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 determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any 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 certification comments, entries, and narrative items on continuation sheets if needed (NPS Form 10-900a).**

1. Name of Property

historic name Babcock Theatre Building

other names/site number 24YL1880

2. Location

street & number 114-124 N. 28th and 2808-2812 2nd Ave. N/A not for publication

city or town Billings N/A vicinity

state Montana code MT county Yellowstone code 111 zip code 59101

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 at the following level(s) of significance:

___ **national** ___ **statewide** _x_ **local**

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official Date

Title State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register ___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register ___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

Babcock Theatre Building
Name of Property

Yellowstone County, MT
County and State

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply.)

- [x] private
- [ ] public - Local
- [ ] public - State
- [ ] public - Federal

Category of Property
(Check only **one** box.)

- [x] building(s)
- [ ] district
- [ ] site
- [ ] structure
- [ ] object

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count.)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structures
		objects
1		**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

N/A

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theatre
DOMESTIC: multiple dwelling
COMMERCE/TRADE: business

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)

RECREATION AND CULTURE: theatre
DOMESTIC: multiple dwelling
COMMERCE/TRADE: business

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)

LATE 19TH AND EARLY 20TH CENTURY AMERICAN MOVEMENTS: Commercial Style

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions.)

foundation: CONCRETE
walls: BRICK, CONCRETE, GLASS
roof: SYNTHETICS: Rubber
other:

Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance of the property. Explain contributing and noncontributing resources if necessary. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, setting, size, and significant features.)

Summary Paragraph

The Babcock Theatre Building, located in Billings in the Yellowstone Valley, is a large commercial building in a Two-Block Commercial style located at the corner of 2nd Avenue North and North Broadway, a major business intersection in downtown Billings. The rimrock that defines the valley is visible less than one mile to the north, while the Yellowstone River lies 2.5 miles to the south. Several designs sporting varying numbers of floors were drawn up prior to its construction as it now stands. The building faces north with the east elevation serving as the secondary façade. Second story apartments sit above the ground floor retail shops and theatre. The building is a strong architectural element within downtown, reinforcing the historic context of the area. The building retains much of the original design, easily conveying its historic associations and integrity.

Narrative Description

The Babcock Theatre Building is a massive two-story commercial brick building located two blocks north of the railroad tracks at the southwest corner of Broadway and 2nd Avenue North in the central business district of Billings. Broadway was the center of commercial expansion at the turn of the twentieth century and remains a vibrant downtown commercial core today. The Babcock Theatre Building is surrounded by a strong neighborhood of two to five-story historic commercial structures built during the early 1900's. Constructed in 1907, during a robust growth period in Billings, the building served to replace the original Billings Opera House destroyed by fire. The Babcock Theatre Building, originally designed as a four-story structure, was redesigned as a seven-story structure; however, only the two-story base and the opera house portion were ultimately constructed. It serves as an excellent example of the base component of a Two Block Commercial style building. The building contains seven retail spaces, 16 apartments and the only remaining historic theatre in Billings. The theatre marquee is visible for several blocks and is a dominant element on 2nd Ave N.

DESCRIPTON OF EXISTING BUILDING
The Babcock Theatre Building is rectangular in shape, measuring 140' by 150'. It occupies one quarter of a full 300' by 300' block with its 21,000 S.F. footprint. The main facades are the north, which faces Second Avenue North, and the east façade, which faces North Broadway (also known as North 28th Street). The south side is common with the adjacent building and the west elevation faces the alley. The 290' of harmonious frontage gives the building a commanding presence at this location.

The building is comprised of ground floor retail with glass storefronts topped with brick faced second floor apartments and anchored with a 760-seat theatre along the west side. The building is primarily two stories tall with the theatre elements rising to 55' at the auditorium and 70' at the fly loft. There is a one-story light court in the center of the building between the apartments and the theatre. The building fits well in this neighborhood of large two to five-story commercial structures.

The building is built on a concrete basement, completely underground. On the north and east sides the basement extends out under the sidewalks in concrete vaults. Sidewalks on 2nd Ave (north side) still contain the Luxfer prism glass lights embedded in the concrete sidewalk.

The walls surrounding the theatre are constructed of 20"+/- thick concrete and extend from the basement to the parapet at the roof. They are visible from all sides. The roof of the theatre is a solid gang nailed wood deck on wood bow trusses. The theatre auditorium roof is bowed and edged with a concrete parapet wall. The fly loft roof is flat with sloping sides and bounded with a parapet wall. A low slung shed roof covers the projection booth. Dark red thermoplastic polyolefin (TPO) covers all these roofs.

The ground floor is constructed with steel columns and steel beams on the exterior walls and walls of the arcade. Heavy timber columns and wood beams provide the structure on the interior. The exterior walls of the second floor are masonry, constructed of multi-wythe brick with a buff face brick on the street facades and a plaster parged, common brick face on the light court. The two-story area extends along the north and east sides. There is a one-story section in the center that forms a light court and contains four large skylights. Parapet walls rise above a tan TPO covered flat roof.

EXTERIOR ELEVATIONS

NORTH AND EAST ELEVATIONS

The north and east elevations are similar and both are comprised of nine bays. Cast stone covered columns separate glass and metal storefronts on the ground floor. Each side displays a narrow arched bay at the center flanked by three wider bays followed by narrow bays at the ends. The arched bay has original terra cotta signage noting the building as "19 Babcock 07". The arched bays served as the original main building entries and lead to an "L" shaped interior arcade.

Many of the original storefront elements were removed during various modernizations starting in the late 1950's. The current storefront elements were added during the 2008-2012 rehabilitation and replicate the original. The storefront has a base of metal panels with fixed clear glass in metal framing above. A horizontal band at 10' forms the base for the reeded glass transom above. The cast stone columns display a plain base and shaft with a decorative cap.

The wider bays are divided into thirds. The narrow bays to the south and west are divided in half. The narrow bay at the northeast corner is cut away and has a recessed door. The transom divisions match the storefronts. Recessed entry doors to the retail spaces are located in four of the wider bays on the east and three on the north. The whole storefront at the arched bays is recessed 3' and served by a pair of glass and aluminum doors.

The second story features horizontal brick banding interspersed with large double-hung windows. A continuous horizontal band of smooth brick caps the columns and is topped with a projecting band of cast stone. Above this is a textured brick band, extending the full height of the windows. The texture of the band is formed by projecting brick every fourth course. Above this is another horizontal band of smooth brick, capped with a cast stone cornice. Above this, the wall steps back to form the parapet. The fenestration on the second level is composed of large one-over-one double hung windows. The nine bay pattern of the lower level is reflected in the second floor fenestration with the larger single windows located at the narrow bays and groupings of 3 windows located over the wider bays.

The north elevation features the entrance to the upstairs apartments as well as the entrance to the theatre. The narrow western end bay is marked with a metal sign indicating "Babcock Apartments." This entrance leads to a vestibule with full-height glass which opens to a grand apartment lobby with high ceilings, crystal chandelier, grand stairway and elevator.

Dominating the north side of the building and located in the next two bays is the theatre entrance. A large illuminated angled marquee projects out over the sidewalk. Scripted neon-lit "*Babcock"* rises above changeable sign panels on both sides, at the center of which is a neon covered red, blue and gold scroll. The sign panel is outlined in small flashing lights. A lighted soffit extends from under the marquee to the deeply recessed entry. Oversized silver poster frames flank the entry wall of glass doors. In the center of the recessed entry stands an ornate ticket booth, with sweeping plaster lid and pillowed stainless steel base. The poster frames and the ticket booth are excellent examples of some of the key elements of the Skouras style of theatre design.

WEST ELEVATION

The west wall of the building opens onto an alley and serves as an exterior wall for the theatre. It is primarily painted parged concrete running the full length of the building and is two stories tall at the north end, increasing to 55' height at the auditorium and then to 70' at the fly loft. A parged brick chimney extends above the roof line at the northwest corner of the theatre.

It is a utilitarian side of the building with one operable double-hung window on the north end and one opening filled with glass block. A few segmental arched openings that have been bricked in are visible. Four pairs of nondescript metal service doors exist; one serves the basement, two serve as exits for the theatre, and one occurs at the stage. A fire escape, serving the theatre's balcony is located about midway along the elevation. Concrete structural piers are located at the auditorium portion. Gas meters, electrical meters and feeds and some mechanical equipment are also present.

SOUTH ELEVATION

The south side of the building is common with a two-story structure to the south. The painted concrete fly loft is visible above the neighboring roof. A fire escape runs the length of the fly loft wall.

INTERIOR FLOOR PLAN AND ARRANGEMENT

BASEMENT
The basement has been extensively remodeled, and while there are hints of its former use, there is little if any historic fabric remaining. There are random ceramic tile floors and walls of the old toilet room and candy factory, and remnants of the bowling alley's wooden lanes, both of which are compromised.

MAIN FLOOR
The main floor retains its original layout and use except for the 1927 conversion of three retail spaces on the north side from retail spaces to entrances for the theatre and second floor apartments. The building is split about in half with the theatre on the west side and retail spaces on the east side. The arched bays of the outside lead to an original "L" shaped arcade on the inside. This arcade served as the original entrance to all areas of the building. The retail spaces opened onto this interior mall with doors and display windows. The main entrance to the opera house occurred from the arcade. The entrance to the second floor offices and the basement bowling alley also occurred from the arcade.

The arcade retains much of the historic fabric. There are nine remaining Luxfer prism glass units which provide light into the basement space. The floor in the north leg of the arcade exhibits the original round mosaic tile and green border tile from the 1907 construction. The walls still contain some of the 1907 original white glazed tile (subway tile) and there is a remnant of a sign noting "No bicycles or loafing in this arcade." An arched ceiling and new skylights were installed during the 2008-2012 renovation. A pair of original oak doors leads to the upstairs rooms. Above these rests an original stained glass transom panel. To the right of the doors is a single historic door providing access to a janitor's closet and to the right of that is a pair of historic doors that serve as theatre exits. Continuing along the west wall of the arcade is a nook that once opened into the office of the opera house. Midway on the west wall is an opening framed in new oak columns with oversized sliding doors. The patterns of the original tile indicate this location served as the primary entrance to the opera house.

The finishes of the main floor retail spaces have been extensively remodeled over time but their configuration is very close to the original. The historic fabric that does remain consists of pressed tin ceilings and wooden floors.

THEATRE
The west half of the main floor contains the theatre. Overall, the theatre is an excellent example of the Skouras style of theatre decoration. It is very unique in that it is one of the few theatres outside of California and one of the last to be finished in this style.

Under the lighted marquee soffit are tapered walls with Skouras style poster panels and a ticket booth with swooping plaster and quilted metal base. Three pairs of glass doors open into a vestibule with a ceiling with wavy plaster trim and a neon lit cove. The vestibule opens to the outer lobby through another set of three pairs of glass doors. Fluted golden columns divide the outer lobby from the inner lobby. The lobby ceiling displays more wavy plaster trim and the inner lobby contains another neon lit cove. Grand staircases with chrome handrails flank each side and lead to the mezzanine and balcony areas above. In the center of the south wall of the lobby sits a non-descript concession stand. Flanking this are two sets of draped doorways that lead to the auditorium.

A gently sloping auditorium floor leads down to a stage. Two columns support the upper balcony and seating is arranged in three groups with carpeted aisles.

