the building's remaining spaces which were originally used for storage and automobile service; exposed reinforced concrete columns are visible in the south portion of the structure, originally the Parts Department (Fig. 1).

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input type="checkbox"/> humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> theater
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		<input type="checkbox"/> other (specify)

Specific dates 1927 Builder/Architect Preston J. Bradshaw

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Vesper-Buick Auto Company Building is eligible for listing in the National Register according to Criterion C and is significant in the following area: ARCHITECTURE: Constructed in 1927 from plans drawn up by architect Preston J. Bradshaw, the building is one of St. Louis' best commercial examples of Spanish Colonial Revival, a style infrequently found in the city. The building features a stucco exterior, tile parapet, decorative metal grillwork and a lavish display of terra cotta ornament.

Background:

During the boom years of the 1920s the expansion of the automobile industry from national sales of close to two million passenger cars in 1920 to more than four and one-half million in 1929¹ was clearly reflected in St. Louis, already one of the country's fastest growing automotive trade centers. Automobile dealers in the city served a broad regional trade area which included eastern Missouri, western Kentucky, southern Illinois, Tennessee and Arkansas. Local interest and involvement in the industry were early evidenced by the founding in 1907 of the St. Louis Automobile Manufacturers and Dealers Association (whose members were drawn from some seventy dealers and ten car manufacturers in business in St. Louis by 1910); and later by formation of the St. Louis Automobile Pioneers in 1927, a club comprised of men who had been connected with the auto industry or owned or operated a car for more than twenty years.²

Increased demand for cars in St. Louis was indicated by the steady growth of new car dealerships in the city as well as by dealers whose vastly expanded business required relocation in larger quarters. Buick sales, which in 1920 accounted for almost half of the total earnings of General Motors (the nation's largest auto manufacturer by 1925),³ held a solidly established market position in St. Louis where four Buick dealers offered service. In the mid 1920s, all four dealers found it necessary to move into larger buildings as a result of greatly expanded Buick sales.⁴

One of St. Louis' largest car dealerships, the Vesper-Buick Auto Co., had grown at such a fast pace that the firm had moved twice since its founding in 1914 and had increased its capital stock from \$50,000 to \$500,000 in 1922. Distributor for Buicks in eastern Missouri, southern Illinois and western Kentucky, the company was organized by Frederick W. A. Vesper who came to St. Louis to take over the city's sole Buick agency in 1914. Born in Lawrence,

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Kansas in 1874, Vesper began his business career as a bicycle dealer but within a few years he was involved in the farm implements trade. He entered the automobile industry when he established a distributing house for the Buick Motor Co. in Dallas, Texas. His successful management of the agency gained him position of Assistant Salesmanager at Buick headquarters in Flint, Michigan. While visiting St. Louis on behalf of the Buick Co., Vesper decided to locate in the city. In addition to his contributions to St. Louis' commercial life, Vesper took an active role in civic affairs, serving as founder and President of the National Automobile Dealers Association and President of the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce. During his two year presidency of the Chamber of Commerce in the early 1920s, he campaigned vigorously for a bond issue for civic improvements using billboards on the side of his Buick agency to advertise the bond issue. 5

Architecture:

In preparing plans for his third and final Buick sales building, Vesper recognized the potent sales value of design and image, new factors which also were reshaping the automobile industry at the time. Although mechanically the car had changed little during the 1920s, style changes demanded by the public were reported to be costing manufacturers millions each year as competition grew keen for variety in body types and range of colors.⁶ Paralleling this heightened awareness of fashion in car design, dealers strove to capture the public eye by upgrading their business places with "smart showrooms" installed with wide expanses of plate glass windows and stylish exteriors. For the most part, car sales and showroom buildings erected in St. Louis during the teens and twenties were designed with traditional brick masonry exteriors articulated with Craftsman or Classical Revival detailing in terra cotta. They followed design modes popular in both domestic and commercial buildings of the period.