Red drapes frame the proscenium opening. Above this is elaborate plaster decoration in swirls of blue, gold and silver, typical of the Skouras style. The side walls of the proscenium are covered floor to ceiling with more decorative plaster with puffed centers in a diamond shaped grid. Oversized gold scrolls race dramatically up the walls on both sides of the auditorium. The walls above the swirls and the ceiling are covered with non-original acoustical material. A wide cornice of cast plaster concealing neon lighting trims the top of the walls of the auditorium. The underside of the balcony has a smaller cast plaster cove with red and blue neon lighting. Above exit doors are ornately lettered, lit exit signs.

A mezzanine that contains the men and women's toilet rooms sits above the lobby. An earlier remodeling converted the original1935 women's toilet room into a janitor's closet.

The balcony is steeply raked with five rows of seating below and eight rows of seating above the entry cross-aisle. At the back of the upper balcony is a two-level projection booth with roof access.

SECOND FLOOR
The second floor contains 16 apartments. Access to the second floor is from the last bay on the north side of the building or through a pair of doors in the arcade. The apartments line each side of the east hallway and one side of the north hallway. The apartments have arched windows and small doors that open onto the hallway. These once served as

service doors for deliveries. The apartments feature narrow kitchens with built-in cabinets, medium sized bathrooms with tubs and large built-in closets. The apartments are mostly studio and one bedroom in size. The studio apartments have a "bed closet." The windows face both Broadway and Second Avenue North as well as into the light court. Members of the Babcock family, the original owners, and the Lipsker family, the second owners, lived in the Babcock apartments.

INTEGRITY

The building retains a high degree of integrity and clearly displays its associations with the commercial development in Billings and architectural design trends of its era. The Babcock Theatre Building retains many of its original features and is in excellent condition. Most of the materials used in its original construction are intact and remain important components of the building. It displays excellent integrity of location at the commercial center of the downtown. The design exemplifies a commercial style popular at the turn of the 20th century in contrast to its neo-classical neighbors. The street level shops, theater and upper level residences remain true to the historic building use.

The historic theatre entrance with its architecturally significant features of ticket booth and marquee remains in very good condition and depict very strongly the historic design easily conveying one of the many functions of this building. The interior of the theatre is a well preserved representation of the ornate movie palace design prevalent in the 1940's and 1950's. The culmination of the recent restoration work has returned the Babcock Theatre Building to its earlier days of architectural grandeur. It remains an important element in the fabric of the downtown commercial and entertainment district.

Babcock Theatre Building
Name of Property

Yellowstone County, MT
County and 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.)

- [x] 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.
- [x] 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 old or achieving significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION
COMMERCE
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance

1907-1955

Significant Dates

1907, 1927, 1935, 1955

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

1907-Edwin Houghton, Architect/ Matthew Dow & Co. Contractor

1927-Ben F. Shearer Studios, IncFrank Jacoby & Sons Contractor

1935-Edwin Osness Architect, A.B. Heinsbergen-Decorator

1955 Carl Moeller of Fox West Coast Theatres under Charles Skouraz

Period of Significance (justification)

The period of significance spans from the construction of the Babcock Theatre Building in 1907 until the last large remodel in 1955.

Criteria Considerations (explanation, if necessary)

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance and applicable criteria.)

The Babcock Theatre Building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C at the local level of significance. The Babcock Theatre Building was one of the finest houses between the Midwest and West Coast when it opened on December 23, 1907. Under Criterion A, the Babcock Theatre Building served as an important anchor in the northern expansion of Billings' downtown from its origins along the railroad tracks and the Northern Pacific Depot. The building is linked to a range of uses important to the growth of culture and commerce in the city.

Under Criterion C, the building is a significant downtown landmark. Designed by renowned Seattle theatre architect Edwin W. Houghton, the building, designed in the Two-Block Commercial style, contrasts with the more common Classical Revival styles of the surrounding area. In addition to a theatre, the building housed retail, residential, and office space. The theatre evolved over time but remains an excellent example of the Skouras-Style theatre design, and the sole surviving historic theatre in Billings.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Babcock Theatre Building, constructed in 1907, is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C at the local level of significance. The Babcock Theatre Building, currently Billings' oldest entertainment venue, was one of the finest houses between the Midwest and West coast when it opened on December 23, 1907. Under Criterion A, the Babcock Theatre Building, located at the corner of 2nd Ave. and North Broadway, is an important anchor in the northern expansion of Billings' downtown, linked to a time when the commercial area was expanded north from its origins along the railroad tracks and near the Northern Pacific Depot. Providing entertainment and retail spaces, residential and office spaces, the building is linked functionally to a range of uses that were important to the growth of commerce and culture in the city.

Under Criterion C, the building is a significant landmark in the downtown fabric. It was designed by renowned Seattle theatre architect, Edwin W. Houghton. The building, designed in the Two Block Commercial style, contrasts with the more common Classical Revival styles of its contemporary neighboring buildings. The inclusion of a theatre in the design and construction of the building provides additional significance under Criteria C. Constructed as an opera house, it transitioned from stage performances to silent films, through the rise and fall of the movie palace. It evolved over time as the economy changed and the movie industry developed and refined itself. It survived modernization and is an excellent example of the Skouras-Style theatre design. It is one of the last theatres done in this style and one of the few examples outside of California. The theatre is the sole surviving historic theatre in Billings and is an important representation of motion picture facilities and the movie industry of the early to mid-20th century.

History of Billings

For thousands of years prior to Anglo-Euro settlement, many different tribes or bands of Native Americans inhabited the Billings area. Archaeological evidence indicates that early native peoples have visited the Yellowstone River region in the vicinity of Billings for over 10,000 years. The Crow utilized the Alkali Creek drainage northeast of downtown Billings as a travel route for access between the Yellowstone Valley and the bench lands to the north. In the vicinity of Alkali Creek, archaeological investigations have documented bison kills and camping sites.

While numerous tribes camped and hunted in the Yellowstone Valley, the valley served as home to the Crow for many centuries. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 established the Crow Indian Reservation that included much of the Yellowstone River Basin west of the Powder River. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 reduced Crow Reservation boundaries by removing all lands north (thereby including the Clark's Fork Bottom) and west of the Yellowstone River. This taking of land allowed for the eventual first settlement in the Clark's Fork Bottom in the spring of 1877. In addition to

the Crow who lived in the area for centuries, other tribes such as the Sioux and Cheyenne utilized the resources of the area, generally as a result of the western expansion.

Though created for the exclusive use of the tribes, reservations lands were often coveted by non-Indians. With much of the available lands in the West already settled in the early 1900's, grazing and agricultural lands were especially desirable including those on reservations. Under the General Allotment Act or Dawes Act, open lands on reservations not settled by Indians were opened to non-Indians on November 1, 1910. Under the Act, reservations were surveyed and individual tribal members allotted a specific amount of acreage, which replaced communal tribal holdings. The Act served as a primary impetus at this time for the westward movement of Euro-Americans; many utilized the Act to acquire property within reservation boundaries.

Foundations of Billings

The text in this section is from Chere Jiusto's Tales Spun Along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings. Western Heritage Press Billings, Montana, 1998.

> *Billings is situated on the north bank of the Yellowstone River, at a point on the Northern Pacific railroad 915 miles west of St. Paul and about midway between that city and the terminus of the road at Puget Sound. The town is located upon a gently sloping plain at the eastern extremity of the most beautiful of Montana valleys – the Clark Fork bottom – north of the town a line of rugged cliffs, the bank of a once wide Yellowstone, divides the bottom lands along the river from a higher plateau.*[1]

Born in 1882, the city of Billings was a rail hub founded by the Northern Pacific Railroad on a site originally known as Clark's Fork Bottom. Eclipsing the earlier settlement of Coulson just to the northeast, the town of Billings was laid out around the rail line by the Montana and Minnesota Land & Improvement Company. With land holdings on both sides of the tracks, the city was laid out with the rail line running down the center, and the main streets of Montana and Minnesota fronting onto the rails.

Heman Clark, agent for the Northern Pacific Railroad, arrived in Billings on April 1, 1882. Detailing the creation of the Billings townsite to hopeful settlers, he announced the railroad's plan for a townsite envisioned to hold 20,000 inhabitants. The railroad would develop eight or nine sawmills, a 16-mile irrigation system and rail spurs to nearby mines, and name it all in honor of past NP president, Frederick Billings. Clark's arrival "lit the fuse of a crazed land boom"[2] as buyers competed to purchase town properties. By May 1882, the first three buildings were erected in town – a railroad headquarters, H. Clark's townsite office and mercantile, and a lone residence.[3] In August 1882, when the NP line was completed to Billings many new residents had already arrived. Buildings to house new arrivals were hastily constructed south of the tracks, while commercial buildings and hotels were located close to the hub of railroad activities. By the end of the following year, the newspaper reported some 400 buildings, occupied by over 1500 citizens. Downtown occupied an area of about nine blocks, split evenly north and south of the railroad tracks. First log and frame, and later, brick and stone business buildings were built along the rail corridor in late Victorian styles.

In 1893, Billings was named county seat of Yellowstone County and by the turn of the twentieth century, the town included "a water works, electric lights, graded streets, efficient fire department, excellent schools and churches, good society, [and] an intelligent class of people."[4] The population spread into the flats north of the downtown and the north side neighborhood became increasingly attractive with frame and brick homes of a number of prominent citizens scattered through the area. In 1900, the U.S. census counted a population of 3,221 Billings residents.

Billings rapidly took the lead as a transportation hub for the large agricultural region in surrounding eastern Montana and northern Wyoming. Livestock was the keystone of the local economy, and cattle ranching and sheep growing dominated the high plains country around Billings. In addition, the railroad linked by spur lines to mining districts in the nearby mountains. Silver from the Judith Basin, White Sulphur Springs and Cooke City mines flowed through Billings, along with coal from the Red Lodge coalfields.

---

[1] D. Leubrie, Chicago Inter-Ocean, 19 November 1888.

[2] Van West, Capitalism on the Frontier, p.180.

[3] Hendry & Fell, Billings Directory 1883; History of the Yellowstone Valley, p.292.

[4] D. Leubrie, Chicago Inter-Ocean, 19 November 1888.

These extractive and agricultural industries supported a solid business community in Billings, and growth of the downtown reflected the brisk pace of commerce. The commercial heart of town remained centered on Montana and Minnesota Avenues but began to stretch on a perpendicular course up Broadway. This was first evidenced by substantial retail development along the railroad tracks and several hotels near the first railroad depot several blocks east of Broadway Street. The original railroad depot was judged to be an inadequate stop by the railroad companies. Therefore, passengers were redirected to disembark at the Headquarters Hotel at the foot of Broadway Avenue. This combined depot and street blockade caused commercial expansion to extend north on Broadway. The north side of the tracks became a finance, shopping, hotel and office district while the rail yards, warehouses, manufacturing and the Yegen Brothers' mercantile establishment concentrated south of the tracks and to the east of the Montana Avenue businesses. On the expanding north end, a substantial granite courthouse and a new city hall and firehouse were built during the first decade of the twentieth century.

The year 1909 was momentous in Billings' history. That year, the construction of the Great Northern Railway through Montana and Billings west occurred, Congress passed the Enlarged Homestead Act, and the Fourth Annual Dryland Farming Congress was held. In the heartland of dry farming, Billings' population boomed as hopeful homesteaders flooded the plains. The 1910 census indicated Billings was the sixth-fastest growing community in the nation and the population bulged at 10,031. During the decade that followed the population swelled to almost 18,000 before dropping back to 15,100 in 1920.

During the boom years of the 1910's, the streetscape of the city was transformed. Increasingly, older buildings and empty lots on the edges of the downtown gave way to larger, multi-story commercial blocks and hotels, including the Babcock Theatre and the earlier Billings Opera House. The new downtown Union Depot, the Northern and Grand Hotels, the Bank of Montana and the Masonic Temple are among the other impressive buildings erected during this era.

Toward the end of the homestead boom, oil production began on the outskirts of town. The Elk Basin oil field on the Montana-Wyoming border was located in mid-1915, and by the following year, the first well near Billings was drilled. Soon the Montana-Wyoming Oil Journal was in print to report on the latest developments from the oil fields. Just six years later, natural gas was also discovered in the basin, and plans for a pipeline to the city were discussed. This industry helped pull Billings through the "bust" end of the homestead cycle and through the 1940's and 1950's became a lynchpin of the local economy.

It is over a century since Billings took root on the dusty alkali flats of Clark's Fork Bottom. Now a bustling metropolis, it has lived up to the promises of town founders and railroad boosters. Billings still remains the state's largest city and a market hub for eastern Montana and northern Wyoming. Tall buildings and the business district of downtown Billings reflect the prosperity of the present, but continue to tell the older tales as well. The legacy of this past is what gives the town its own unique personality, and shapes its future.

Predecessor of the Babcock Theatre

By 1895, the traveling road show had become the usual source of theatrical entertainment across the United States. With the railroad linking the east and west coast, quality entertainment was available to the new towns in the western territories.[5] On February 4, 1896, A.L. Babcock opened the Billings Opera House on Montana Avenue between 25th and 26th Streets with a performance of "Bicycle Girl" starring Nellie McHenry. With a cost of construction around $10,000, the completion of the opera house was a noted accomplishment in the advancement of the young western town in the Yellowstone Valley. The play house was "not exactly a poem in architectural design, nor yet as imposing as some play houses in the state, still it shows up well and is large enough for all present purposes."[6] It sat 800 and brought high caliber performances "evidence of the fact that this city is rapidly taking on metropolitan airs."[7] While the exterior was not note worthy, the interior was fully decorated, the acoustics excellent and the new electrical lights "set in plastic relief work of beautiful figures" give the interior a "charming" appearance.[8] Nellie McHenry gave the opening dedication and thanks to Senator Babcock. She also gave a political push for the men of Billings to back Babcock as candidate for governor.

[5] Oscar G. Brockett, *The History of the Theatre* (Austin and Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 2007), p.583 & 584.

[6] "Best in the West", Opera House opening night program, Babcock Theatre, 23 December 1907.

[7] "Best in the West", Opera House opening night program, Babcock Theatre, 23 December 1907.

[8] Ibid.

Mr. Babcock operated the house until it burned on September 22, 1906. The fire was spotted around 3:00 am and the building was completely ruined within an hour. The neighboring Commercial Hotel was scorched but saved by the efforts of the Maverick Hose Company. On September 22, the Billings Dailey Times quoted Mr. Babcock as saying that he was glad it burned when it did and not during a performance. He said "The burning of the old opera house hastens the erection of a modern, commodious theatre, one that has been under contemplation for some time, and equal any playhouse between St. Paul and Butte, and in erecting the new building, I will be associated with theatrical managers of the highest reputation in the west." The site of the new building will be decided upon in the near future, while the plans for the new house have been under consideration for some time." [9]

Construction of the Babcock Theatre—the Early Years

The site of the new building was soon decided. The Montana Avenue area was in decline at the time and businessmen were encouraged to expand north from the railroad and the railroad tracks. After the Headquarters Hotel burned, development along N. 28th Street (later renamed Broadway) grew. By 1906, Broadway boasted several substantial brick structures, including City Hall, and was quickly becoming the commercial hub for the growing metropolis.[10]

A.L. Babcock purchased lots 7-12 of block 93 as undeveloped property in March of 1889 from H.A. Bruns, before the downtown business district began to spread north. By 1889, a few homes were erected on the south portion of the block, but the north end remained undeveloped except for a tennis court. He sold half interest in the property to Henry W. Rowley in April of 1889 and purchased it back in 1906 as the site for construction of the new opera house.[11]

With the site determined, the plans were finalized. Mr. Babcock commissioned Edwin Walker Houghton of 414-416 Collins Block in Seattle, Washington to work on these early plans. Mr. Houghton (1856-1927), a prominent Seattle architect with a substantial reputation in theatre and opera house design, was known as the dean of theatre architects. Working mostly in the Pacific Northwest, Houghton did, however, design the Grand Opera House in Butte, Montana and the Helena Theatre in the capital city of Helena, during the heyday of gold and copper mining.[12]

Replacing the opera house was important news to the community indicated by its coverage in several newspaper articles. By November 11, 1906, just a month and a half after the fire, the Billings Gazette announced that plans were ready for the new building. "The stage will be 60 feet wide, with a depth of 35 feet and will contain all of the up-to-date mechanical methods used in the larger opera houses of the east. A balcony and gallery will be one of the features of the new play house and these with the auditorium will have a seating capacity of 1250." [13] The plans called for…"an opera house of the latest modern design and the box arrangement will be entirely different from that of any opera house now in existence on the Pacific coast."[14] The interior was to be lit by hundreds of incandescent lights and featured fire proof curtains and multiple exits. Estimated cost of construction was $50,000-$60,000**.** Two weeks later, the bids for construction were scheduled to open with construction starting immediately.[15]

The continued rapid growth of the community, doubling in size over the previous year, led to optimistic predictions of Billings becoming the "Chicago of the Northwest."[16] Mr. Babcock, a staunch believer in the future of Billings, required little convincing when approached by concerned and dedicated citizens that a larger and more substantial development was what the city needed. Mr. Babcock joined forces with Joe Simms, Bert Shorey and (future Broadway magnate) John Cort

---

[9] "The Opera House Makes Big Blaze, Fire Attains Good Headway and is Bursting Through Side of Building Before Alarm is Turned On," *Billings Dailey Gazette*, 22 September 1906, p.1.

[10] Polk Directories, Billings City, 1907.

[11] Yellowstone County Deed Record Books, *Office of Clerk and Recorder*, Yellowstone County Courthouse, Billings, MT.

[12] "Architect Houghton has Designed Many Theatres," *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 29 December 1907, second section, p.4.

[13] "Play house for Billings, Work Will Start Soon-Will be Modern in All Respects," *Billings Dailey Gazette*, 11 November 1906.

[14] Ibid.

[15] "For New Opera House in City, Bids for Building to be Opened Monday, Work to be Pushed," *Billings Dailey Gazette*, 23 November 1906.

[16] Polk 2007, "Billings City", p.28.

of Seattle, Washington, as well as his partner in the Yellowstone National Bank, Peter Larson of Helena, and son, Lewis C. Babcock.[17]

Mr. Cort of the Northwestern Theatrical Association was successfully developing theatres along the west coast and employed Mr. Houghton as the architect for many of those, including the Moore Theatre in Seattle, completed in 1907. Mr. Cort's role as booking agent was important in the development of the project and the successful operation of the opera house. It was the booking agent's responsibility to deliver steady reliable access to talent.

Western theatre managers had to go to New York to book entertainment for the season of attractions. With forty weeks of programming to fill, a manager needed to visit and negotiate with forty different producers, each which negotiated with many other local managers. Booking proved difficult, time consuming and fraught with sudden cancelations; these problems resulted in theatres joining together creating the role of booking agent to serve as the middleman between producers and managers. The agent booked acts for a series of venues along a route, guaranteeing high quality, steady stream of performers.[18, 19]

With the new investors, the plans for the building grew. Instead of just an opera house, the development added office space. Drawings dated December 4, 1906 show plans for Mr. Houghton's 334th building titled "Office Building and Theatre for A.L. Babcock." The design for the opera house portion was the same with the two balconies but a four-story portion was added to the front of the building with shops on the first floor and offices on the upper three floors. Plans indicated a building measuring 63' 6" wide by 150' long. The office portion was wider than the theatre and the entrance occurred along the side. [20]

By the 19th of December, 1906, there were studies for a six-story design of the same footprint. By April of 1907, the plans for the building had grown again; the footprint was now 140' wide and 150' deep and seven stories tall with a roof top garden.

Construction started in the spring of 1907 and on December 8, 1907, the front page of the Billings Gazette showed an artist rendering of what the A.L. Babcock Theatre Block would look like when finished.[21] The rendering indicated a large seven-story structure with ground floor retail space, six floors of office space and topped with an ornately trellised roof top garden. The building was a richly decorated execution of horizontal and vertical lines in the Commercial Style with a Beaux Arts influence in the ornamentation.[22] The Babcock stood in a very busy section of town, one block away from city hall and the fire station and one block away from the new Masonic temple.

The building facades were broken horizontally with a two-story base, a four-story shaft and an elaborate entablature and cornice. The two primary facades were also broken vertically at the corners and in the middle with heavier masonry elements consisting of wide expanses of brick faced walls punctuated by single windows. The vertical "columns" terminated in projections at the roof line. The center columns ended in arched entries at the street level. Horizontal terra

---

[17] Opening night program, "Best in the West".

[18] By 1900, the largest controller of bookings was known as the Syndicate. New York producers who refused to cooperate were denied bookings and many actors were "blackballed" by their association with the production. By 1900, the Syndicate was in complete control of the American theatre. It could now effectively influence the choice of plays and tended to choose productions that featured stars with large followings or themes with mass appeal. Between 1900 and 1915, the American theatre became a commercial enterprise. The Syndicate did not remain unopposed and their power began to break by 1902. The Shubert brothers, Sam, Lee and Jacob J. were producers who the Syndicate closed their theatres to. They formed their own chain and by 1908, dissatisfied by the Syndicate's treatment, several theatres joined them. By 1910 The National Theatre Owners Association was formed. The Schuberts became just as monopolistic and dictatorial as the Syndicate had been and produced lavish musicals with little substance. They gave up producing plays by 1945 but continued to control the routing until the 1956 antitrust ruling forced them to sell many of their theatres. The Babcock Theatre would be part of the National Theatre Owners Association during it's history.

[19] Brockett, pp.583 & 584.

[20] Historic drawings.

[21] "A.L. Babcock Theatre Block as it Will Appear When Completed, Finest Opera House in the West is Almost Complete," *Billings Gazette*, 8 December 1907, p.1.

[22] John C. Poppeliers and S. Allen Chambers, Jr., *What Style is It? A Guide to American Architecture* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2003).

cotta cornices and decorative panels create additional horizontal lines. Windows in the shaft of the building were bound together with a play of vertical columns, horizontal decorative panels and a horizontal base of terra cotta trim.

At the street level, vertical terra cotta covered columns were capped with a horizontal band of smooth brick. The glass storefronts were a pattern of three panels of transom glass divided by a thick horizontal band from three panels below consisting of a central door flanked by glass storefronts. Above the storefronts was a strong horizontal element comprised of bands of smooth brick, rusticated brick and terra cotta.

The building was richly capped with a trellised roof top garden over a projecting cornice with dentil trim, creating yet another play of horizontal and vertical lines and contrasting the lightness of the ground floor.