Vesper's desire to set his new building apart from those of other retail car dealers is clear from its unconventional stucco exterior finish articulated in Spanish Colonial Revival (Photos # 1, 2). A consciousness of design was also reflected in his comment that he sought to "provide a building of which all St. Louis as well as the firm itself will be proud," one which would "create a genuine addition to the city's architecture."⁷ The architect selected by Vesper for this task, Preston J. Bradshaw (1883-1953), was perhaps St. Louis' most prominent and experienced designer of hotels and apartment buildings during the 1920s.⁸ In addition, Bradshaw had drawn up plans for numerous commercial buildings devoted to the automobile trade. One of his earliest and most distinctive designs for car sales was part of a complex erected in 1915 known as the Plaza Hotel Complex (listed in the National Register). Executed with a stucco finish in Mission/Spanish Colonial Revival style, these buildings attracted considerable attention at the time for their

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prominent site and unusual design and materials. Nevertheless, they seemed to have had limited influence in conservative brick clad St. Louis until some years later when the Vesper-Buick building appeared in 1927. (Drawings for a large apartment complex in California and a hotel in Florida, however, reveal that Bradshaw had designed in the Mission style outside St. Louis).

The new building was officially opened February 4, 1928 with festivities lasting for a week which coincided with the Annual Auto Show. Press coverage of the building's plan and design was unusually detailed, noting in particular its "Spanish style, the treatment being applied to the interior of the retail show room and the administrative offices, as well as to the outside, where tile roof, stucco finish and generally Spanish lines prevail." The Spanish theme was given appropriate emphasis at the angled main entrance to the show room where a dramatic display of terra cotta Spanish Baroque ornament was featured, flanked by small windows covered with decorative iron grillwork (Photo #2). A curvilinear shaped gable marked the side (east) entrance on Vandeventer Avenue. At the cornice, bands of rich terra cotta ornament incorporated cartouches with the company's monogram, V B. The large plate glass windows enclosing the showroom on two sides were framed with ornamental iron; bays were defined by fluted pilasters embellished with capitals.

The showroom, capable of displaying sixteen cars, was reported to be one of the largest in the country. The spaciousness of the floor area was enhanced by the height of the room which opened the full two story building height (Fig. 1). Ornamental detailing was intentionally executed with restraint on the interior, "so as to provide an unobtrusive setting for the Buick line." ¹⁰ The main entrance was accented by decorative plasterwork but less exuberantly designed than the exterior terra cotta. Reinforced concrete columns (now partially concealed by non-original sheathing and a dropped ceiling) were dressed with plaster paneling enriched with rope molding and ornamental capitals; a plaster frieze at the ceiling featured rope molding and cartouches with the company monogram. Natural illumination provided by the large windows was supplemented by long ranges of floodlights installed in the ceiling. Muted buff and green tones of the glazed ceramic tile floor (intact) were in keeping with an effort to control color in "neutral tints" on the walls and columns. ¹¹

Contemporary accounts of the original plan of Vesper-Buick stressed that the building was laid out with great care for the convenience of the public and reflected the "importance which progressive automobile organizations attach to service, and the lengths to which they go, today, to provide that service." It was noted that,

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All departments with which the public has contact are readily accessible from the street. The parts department, for instance, is reached through a separate door opening on Vandeventer Avenue without climbing stairs or threading devious passageways.

The service receiving department with its quick service floor where adjustments and minor repairs are made while the customer waits are just inside the wide door off Vandeventer Avenue and a comfortable waiting room is provided for the convenience of owners.¹²

Executive offices were located along the south and west sides of the showroom. Three survive on the first floor with original dark oak paneling (Fig.1); one office at the southwest corner of the showroom also features a skylight covered with ornamental iron grillwork and a decorative plaster freize. Fronting along Vandeventer Avenue on the second story is another office with original oak paneling. A balcony fitted with a decorative iron railing overlooks the south end of the showroom.

In 1930, the Vesper-Buick Auto Co. was succeeded by the Buick Motor Co. Factory Branch which occupied the building along with Willcockson Buick, a company incorporated in 1930 by William H. Willcockson, a former officer in Vesper-Buick. The building was used for automobile sales and service until the 1940s when an electrical supplies firm located there. Although in more recent years the building has suffered from deferred maintenance, rehabilitation plans are now under consideration.

FOOTNOTES

1 John Rae, American Automobile Manufacturers: the First Forty Years, (Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1959), p.170.