The theatre was the culturally important part of the new development and traveling acts were scheduled to arrive as soon as the theatre was complete. A December 8, 1907 news article reported "While the theatre is almost completed, it will be some time yet before the remainder of the building will be ready for occupancy, though Colonel Babcock said yesterday that work on it would be pushed."[23]

The theatre portion was completed as originally designed, but only the two-story "base" of the building was ever constructed. Documentation as to the reason for the reduction in plans has not been found. It is unclear if Colonel Babcock was referring to the full seven-story structure or not when he was quoted by the Billings Gazette on December 8. Certainly it was an ambitious design for a young community of 8,000 people. The partnership was impacted when one of the investors, Babcock's banking partner Peter Larson passed away during this time. The investor group was comprised primarily of bankers and the Bankers Panic of 1907 involving one of the Copper Kings of Butte, Montana dramatically shook the financial world from the east coast to the west coast, closing banks and challenging confidence.

Designed by E. W. Houghton and constructed by Mathew Dow and Company of Seattle, the final iteration of the massive block measured 150' by 140', larger than its neighbors, with a 150' frontage on Broadway and 140' on Second Avenue North.

The ground floor facing the street contained retail spaces with offices on the second floor. The basement was well suited for additional mercantile space with three entrances accessed by wide staircases. It had tall ceilings and was well "lighted" with electrical fixtures as well as prism floor lights. The building was mostly of steel construction with dressed brick facing and terra cotta trimmings. The two arched entries, one on Broadway and one on Second Ave N., led to an interior arcade off of which was the entrance to the theatre, the apartments and the shops.

The flooring in the arcade was tile and the floor slopes to the exterior leading to the belief that the arcade was originally open to the exterior. The walls of the retail side were marble wainscot with French plate glass above, reaching to a barrel vaulted ceiling, elaborately decorated with plaster designs in a Neo Classical style. Where the two arcades joined was a skylight with an art glass lid decorated to match the plaster work. White enameled brick covered the walls on the side of the theatre. The main stairway of the building led from the rear corner of the arcade.

The theatre, built on the alley, measured 60' by 120' and opened before completion of the rest of the building. With a cost of over $250,000, it was touted as the finest in the Northwest and retained that rank until the opening of the neighboring Fox Theatre in 1931. The Babcock Theatre officially opened Monday, December 23, 1907 with a monumental production of *Blue Moon* starring James T. Powers along with 70 other performers. Tickets cost $2.50 for main floor and balcony, $2.00 for balcony circle, $1.00 for gallery and $3.00 and $4.00 for box seats. It opened with a $20,000 Wurlitzer organ and six piece orchestra led by Paul Enevoldson. [24]

Entrance to the theatre occurred from the west leg of the arcade through three large oak doors into the lobby. The floors were tiled and the walls lined with marble wainscoting 7' high. Plaster relief adorned the ceiling in floral patterns with gold trimmings. The box office sat to the right and the manager's office was to the left as one entered.

From the lobby and through a set of three green swinging doors with oval plate glass was the foyer. To the left was the main floor of the theatre screened by tapestries and to the right was an 8' wide staircase heading in both directions to the balcony. The foyer was decorated in plaster relief with floral patterns and massive oak trim. Classical oak pillars framed the stairway. The foyer also contained the ladies rest room.

[23] *Billings Gazette*, 8 December 1907, p.1.

[24] Opening night program, "Best in the West."

The theatre had a seating capacity of 1350 with a standing room capacity of more than 2000 people. The first floor seated about 500 people and displayed a curved horseshoe shape with two tiers of boxed seats on either side. The seats were upholstered in wine-colored velvet and the floor was covered in green carpet. The walls and ceiling were decorated in the neo-classical style of the period with decorative plaster relief work and statues framing the stage and over the box seats and angelic figures on the ceiling.

The balcony had seating aligned similar to first floor and raised on tiers. It contained a retiring room for women and a large foyer in the center. It too displayed green carpeting with floral ceiling ornamentation.

The Gallery held an additional 350 patrons and was furnished with large pew seating. The entrance to this upper gallery was off the alley, separating these patrons from the view and association with the elite patrons in the lower levels.

The ambitious plans included the 60' by 35' by 84' high stage, one of the largest in the country at the time, allowing for the performance of any size production.[25] The plans included the latest provisions for fire proof construction including eight exits, multiple fire hoses, wiring in conduit ending in a fire proof vault, and the use of fire proof materials such as metal not wood lath. It also had two large roof ventilators for smoke and flame removal.

The colors were a delicate green on side walls and a cream on the ceiling with decorations in ivory and gold, a color scheme common in a Houghton theatre.[26] The metal work was bronze and brass and custom made light fixtures possessed globes made to match the decorations.

The basement area under the theatre contained many dressing rooms, each with hot and cold running water and electric lights. There were two larger dressing rooms for the chorus. Remnants of one of these rooms with sinks remain today.

Support posts, which obscured the view of the stage from certain seats, were a typical feature of theatres of this period. E.W. Houghton's plans for the Babcock were elaborate and revolutionary. He incorporated the latest structural advances in theatre design; the most notable was the clear span of the balcony, eliminating columns in the seating area and ensuring good sight lines. This novel idea was put to test, when the front section of the balcony was loaded with 42,000 pounds of nails in kegs borrowed for the occasion from the surrounding hardware stores. The construction crew, men from the testing party and several prominent citizens added their weight to the balcony and the monumental event photographed. Mathew Dow, present for the structural test, proclaimed that "the Billings Theatre is the strongest, most durable and finest in the entire northwest."[27]

The main floor retail space provided goods for both the local and visitor alike. The shops offered clothing, jewelry, variety goods, and ice cream. There was a print shop and a piano shop.

The second floor provided room for professional businesses including dentists, surgeons, lawyers, real estate agents and the US Land office handling the homesteading for the surrounding properties. There were 31 units, none numbered 13. Polk directories indicate that a few of the units may have been used as residences in the early years.

By 1912, there was a bowling alley in the basement.

Evolution of the Movie Industry and the Babcock Theatre

For the first fifty years the retail part of the building changed very little. It provided a steady supply of the goods and services needed by the growing community. The second floor offices slowly transitioned from office to residential, also meeting the needs of the community.

The theatre, however, has a rich history of transformation that followed the inception and evolution of the moving picture industry, technically and culturally as the preference for entertainment changed from traveling live productions to the fantasy of movie palaces to live performance. With the invention of the Vitascope by Thomas Edison in 1896, a new form of entertainment was developed that would cause the most change and have the greatest effect on the Babcock Theatre.

The Vitascope enabled one person at a time to view moving pictures. These moving pictures were first viewed in penny arcades where rows of machines waited for patrons to plug pennies and watch short "movies" of flags waving or workers leaving the factory. Penny arcades were entertainment for the poor and lower class. Penny arcade operators wanted to

[25] *Billings Gazette*, 8 December 1907, p.1.

[26] *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, 29 December 1907, second section, p.4.

[27] "Safely Test at Theatre, Great Weight is Used," *Billings Gazette*, 22 December 1907, p.1.

keep the novelty but find a way to make more money and draw a better class of patrons.[28] By 1905 new "store show" theatres dubbed "Nickelodeons" started appearing. They were typically stores, cleared of shelving and set with rows of chairs. The flickering black and white images were projected onto a bed sheet strung across the end of the room. Pictures were shown all day long with music pounded out on a mechanical piano.[29] Early nickelodeons were a lucrative business; they were cheaply constructed, cheap to operate, and provided entertainment to a rough clientele. Motion picture exhibitors realized they needed to attract more middle class patrons and to do that they needed a better product and a better way to exhibit it.

By 1907, the storefront nickelodeon boom began to decline and entrepreneurs began to build movie theatres with greater seating capacities. By 1908, there were over 8,000 nickelodeons serving a wide clientele including women and children. Films were 1000 feet long, lasting 18 minutes. Shows were offered frequently so one could stop in at any time; as a result, movie viewing became an impulse activity.[30]

Meanwhile in live performance theatres, to cater to everybody all the time, theatre managers found it both practical and profitable to book vaudeville. A vaudeville show was a coordinated series of acts consisting of song and dance teams, comedians, animal performers, acrobats and short dramatic skits, and was less expensive to produce than the lavish stage productions. Short moving picture clips were often combined with vaudeville acts in the smaller theatres. The popularity of less expensive houses grew with the young city and at the time of the opening of the Babcock Theatre, three such businesses existed – The Family, the Globe and the Topic Theatre.

The Globe focused on vaudeville. The Topic boasted a six piece orchestra and showed vaudeville acts, burlesque and moving pictures. The Family catered to women and children showing "polite" vaudeville. They were all located along the railroad tracks on Montana Ave and Minnesota Avenue. The founding fathers decision to locate the Babcock in the new commercial district was another way of distancing the Billings' aristocracy and wealthiest visitors from the railroad tracks and the seedier side of town.

By 1911, the Babcock was a well known stop for the best and latest live performances and served as the community center for the town. It had an impressive organ and a wonderful orchestra and offered concerts on Sundays. President Taft visited Billings in October and spoke to a packed house at the Babcock Theatre.[31]

During the World War I years, (1914-1918) attracting traveling productions became more difficult and the Babcock began showing vaudeville. By 1915, live theatre was declining in appeal, the result of increased ticket prices, competition from spectator sports and motion pictures.[32] To compensate, the Babcock added more films and local talent productions.

Shift from Live Performances to Film

With the decline in traveling productions, theatrical producers became involved in the motion picture business and motion pictures began improving artistically. Film producers started making longer films with actual stories comparable to live stage, and films began appealing to the wealthier class as well. These films were shown at the more opulent legitimate theatres including the Babcock. Scored music was added as part of the interpretation of the film. Silent films relied on the skill of the piano player to set the tune and tell the story. The tone of the music was used to introduce the characters and convey to the audience who was good or bad, beautiful or ugly. Houses with orchestras and pipe organ offered a richer dramatic effect. Synchronization of the film to the music required repeated projection of the film to allow the conductor to develop full coordination between the music and the on-screen action.

Industry leaders worked on ways to elevate motion pictures from the gritty moving picture nickelodeon experience to an art form with the class and quality of legitimate stage, advances which the Babcock incorporated. A leader in the advancement of movie exhibition, Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel shows provided both a film and musical production, a format popular through the 1920's, which assured visitors a good time with one or both of the evening's elements of

---

[28] Ross Melnick & Andreas Fuchs, *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres* (St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Co., 2004), p.11.

[29] Ibid. p.13.

[30] Ibid. p.15.

[31] "Magnificent Ovation is Given to President, Enthusiastic People of Midland Empire Greet Him," *Billings Dailey Gazette*, 20 October 1911, p.1.

[32] Craig Morrison, *Theatres* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Co.; Washington, D.C: Library of Congress, 2006), p.588.

entertainment. He used large orchestras and high quality projection methods. He found ways to add ambient light, lighting the room at the beginning and end of the show. He experimented with colored lighting to signal the piano player the mood for the next scene. He explored adding "smell-o-vision" by placing rose petals in front of fans. He elevated the interiors to neoclassical style, enhanced the stage settings and added well drilled ushers. He fused the quality of the music with the quality of the motion pictures and was able to appeal to high class patrons. His signature theatre, was called the Strand; soon a Strand theatre existed in every major community.[33] In Billings, the Majestic theatre, opened in 1916, was renamed the Strand in 1917.

By 1920, the Babcock Theatre was still primarily oriented toward live performances; however, the owners had embraced movies and installed the best pipe organ available. The Babcock orchestra, directed by Paul Enevoldsen, was known to be one of the finest in the west. The theatre also boasted the only pipe organ in Billings, a Hope-Jones Wurlitzer, one of the largest manufactured for any theatre. It was both a pipe organ and a symphony orchestra. Able to mimic every instrument of the orchestra, it could range in volume from a soft whisper to the roll of thunder. It used air for the wind notes and the vibration of strings for the string notes. The big organ was augmented by a small orchestra of richly talented and highly trained musicians, led by conductor Paul Enevoldsen, with Henry Monnet on the big organ. The orchestra included a violin, clarinet, cello, trumpet, flute, double bass, piano and the traps. The traps were the percussion section of the orchestra and produced every animal call from a mouse's squeak to a lion's roar as well as the cry of a baby, the whistle of a steam boats and trains, the automobile horn, the sound of a running horse, and a hundred others. "The Hope-Jones Wurlitzer organ at the Babcock Theatre is a most wonderful instrument. It is the product of years of experience in organ building and as it stands today it is a triumph of the organ maker art. This $20,000 combination pipe organ and orchestra is a most eloquent answer to the demand of the modern theatre for the broadest, most adaptable and most elastic musical instrument which it is possible for human genius to devise. In the Hope-Jones Wurlitzer organ, progressive theatre men have found the ideal instrument but few towns the size of Billings can boast of such an installation. The purchase of this organ by the Babcock theatre was a musical event of the first importance to the community." [34] The Babcock Theatre also possessed one of the largest musical libraries in the northwest.[35]

With their superior ability to capture the scene and their significantly lower admission price, motion pictures began to draw away the live theatre audience. Films and live theatre thrived side by side until the invention of sound recording in 1927 and the depression of 1929. With improvements in film production came the need for improvement in the film exhibition.

This successful presentation of moving pictures to an elite audience influenced film production. With the decline in legitimate theatres, displaced producers and actors joined the film industry. Lavish sets and fabulous costumes combined with advancement in photographic technology and special effects brought dimension to the films. These stories of adventures in exotic places became epic and larger than life, requiring a change in theatre construction. If movies were to elicit a sense of escapism, they would require venues that created a feeling of magic and fantasy the moment patrons stepped into the lobby. In the 1920's, the theatre facades became more elaborate, reaching out to the patron on the street. Theatre facades, the use of terrazzo and illuminated marquees became more and more ornate, reinforcing the idea that "the show starts on the sidewalk"[36]

The movie theatre itself became part of the show and the birth of the photoplay palaces had begun. New deluxe motion picture theatres were created and a frenzy of converting old opera houses, vaudeville theatres and live theatre venues occurred; the Babcock was not immune to this shift in technology. Young architects had access to study abroad and classical architecture was the original choice. Palatial in scale and neoclassical in design, they elevated the movie house to movie palace. [37] By 1920, movie theatres were equal to or more ornate than the theatres built for live performances.[38]

This success had a significant effect on theatre architecture. Once just storefronts, the sheer size of the new theatres required large lobbies and foyers normally found in legitimate theatres, such as the Babcock. Perhaps the greatest change was the omission of the second balcony, a standard feature of legitimate theatres. The second balcony, such as

---

[33] Melnick, p.28.

[34] "Music is Wonderful Aid in Interpretation of Movies," *Billings Gazette*, 25 April 1920, p.1.

[35] "Good Music is Featured at the Babcock," *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1925, p.1.

[36] Melnick, p.30.

[37] Morrison, p.219.

[38] Melnick, p.28.

that at the Babcock, was commonly accessed from the alley. It provided entrance to the cheaper seats sold to the lower class patron and served as a means to maintain separation. With the philosophy of the moving pictures as the great social equalizer, the second balcony no longer made practical sense. [39]

An article in the September 1914, American Architect declared "the economy of cinematograph productions makes it possible to provide seats on the orchestra floor and in the balcony at a price so low that the physical effort of climbing to a second balcony would not compensate for the reduced cost of the seat. Thus, in a few short years, has a single mechanical invention occasioned a great change in a type of building which was the development of two thousand years."[40]

The movie palace erased class segregation and gave working class and upper class people equal access to a once upper class space. The main level seating was not divided into price categories. Gone was the second balcony with its low class seating. Gone were the box seats for the wealthy. The seating in the large front facing balcony was also undifferentiated by price**.** The boxy, square proscenium of the vaudeville house had become wide and gently curving. Box seating in a movie palace was impractical and unneeded. Viewing a movie from a sharp angle was even less desirable than viewing a live performance. For a while, the familiar boxes remained, converted to lavish grilles which concealed the pipe organs that were standard movie palace accessories.[41]

The addition of photoplays to the Babcock programming provided a whole undercurrent of an eye toward the psychology of the event and the "architecture of fantasy" that was totally unique to motion picture. Epic and larger-than-life films became popular, featuring fabulous costumes and lavish sets. By 1921, the Babcock still provided live performances. The West showed vaudeville acts plus film, while the Regent and Strand provided continuous showings of films from 1:00 to 11:00 pm. Over the next 15 years, the Babcock changed significantly.

The Theatre Operating Company

A.L. Babcock died in 1918 and the management of the Babcock Theatre Building and his other holdings transferred to his son Lewis C. Babcock. In 1923, Lewis leased the Babcock Theatre to the Theatre Operating Company. The Theatre Operating Company was an integral part of the theatre history in Billings, with E. C. O'Keefe as president and manager of the Babcock and Rolla Duncan as vice president and secretary.

Born in Minneapolis, O'Keefe attended both military school and law school, and worked in lumber camps in Minnesota, Winnipeg and Edmonton prior to ending up in Great Falls working on the Montana Power power plant. He came to Billings in the fall of 1913 and purchased the Theatorium from "Dad" Bailey, following which he formed The Theatre Operating Company. He operated the Theatorium until the spring of 1914, when he purchased the old Isis (which by 1925 was the site of Midland National Bank). In the fall of 1914, he leased the Acme (later renamed the Regent) and operated it and the Isis (renamed the Luna), until the summer of 1915 when he leased and created the Majestic –later renamed the Strand and then the Lyric. He closed the Luna and in 1916 sold the Majestic while still operating the Regent. In October of 1918, he sold half interest to Rolla Duncan and successfully focused his attention on selling theatre equipment with offices in Billings and Seattle. In February 1923, he returned to Billings and leased the Babcock Theatre. He managed the Babcock and the Regent and added the Lyric in the fall of 1925.

Rolla Duncan was born in Missouri and moved to Montana as a small boy. As a young man he joined the Yellowstone County's sheriff's office, employed in this line of work for 10 years. He ran and was elected to the position of Yellowstone County commissioner, but resigned to go into the theatre business. Initially located in Rexburg, Idaho, he relocated to Lewiston, Idaho, where he remained until the end of WW1. In 1918, he came to Billings and purchased a half interest in the Regent Theatre, which he managed while his partner, Mr. O'Keefe, was in Seattle. In July of 1923, shortly after his partner returned to Billings, Mr. Duncan was appointed United States marshal for the Montana district. He sold his interest in the company to Max Fregger in 1926 but continued to live in Billings and work out of Helena.

---

[39] Melnick, p.29.

[40] "The Rapid Evolution of the Modern Theatre Type," *American Architect*, 23 September 1914, p.186.

[41] Morrison, p.209.

1923 Remodeling
In 1923, shortly after the Theatre Operating Company took over management, the Babcock Theatre was renovated. It received seven new sets of curtains and 9 new sets of scenery as well as the newly popular "cyclorama." The rigging included 330 steel pulleys and 10 miles of rope. The sets were designed by Mr. and Mrs. Phil Brady under the name of Montana Scenic Studios, with offices located in the Babcock building. Three hundred hung lights with dimming were controlled from a switchboard on stage. It included a "picture set" for "photoplays." The set was constructed of silver metallic cloth which absorbed the lighting of the large flood lights but displayed the rainbow presentation of the "photoplay," a lightshow, shown between acts. The Raven design picture screen was of the latest technology, constructed of a rubber sheet with a white silk sheet set in front. It sat deep in the stage and absorbed light, offering an undistorted picture from any seat in the house.[42] A new ventilation system was installed offering fresh air changes every 30 seconds.[43]

On January 15, 1924, Hyme Lipsker purchased the Babcock Theatre Building from Mrs. A.L. Babcock and her son L.C. for a sum in excess of $250,000. Mr. Lipsker was a merchant and a business man and invested well in the Babcock building until his death in 1950. The Lipsker family continued to own the building until 2008.

The theatre business not only did well in Billings, but also nationally. By 1925, the film industry was booming. It employed 300,000 people and 50 million people attended movie theatres around the country each week.[44] In addition to film, the Babcock continued to offer legitimate drama with quality productions pausing for a few days' performances on their way to larger cities and longer runs.[45]

And Then There Was Sound
Synchronized sound was developed for commercial use by 1927. Warner Brothers unveiled the new "Vitaphone" sound on disc technology and Fox developed the Movietone system which placed the soundtrack on the film stock itself.[46] Adding sound to film had a major impact on the industry and on the theatres. Warner Brothers started producing not only feature films but also short length films (shorts) of filmed recordings of vaudeville acts. The small and independent exhibitors could offer vaudeville with the feature film without incurring the expense of a live act. With canned score and canned dialog, live orchestras became unnecessary and stage shows became scarce. From the mid 1920's to the late 1920's movie theatres boomed. This success meant a corresponding loss for America's legitimate theatres including the Babcock.

The 1927 Remodeling
On June 7, 1927, two weeks after the original architect, E.W. Houghton died, the Babcock closed for a major remodeling. Between June 7 and September 25, 1927, at a cost of $75,000, the Babcock Theatre was completely redecorated and refitted from front to back, including the latest technology for the new "talkies" and decorated in the latest fashion of the times. The general contractor was Frank Jacoby & Sons.[47] The Babcock Theatre was run by Theatre Operating Company which owned 4 other playhouses and was managed by Max Fregger and Eugene O'Keefe. Max Fregger had bought out Rolla Duncan's interest in the business that same year.

Responding to the philosophy that the "show begins at the sidewalk"[48], the entrance moved from inside the arcade to the Second Avenue North side of the building. This required cutting a large opening in the 2' thick concrete walls and

---

[42] "Largest Stage Between Twin Cities and Coast That of Babcock Theatre," *Billings Theatre and Town Magazine*, 22-28 August 1925, p.33.

[43] "Anniversary of the Babcock Theatre-Babcock built by Men of Vision," *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1925, Third section, special feature.

[44] Joseph Dannenburg, ed. "Film Year Book 1925" *The Film Daily*, 1925, pp.43 & 53.

[45] *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1925, special feature, p.6.

[46] Melnick, p.59.

[47] "Theatre Work Begins Monday, Babcock Equipment is Being Torn Out and Sold," *Billings Gazette,* 7 June 1927.