2 George P. Dorris et al., Four Wheels No Brakes: A History of Automobiles in St. Louis and the Part That City Has Taken in the Development of the Automobile, (St. Louis: Van Hoffmann Press, St. Louis Society Automobile Pioneers, c. 1930), pp.127-32; p.236.

3 Rae, pp.138-9; p.156.

4 St. Louis Post Dispatch 21 August 1927

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5 Greater St. Louis November 1921

6 St. Louis Post Dispatch 28 August 1927, "Many Millions Spent in Car Style Changes."

7 St. Louis Post Dispatch 29 January 1928; 5 February 1928, "Vast New Vesper-Buick Plant Opened Yesterday."

8 A graduate of Columbia University, Bradshaw (c.1883-1953) was associated with New York architect Stanford White before returning to St. Louis. Many of his designs were published in leading national architectural journals. Among his large projects in St. Louis are the Mayfair, Lennox, Chase, Melbourne, Coronado and Forest Park hotels.

9 St. Louis Post Dispatch 29 January 1928.

10 St. Louis Post Dispatch 5 February 1928.

11 St. Louis Post Dispatch 5 February 1928.

12 St. Louis Post Dispatch 5 February 1928.

9. Major Bibliographical References

See attached.

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of nominated property less than one acre

Quadrangle name Granite City, IL/MO

Quadrangle scale 1:24,000

UTM References

A

1	5
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7	4	0	0	9	0
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4	2	7	9	9	1	0
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Verbal boundary description and justification Parcel in City Block 3920 in Block 25 of Peter Lindell's 2nd Addition fronting 213' 2 $\frac{1}{4}$ " on Vandeventer and 150' on West Pine.

List all states and counties for properties overlapping state or county boundaries

state	code	county	code

11. Form Prepared By Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc.

name/title ¹ Mary M. Stiritz, Research Director

organization Landmarks Association of St. Louis, Inc. date 7/7/86

street & number 917 Locust, 7th floor telephone (314) 421-6474

city or town St. Louis state MO 63101

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

☐ national ☐ state ☒ local

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

State Historic Preservation Officer signature

Wayne E. Brown

for Frederick A. Brunner, Ph.D., P. E., Director, Department of Natural Resources, and
title State Historic Preservation Officer date 8/22/86

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I hereby certify that this property is included in the National Register

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

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Dorris, George P., et al. Four Wheels No Brakes: A History of Automobiles in St. Louis and the Part That City Has Taken in the Development of the Automobile. St. Louis: Van Hoffmann Press, St. Louis Society Automobile Pioneers, c. 1930.

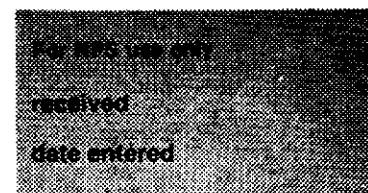
Greater St. Louis. November 1921.

Rae, John. American Automobile Manufacturers: The First Forty Years. Philadelphia: Chilton Co., 1959.

St. Louis Post Dispatch 21 August 1927; 28 August 1927 "Many Millions Spent in Car Style Changes"; 29 January 1928; 5 February 1928 "Vast New Vesper-Buick Plant Opened Yesterday."

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2. James M. Denny
Chief, Survey and Registration
and State Contact Person
Department of Natural Resources
Historic Preservation Program
9th Floor, Jefferson Building
P. O. Box 176
Jefferson City, Missouri 65102
Date: August 18, 1986
Phone: 314-751-5376