[48] Melnick, p.30.

replacing that retail space with the theatre's ticket booth and entrance vestibule.[49] Long time tenant, Trott Printing was relocated to the now abandoned north leg of the arcade, where it stayed until the 1990's.[50]

Equally as significant as the new entrance was the reconstruction of the auditorium interior. Many changes occurred demonstrating the shift toward film. The second balcony was removed and the first balcony was rebuilt, changing the horseshoe shape into a soft curve. The box seats were converted into grilles for the pipe organ and new spring cushioned seating installed, offering greater leg room, yet maintaining 1200 seats.

The proscenium arch was set in triple arches, behind which was the pipe organ. The Wurlitzer –Hope-Jones orchestral organ was removed from the basement, divided, improved and installed in the organ chambers on either side of the proscenium. It was still operated from the left side of the orchestra pit.

Theatre screen design continued to evolve. The Raven design screen installed only two years earlier was replaced. The new picture screen, same type as used in the Samuel "Roxy" Rothafel's Roxy Theatre in New York City, was said to give better definition and color and be freer of eye strain for the patron than any other screen of the time.[51] The auditorium acoustics were adjusted such that the "ordinary tone of voice on the stage could be heard in any part of the house."[52]

The projection room received low intensity arc lamps and a new Simplex moving picture projector was installed to handle the "talkies." Although talkies were making orchestras obsolete, members of the Babcock orchestra did not disband but rather, played at other venues or vacationed during the remodeling.[53]

The interior was designed by Ben F. Shearer Studios, Inc. of Seattle Washington, with representative Carl F. Berg. Ben Shearer was originally from Billings, starting his career as an employee of Eugene O'Keefe (President of T.O.C. and manager of the Babcock) as a motion picture machine operator. Mr. Shearer came to Billings in 1907 with his parents. He worked in the old Theatorium picture house on N. 27th as well as the Star and Luna theatres on Montana Ave. After that he worked for the Rialto Theatre Equipment Company of Minneapolis in charge of the Montana and Wyoming territory until joining the U.S. army in 1917. After World War I he rejoined the Rialto briefly before starting a theatre equipment business for himself. He moved to Seattle where he enlarged his business from just theatre equipment to a complete contracting company capable of manufacturing and installing all special products, stage scenery and furnishings. B.F. Shearer Studios also did the Hollywood, Bagdad and Oriental theatres in Portland and the Bagdad Theatre in Seattle.[54]

By 1927, Classicism was waning as an architectural inspiration for movie theatres and theatre architects were harnessing a new look. They borrowed highly ornate textures and colors of exotic places such as Egypt, India, and China.[55] The B.F. Shearer Studios replaced the neoclassical opera house interior with a Spanish Colonial theme. The walls were plastered in warm earth tones with bright Castilian reds and greens. The ceilings and walls were done in textured plaster with three or four colors and glazed over in gold. Wrought iron torchieres and candelabras lit the auditorium, foyer and lobby.

Lace shawls were draped across balconies and miniature senoritas and conquistadores were featured in the decorations. Elaborate draperies were found throughout the theatre with plush red silk in the second floor lounge, and heavy gold silk over-drapes and heavy blue portieres hanging in the foyer. In front of each of the organ grills on either side of the proscenium was a heavy silk fringe with more lace shawls. The main stage curtain was blue velour with a deep border made of festoons with heavy silk rope fringe. The new asbestos curtain featured a Spanish galleon on a sea of blue.

The entrance was in line with the north side of the building and had a ticket booth flanked by pairs of mahogany doors entering onto a large lobby and then into a vestibule from which you passed through another 3 pairs of mahogany doors into a foyer. The foyer had two new grand staircases leading to the balcony and four pairs of doors leading to the main floor of the auditorium.

---

[49] Historic drawings.

[50] Polk Directories.

[51] "Castilian Design Lends to New Babcock Enchantment- Special Lighting Features- Improvements Cost $75,000," *The Advance*, 28 September 1927, p.36.

[52] Advance, p.19.

[53] *Billings Gazette*, 7 June 1927, p.1.

[54] Advance, p.22.

[55] Morrison, p.219.

The lobby was finished in two tone marble and included new ornamental glass, ornamental plaster and tile frieze and a new terrazzo floor. New wiring was installed as well as a new heating plant with a new ventilation system.

The remodeling was completed by September 25, 1927 with a gala opening and dedication ceremony and the following month it featured the new Warner Brothers release, *The Jazz Singer*, starring Al Jolson. The movie, a landmark in the industry utilized the technology of the Vitaphone Picture, had canned score and effects and featured a talking and singing sequence. The Babcock Theatre was one of the first theatres in the Northwest to show pictures with sound.[56] The Babcock once again claimed its role as the largest and finest theatre from Minneapolis to Seattle and retained this role until the neighboring Fox Theatre opened in 1931.

The Roaring 20's and into the Depression of the 30's

William Fox was one of the first movie moguls to fully incorporate vertical integration into his business model. Vertical integration meant that one family of companies controlled the production, the distribution and the exhibition of their films.[57] The model worked well and other industry leaders began merging companies. These partnerships grew more and more powerful and by the late 1920's, consolidation was quickly making giant powerful monopolies in the film industry. The U.S. Justice Department took an investigative interest in the entire industry's antitrust activity after Fox bought out Loews to become the world's largest motion picture company. During the Roaring 20s, theatre chains expanded at unbelievable rates. In contrast, the smaller independent theatres struggled, due in part to competition from these theatre chains and in part to the expense of updating equipment and adding sound.

By the late 1920's, Harold B. Franklin was president of West Coast Theatres (WCT), a unit of the William Fox organization. Fox West Coast controlled theatres from California to Washington and east to Utah. Under Franklin's guidance WCT led the theatre building boom, investing heavily in new construction and in January of 1929, they announced their plans to build a new "amusement palace" in Billings. The site selected was just over one block away from the Babcock Theatre, on the site of the old Charles M. Bair family home. It was to be a modern movie palace, Mayan Indian in design with details adapted from the architecture of the ruins of Mexico and Central America. "The exterior will be monumental in character, patterned after existing Mayan Temples. The interior will express the precedent established by the Mayan artisans in their building decoration although modified and adapted to suit the needs of a modern building."[58]

A rendering in the Billings Gazette showed a colossal façade with stepped window trim and a Mayan God's head and a large projecting marquee. There were several decorative bands and a decorative cornice with stepping roof line. The windows flanking the entry were also ornate with multi-panes and heavy stepping trim. [59]

On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed and in the months following, the Fox Empire crashed. The movie palace construction boom slowed to a trickle and plans for the new theatre in Billings stalled. For the first few years of the Great Depression, movie going was a means of escape from the problems at hand, but by 1931, it was a luxury that few could afford. Even the experience of visiting the movie palace had become offensive. The theatre's palatial environment, once the symbol of prosperity within reach, became a bitter reminder of need during the Depression. A new architectural movement of Modernism replaced the exotic historical fantasy. Theatre architects adapted the highly decorative but smoothly modeled forms and surfaces of the Art Deco themes. Pipe organs disappeared and simple sweeping curtains extended beyond the stage into the auditorium.[60]

Very few new theatres were opening across America, but plans for the Fox Theatre in Billings continued and when it opened in the fall of 1931, the design had changed from a Mayan Temple movie palace to a simpler, less extravagant Art Deco Style movie house.[61] The sparkle and dazzle of the modern design offered promise to a depressed community and

---

[56] Program for re-opening of Babcock Theatre, 7 June 1928.

[57] Melnick, p.70.

[58] "New Movie Palace for Billings, This Spring is Certain," *Billings Gazette*, 13 January 1929.

[59] "Proposed New Billings Theatre Follows Mayan Indian Design," *Billings Gazette*, 16 January 1929.

[60] Morrison, p.266.

[61] Melnick, p.71.

[62] James M. Reich, *Post Card History Series Billings (*Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), p.41.

over 3000 people turned out for the grand opening. The theatre was impressive for the time with 1500 seats and an upper and lower balcony. The outside ticket office was covered with marble and inside, well dressed ushers seated patrons. It offered a variety of films and community concerts and soon replaced the Babcock Theatre as the community center. The Depression continued and the fashion faded, the Fox was the last new Art Deco theatre to be constructed in the United States.[62] The Art Deco style only lasted until about 1937, but for that short period it was very popular with the architects in Billings.

With the threat of a competing theatre, the Babcock owners and operators invested in upgrades to improve the patron's comfort. In the spring of 1931, under the operation of the Hughes Franklin string of theatres, the theatre was updated to include the latest of theatre equipment and a new marquee at the cost of $18,000. Eugene C. O'Keefe managed the Babcock and Regent theatres and was a division manager for the Hughes Franklin chain.

Theatres were unbearable during the summer and usually closed during those months until the development of large scale cooling methods. Willis Carrier had combined moisture with ventilation to "condition" the air and developed what was coined "air conditioning." During the 1931 remodeling, the Babcock installed a Kooleraire system and advertised it to their patrons as "cool and REFRESHING as a mountain resort." [63] In the basement under the stage, an underground well was dug to supply water to a large swamp cooler, "a washer of the latest type" installed by B.F. Shearer Company of Seattle, Washington. The system was composed of a manifold of hundreds of spray heads. Fans forced air through this wall of water, washing and cooling the air before it was then forced by fan to the top of the theatre. The "freshly washed air"[64] could also be heated by passing through large steam heated radiator before being ducted to the auditorium. This evaporative cooling system required constant watching at the time, but continued in use for nearly 80 years, when it was replaced in the 2008-2012 remodeling. The equipment remains in place today.

Both the screen and the projection equipment were replaced and a new larger marquee was installed. Designed in the "modernistic design" of the Hughes Franklin style, the marquee had more flags, signs and eye catching gimmicks and could be seen from several blocks away. Fabricated by the Neale Rainbow Light Corporation of Los Angeles, California, it measured 12' by 30', constructed of iron and covered in gold, silver, red, yellow and brown porcelain enameled metal. It had red, blue and green neon lights which lit up the sign panel as well as the 3' wide by 20' tall "Babcock" sign. There was a 5' high changeable sign panel flanked by 8' high neon lit columns. The whole thing projected out over the sidewalk and lights in the soffit illuminate the theatre entrance. The Babcock was once again a state of the arts theatre.

As the depression years continued, more and more patrons stopped attending films. The weekly escape from the drudgery of daily life became too expensive. Competition was fierce between theatres, the studios were struggling and the quality of films suffered. By 1932, over one third of the theatres closed.[65] In Billings, both the Regent and the West theatres closed leaving only 4 theatres remaining. The era of movie palace extravagance was over.

What was left of the Fox Empire merged with 20th Century to create modern 20th Century Fox, the entity which retained the theatre holdings. William Fox quit and in 1932, Charles and Spyros Skouras were brought in to take over the management of Fox West Coast Theatres.

The Babcock joined the Fox Theatre chain in 1934. With the Fox Theatre taking the role of the community center, the new managers of the Babcock tried to find events to fill the theatre. Sporting events proved to be popular and in May of 1934, the Babcock joined a wrestling circuit, bringing talent from surrounding states. This lasted only 2 weeks before manager Paul Scates decided it was a financial failure and ended the connection with the Texas promotional group. [66] Boxing was tried next.

---

[63] "Cool Air Ventilating System Installed at Babcock," *Billings Gazette,* 19 July 1931, p.7.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Melnick, p.73.

[66] "Mat Game Loses Out at Babcock, Scates Quits Chain after Looking at Scant House," *Billings Gazette*, 15 May 1934.

The Big Fire

On February 21, 1935, the Babcock Theatre was rented out for a prize fight. The stage was deep enough to construct temporary bleachers around the ring providing seating for the choice ticket holders.[67] All evening Fire Chief Vincent Steele asked for no smoking in the theatre. But the crowd still smoked, so the chief asked that smoking only occur between matches. His theory was that that if patrons smoked during the matches they would become too excited and would drop lit cigars or cigarettes on the floor. His fears were justified and around 9 p.m. a fire broke out. It was determined that the fire actually was started with a careless cigarette, cigar or match dropped into the space below the stage. The fire started ringside and spread quickly through the ventilation system. Fire Chief Steele swiftly took charge of the situation, causing the asbestos curtain to be dropped and the ventilation system shut down. Over 1000 people were evacuated unharmed and as a precaution, so were the 15 second floor residents. The fire was almost entirely contained within the playhouse with little damage to the rest of the building. The thick concrete walls protected the apartments from damage other than smoke.[68]

Every regular fire fighter, every volunteer fire fighter and the entire police force were there either fighting the fire or managing the crowd of spectators. Firemen poured water on the fire all night and by morning there was 18" of water in the basement, causing a total loss of Recreation Bowling Alley. In the theatre, the entrance lobby and 13 rows of seating under the balcony were all that survived. The roof collapsed during the night, the proscenium arch failed, the stage was ruined and the amazing pipe organ demolished.[69]

Mr. Lipsker had been converting the second floor from offices to residences and at this time the second floor contained 15 residences and 7 offices. The remaining businesses included Modern Dentists, Beers Law Firm, Dousman Real Estate, F.E. Hanley Investments, J.E. Clavadetscher, music instructor and Roscoe Contractors. The ground floor tenants included Nu Enamel Paint, Trott Printing Co, and City Drug on Second Avenue and Phelan Corset Shop, Rose Runck Milner, Billings Boot Shop, Nelson Jewelry, Buckley Doyle Women's Store and Lipsker's men's store. The basement was occupied by Recreation Bowling and Hallam-Kinney sign shop as well as storage for the main floor shops.[70]

Mr. Lipsker estimated the value of the property at $350,000 and the damage at $150,000. When interviewed the night of the fire, he said that the property would be rebuilt either as a theatre or as an apartment/ hotel. By the next day, Hyme Lipsker had decided to rebuild the theatre.[71]

Within a month, the plans for the reconstruction of the theatre were ready and in less than 6 months it was completely rebuilt. The renovation of the building, by local architect Edwin G. Osness, included fire safety features of an automatic sprinkler system in the fly loft, concrete slab at the stage and a laminated fire resistant roof.

The new Babcock Theatre opened with all the pomp and circumstance with which the original opera house had. The municipal band played from the rooftop of the Hart Albin building across the street and Phil Sheridan and his band, a popular Pacific coast dance orchestra played on the stage and later at Lake Elmo Dance Hall. Second Avenue was closed to traffic to allow room for both arriving dignitaries and onlookers. On the day of the opening congratulatory telegrams arrived from Hollywood stars including Katherine Hepburn, W.C. Fields, Mae West, Bette Davis, George Brent and Jean Harlow.[72] Once again the Babcock Theatre provided release from the depressing reality of the times into the world of fantasy.[73]

Mr. Lipsker visited Los Angeles to interview theatre architects and selected A.B. Heinsbergen to design the interior. A. B. Heinsbergen was a nationally acclaimed Dutch born muralist who came to the United States at age 13. He began his craft

---

[67] Anneke-Jan Boden, *Billings: The First 100 Years (*Norfolk, VA: Donning, 1981) p. 121.

[68] "Babcock Theatre is Swept by Flames Arouse Tenants in Apartments as Fire Spreads," *Billings Gazette*, 22 February 1935.

[69] "Babcock to be Reconstructed Immediately, Loss in Fire is Set at $75,000; Apartments Looted by Vandals," *Billings Gazette*, 23 February 1935, p.1.

[70] Billings Polk Directory.

[71] *Billings Gazette*, 22 February 1935, p.1.

[72] "Theatre Goers Praise Remodeled Babcock," *Billings Gazette*, 7 August 1935, p.1.

[73] "Babcock Plans Gala Opening Tuesday Night, Municipal Band Concert, Phil Sheridan's Orchestra are Programmed Features," *Billings Gazette*, 4 August 1935, p.1.

as an apprentice in Holland, immigrating to America in 1906 where he was immediately hired as an apprentice with a decorative painting company. In 1922, he founded the A. B. Heinsbergen Decorating Company in Los Angeles, California. He was responsible for some of the most notable interiors of the time including the California state capital building in Sacramento, the Los Angeles City Hall, and the interstate Commerce building in Washington D.C. His proficiency in theatre interiors started in 1924 when Alexander Pantages selected him to design the interiors of his vaudeville houses. He went on to decorate over 750 theatres throughout the United States, Canada and Mexico. He is viewed as one of the finest muralist and his work is considered historically significant and designated as landmarks.[74]

The theatre was decorated in the art deco style with the "most modern designs" and equipped with new lighting, larger upholstered seats and multi-colored highly patterned carpet. The main staircase was rebuilt and thin sweeping chrome handrails installed. The plan allowed for an organ chamber, though none was ever installed. The exterior was also modernized by replacing the terra cotta trim with sleek marble at the theatre entrance. Pieces of the original terra cotta were placed in an attic space and found 75 years later.

Multi-colored decorative painting was used throughout but the most significant feature of the interior design was the large hand painted mural that filled the entire wall as one entered the lobby. Eighteen feet wide and nine feet tall, this mural was designed and hand painted by Mr. Heinsbergen. It was art deco in design, done in metallic silver, gold and blue paints. The center featured the muses of drama and song, flanked by female attendants. Water and shrubbery are in the foreground and modern skyscrapers are in the background. The original rendering is located in the offices of O2Architects in Billings.

The 1930's witnessed additional changes to the Babcock. The upstairs offices were converted to apartments, an elevator was installed, and the entrance to the apartments moved to the westernmost bay on the 2nd Ave North side, where it remains today.

The War Years

The 1930's were a difficult time for theatres. No matter what they did to attract patrons, including free give aways and lotteries, they couldn't overcome the financial difficulties of the Great Depression. The overbuilding of the 1920's created fierce competition for the limited patrons. National chains went bankrupt and theatres closed. Production costs increased and film quality lowered.

The depression era ended with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's entrance into World War II. Americans were back at work supporting the war effort. Unemployment was down and disposable income was up. Gas rationing contributed to box office growth; movies were an inexpensive, easily accessible form of entertainment. News reels were added and movie theatres became not only an escape from war time worries, but a way to see actual footage of the war; a completely new way to follow current events. For the first time, audiences saw the cold, hard reality of war's vast amount of death and destruction. The news reels reinforced the sense of purpose and the theatre's role as the community center was restored. Embracing this role, the film industry participated in the war effort both financially and philosophically. Lobbies were plastered with patriotic posters and on screen messages recruited personal (enlistment) and financial (buy war bonds) support for the war effort. Studios developed films featuring anti-Nazi and pro-Soviet themes (Casablanca 1942 and The North Star 1943). They offered free movie days in which the purchase of a war bond garnered free admission to the movie.[75]

During the war years, materials were limited; building anything not essential to the war effort was restricted. From 1940-1950 new theatres were unheard of and remodeling of the tired or outdated structures was controlled. The industry anticipated a construction boom when the war finally ended. However, when the war did end, the experience had changed. The prices were cheaper, but there were no stage shows. There were more show-times but less pomp and ceremony. The Great Depression had killed the movie palace.

[74] John Edward Powell, *A Guide to Historic Architecture in Fresno, California* (1996).

[75] Melnick, p.101.

Skouras and Post War-the 1955 remodeling

West Coast Theatres sold controlling interest to William Fox in 1928 and became known as Fox West Coast Theatres (FWCT). In 1930, William Fox left and financial difficulties followed during the early years of the Depression. FWCT was owned by Wesco. In 1932, Wesco approached the Skouras brothers Charles and Spyros, who were successfully operating a string of theatres in the Midwest, to manage their holdings. After several years and multiple bankruptcy proceedings the theatre empire was finally a success. After 1942, Charles P. Skouras headed the National Theatres and his brother Spyros P. Skouras headed the 20th Century-Fox Film Corporation. By the mid-1940's Charles Skouras was the highest paid film executive with a salary in excess of $568,000. He died in 1954.[76]

With the financial restrictions of the 1930's and the material limitations of the 40's, theatres were outdated. When the post war construction and remodeling campaign began, FWCT under the direction of Charles Skouras, decided to create an in-house design studio and Carl G. Moeller (1893-1975), an architectural designer and gifted artist, was placed in charge. The 1930's tastes for Art Deco changed to Streamline Modern and Moeller adapted this to both his set designs and his theatre interiors. [77]

Under the Skouras leadership, Fox constructed a number of new theatres and remodeled over 200 others. Material shortages were still evident and the new designs were based on elaborate use of inexpensive materials. For nine years the "Skouras" style grew and flourished, embellishing theatre entries, lobbies and interiors with relatively inexpensive but quite impressive decorative finishes using pressed and etched metal, enormous amounts of staff plaster, colorful neon and paint in multicolored hues.

The Babcock, one of the Fox holdings, received its major face lift with the 1955 remodeling. The post war economy was recovering, construction materials were again available, and Billings was enjoying the effects of the oil boom. Hyme Lipsker had died in 1950 and his sons Morris and Aaron were managing the building. The National Theatre Company (NTC), part of the Fox Intermountain Theatres managed the Babcock Theatre, with Bob Pennock serving as the local manager. Investing $130,000, N.T.I. completely renovated the Babcock Theatre in the Skouras Style.

The remodel utilized prefabricated decorative elements and although the work was done over 10 weeks it required the building to only be closed for 9 days.[78] The entrance doors were moved back from the face of the building for a deep entrance. The side walls of the entry were relocated, splaying outward and lined with display cases trimmed in oversized pressed metal, used to announce upcoming events. Centered under this was a free standing juke box like ticket kiosk, covered with swooping oversized staff plaster and an etched metal base. Visible from blocks away, a new marquee was installed and brightly lit with layers of multi-colored neon and tracer lights.

The lobby was painted in multi-hued decorative paintings and had coves with neon lighting. The wall with the Heinsbergen mural was removed in a 1948 remodeling to allow for the installation of a candy counter. The candy counter was revamped with etched metal panels and the walls around the drinking fountain were made fanciful and ornate.

Stage shows no longer served as part of the entertainment so a masonry wall was constructed on the stage and the area behind it added to the end retail space. The latest in projection and lighting was installed along with a new wide screen with stereophonic sound towers. The proscenium opening was widened to allow for the new screen. Pillowed staff plaster trimmed the walls of the proscenium and oversized ornate scrolls of golds and silvers trimmed the top of it. Large gold scrolls swept up the walls. The auditorium was lit with blue and red neon installed in large plaster coves located around the ceiling and under the balcony.

Decorative painting filled the lobby and the auditorium in chartreuse, ivory and red colors and glitzy gold and silver leaf.

The main and balcony floors were rebuilt, new cushioned seating for 923 installed and the area completely re-carpeted. Men's and women's toilets were moved from the basement and lobby to the mezzanine and a telephone alcove was installed in the lounge for the "convenience of patrons."[79] Once again the theatre was state of the art and a "show" in itself.