VESPER-BUICK AUTO COMPANY BUILDING

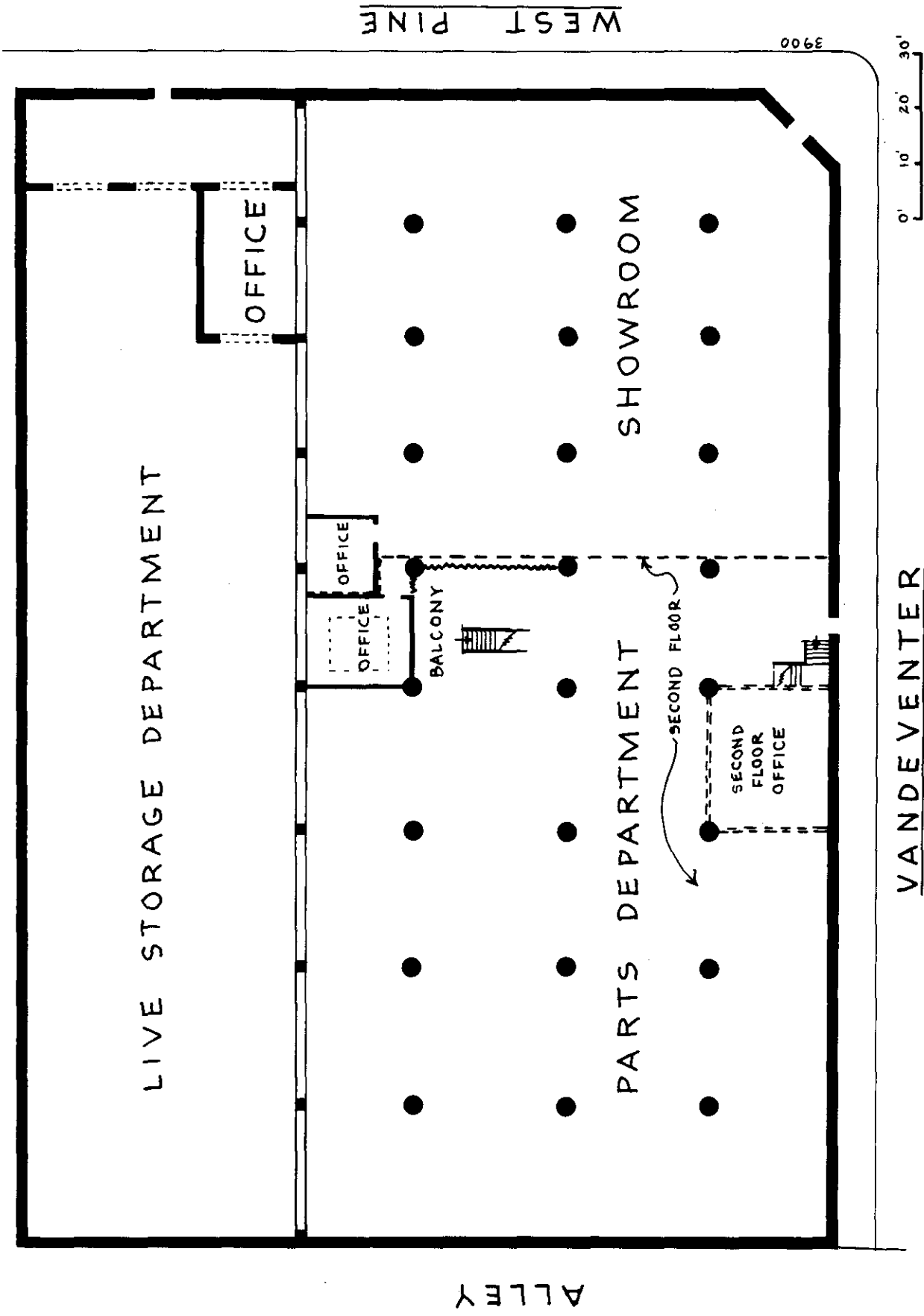
St. Louis, MO

Figure #1 of 1

Sketch Map

Drawn by: Pat Hays Baer

Date: July 1986



VANDEVENTER

SKETCH MAP: **VESPER-BUICK AUTO COMPANY BUILDING**
 ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI
 SHOWING REMAINING ORIGINAL INTERIOR SPACES

VESPER-BUICK AUTO COMPANY BUILDING

St. Louis, MO

#1 of 3

Photographer: Cynthia Longwisch

Date: June 1986

Negative: Landmarks Association of St. Louis,
Inc.

Camera facing southwest (north & east ele-
vations)



VESPER-BUICK AUTO COMPANY BUILDING

St. Louis, MO

#2 of 3

Photographer: Cynthia Longwisch

Date: June 1986

Negative: Landmarks Assoc. of St. Louis, Inc.

Camera facing southwest (detail, main entrance)



VESPER-BUICK AUTO COMPANY BUILDING

St. Louis, MO

#3 of 3

Photographer: Cynthia Longwisch

Date: June 1986

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Camera facing northeast (rear (south) elevation)



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