---

[76] Preston J. Kaufmann, "Skouras-ized for Showmanship," *Theatre Historical Society of America,* Annual #14, 1987, p.6.

[77] Ibid.

[78] "Babcock Plans Grand Opening," *Billings Gazette*, 29 June 1955, p.3.

[79] "Babcock Plans Grand Opening," *Billings Gazette*, 29 June 1955, p.3.

The Skouras Style is often described as streamline modern, expressing "showmanship" in architecture and is found chiefly in theatres along the west coast. The Skouras Style survived the Consent Decree (see footnote 85) which split FWCT in 1952, but it could not survive the death of Charles Skouras in 1954. The Babcock Theatre was one of the last theatres remodeled in the Skouras Style and one of the very few examples of a non-California theatre operated by National to be extensively redone in the Skouras Style.[80]

This would be the last lavish remodeling of the Babcock Theatre. Over the next five decades the Theatre, along with other historic downtown theatres, struggled to survive a series of judicial, economic, social and technological forces.

The Post War Boom and the End of Historic Downtown Theatres

In the early post war years, people had some money to spend but no place to go. Movie attendance boomed. In 1943, 25.7% of recreational expenses were spent on motion pictures. By 1950, that amount was reduced in half and by 1963 it was down to only 4.1%. [81] The post war boom also led to the end of the historic downtown theatre. Post WWII automobile ownership in America increased exponentially (69,500 in 1945 to 6.7 million by 1950).[82] Spurred on with government loans and an increase in automobile ownership, young couples moved to the suburban fringe. Theatre development followed, moving from the over-screened urban areas to the under-screened suburban areas.

The first suburban threat to the downtown theatres was the development of the drive-in movies. Drive-in theatres, "ozoners" were the ideal place for a young family with children-no baby sitter required, no parking problems, dress as you like. The event was much more casual than theatre attendance. Within the confines of their own cars, women could wear "house dresses," children could scream and babies could cry. It offered cheap entertainment for a family group. Exhibitors found them attractive too; cheaper to build than an indoor house, cheaper to operate and the concessions stands were more profitable.[83] Outdoor drive-in theatres boomed throughout the 1950's but started to fade in the 1960's when suburban growth caused their real estate to become more valuable.[84]

For years the Justice Department tried to break up what it considered a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act; the vertical integration of film production, distribution and exhibition, by issuing a Consent Decree.[85] By the end of the 1940's, the

---

[80] Kaufmann, p.42.

[81] Melnick, p.116

[82] Ibid. p.119.

[83] Kerry Seagrave, *Drive-In Theatres* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1992), p.37.

[84] Melnick, p.119.

[85] Consent Decree: In the 1910's, Fox developed a system of controlling the production, distribution and exhibition of films when they vertically integrated Fox, National and Paramount Studios. The model was successful and copied by the other major studios of Loew's/MGM, Warner and RKO. These major Hollywood companies formed an oligopoly by which they divided the country into an intricate system of zones and clearances by which they controlled the distribution of first and second run movies. By 1945, they owned just over 17% of the motion picture theatres in the United States but controlled 70% of the first run theatres. The "Big Five" (Loews's, Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, RKO and Warner Bro's) and "Little 3" studios (Universal, Columbia and United Artists) were able to determine where and when their films would be shown. The United States was informally divided into geographic areas monopolized by one of the 8 studios, preventing competition. The independent producers had limited theatres to show their films and the independent theatres could not get the first run films.

The Justice Department had been trying to break up the system since the 1920's but was unsuccessful until 1940, when the government charged that vertical integration was a violation of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The Big Five signed the first Consent Decree in November of 1940, agreeing to put an end to "blind bidding" and "block booking." Blind bidding was when theatres bid on films sight unseen, sometimes before they were even produced. Block booking was when a theatre was forced to take a "block" of studio's films, sometimes only getting one or two of the films they wanted and being forced to show a number of others.

The first consent decree expired in 1943 and had very little effect on the Hollywood system. However as the war came to an end and Hollywood's role as a propaganda arm of the Military Department eased, the Justice Department again focused on the studio practices. In 1946, the government again filed suit, this time against Paramount and won. The US Supreme Court required the studios to divest their powerful theatre chains. One by one, over the next fifteen years, the Hollywood studios settled with the government and spun off their theatre empires. In addition to the separation of exhibition from production

government succeeded and the large studio systems started diversifying their theatre chains. Twentieth Century Fox divested in 1951.[86] While the theatre chains were profitable at this time, the production side struggled. Without guaranteed profits from the exhibition side, films were a much larger gamble for the studios. The five major studios made fewer films but with larger budgets hoping for a box office success. Theatres struggled to get enough films to keep the theatres filled. The studio profits from epic films no longer went directly back into the theatres, but rather to the studios themselves, creating difficulties for theatres needing refurbishment. The upkeep of the expensive finishes of the lavish theatres was cost prohibitive. New theatres were constructed as art houses; unadorned boxes, where the quality of the film was what was important, not the experience of the theatre building.

The next threat was the result of the suburban shopping mall. With the suburban expansion came the development of the shopping center and with the shopping center came the new shopping center theatre. The theatres offered lots of parking and a minimal design aesthetic that celebrated the size of the screen instead of the ornamentation of the auditorium. Attendance at downtown box offices continued to drop as fewer people were willing to get into their cars and drive downtown to see a film. More and more urban theatres closed while more and more suburban theatres opened.

In spite of the exodus to the suburbs and the breakup of the studio system, the greatest threat to the movie industry was the development of television. TV was free and very convenient. In November of 1948, *Architectural Record* noted "The moving picture theatre, now just about entering its second generation, looks to be due for some changes. The new generation will have to improve on the old, or the race may find itself dying out. For science is now giving the movie industry its worse scare since the movies began, with television making movie patrons stay home in droves." [87]

Theatres were always looking for ways to cut costs. Initially films were placed on two projectors and a full-time projectionist was required to change out the projectors. When the method of plattering was developed the whole film was spooled on a platter. Not only did it not require a full-time skilled projectionist, but more than one film could be run by a single, less costly person and the concept of twin (two screens) theatres was developed. The twins had smaller auditoriums, offered more selections and required fewer staff. Older theatres tried partitioning off their balconies, but the acoustical qualities were often unacceptable.

The multi-screen revolution ruled in the 1970's and 1980's. Twins became quads, and the number of screens grew. The theatre designs were bland and so were the names. The theatres were streamlined and automated; turnstiles replaced ticket takers and "showmanship" was exchanged for profitability. Between 1975 and 1995, thousands of landmark cinemas closed or were demolished or destroyed by renovation or abandoned and left to rot. The economics of the business changed so dramatically that the older theatres could not compete with the shiny new multiplexes with their promise of acres of parking and a safe comfortable evening.

At its peak, Billings boasted eight downtown theatres. By 1935, the number dwindled to three; the Babcock, the Fox and the World. The World started in 1916 as the Majestic, was renamed the Strand in 1917, and again named the Majestic in 1923. It changed to the Cozy in 1925 and the Lyric in 1927, which it remained until Bill Dollison bought it from Fox International in 1956 and named it the Dolly. Lonny Wagner of local Theatre Operators Inc. (TOI) bought it from Dolly in 1961 and named it the World. In 1978, the World closed and its equipment moved to the World West, a new twin screen theatre in the suburban west end of Billings near the new Rimrock Mall shopping center.[88]

With the big operators tied up in the Justice Department because of the Consent Decree break up, each new theatre opened by one of the large operators required court approval. Smaller operators, like the local TOI, could open theatres more quickly and independent chains grew during this period.[89]

Attempting to compete with the multi-plexes, the Fox Theatre converted its upper balconies into two smaller theatres, a move met with little success, and by 1986, the Fox was completely rebuilt as a live performing arts hall. The Babcock remained the only downtown movie theatre.

---

and distribution, the theatre chains were required to further divest themselves of 25-50% of their theatre holdings. This took several more years and established which theatres would be most profitable in the changing demographics, spinning off those that were less valuable (Melnick 127-129).

[86] Ibid. p.129.

[87] "A New Architecture for the Movie Theatre," *Architectural Record*, November 1948, p.121.

[88] Christine Meyers, "The World's Demise Yields Remnants from its Heyday," *Billings Gazette,* 3 December 1978, p.B1.

[89] Melnick, p.150.

The Babcock Theatre struggled to survive. It closed in 1981, when the Carisch theatre chain failed to renew its lease. Carisch operated a 7-screen multiplex in a suburban shopping center and used the Babcock as a place to show a series of R-rated horror films.[90]

A group of investors attempted to open the Babcock as the city's first art and foreign film show house. With the best of intentions and $90,000 investment, the group could not develop a profitable venue and the Babcock closed its doors again. In June of 1982, Theatre Operators, Inc. (TOI) leased it and started showing blockbuster attractions. The larger seating capacity made it more profitable, for the big box office attractions, than the smaller multiplex theatres. For nine years it survived but blockbuster films were harder to get and the flexibility of the multiplexes allowed the operator to move films between auditoriums to maximize profits. The large stand-alone Babcock was just too large and too expensive to operate and it closed again in March of 1991.[91]

The following fall a local dramatic group known as Star Fire Productions leased it to show live vaudeville acts. The stage in its reduced size was difficult to work with and by 1995, it again closed. The theatre sat empty until the fall of 2006 when a boxing promoter leased the theatre. The boxing events ran Thursday nights from late fall to early spring. This lasted for 4 years before closing. The building was sold in 2008 and the new owners restored the stage to its full original depth. They made the theatre available to a variety of groups and promoters and now offer everything from lectures, to films, to rock concerts.

In August of 2008, Ruth Lipsker Moss sold the building to the Babcock LLC comprised of Kay Foster, Mike Mathew and Don and Kim Olsen. They are the third owners of the building and the building is now 101 years old. Ruth Moss had a life estate allowing her to stay in the building as long as she was able. She died there 3 weeks later.

Between 2008 and 2012 the entire building underwent a certified historic preservation tax credit rehabilitation. The rehabilitation project, designed and directed by O2Architects of Billings, Montana, removed the non-historic interior and exterior elements and reversed most of the historically insensitive alterations in order to revitalize the building to resemble its mid-1950's century appearance. The building is very well documented both photographically and verbally.

History of Exterior Changes

Except for the changes to the theatre, the exterior of the building remained as originally constructed until the late 1950's when it was "modernized." The façade was consistent throughout the building and signage identified the individual tenants. The upscale clothing stores of Doyle's and Jason's in the Babcock building and Coles and Hart Albin across the street were the staple of the downtown shopping experience, reinforced by the stately historic fabric of the buildings where they were located. With the 1950's oil boom and the post war desire for all things new and modern, the downtown retailers reinvented themselves. City Drug, who occupied the corner retail space for 35 years, closed and was replaced by Barron's Jewelry.

Barron's, a ten-year-old business, moved north one block to relocate in the prime corner retail space of the Babcock building in the heart of downtown. Barron's commissioned a massive remodeling of 100 feet of the building's storefront, enclosing the cutaway corner and completely replacing the existing fabric with terrazzo column covers and full-height brass colored aluminum and glass storefronts.

Shortly thereafter, the long standing boot store that operated out of the building also closed and was replaced with a national franchise women's wear clothing store resulting in a change to their storefront.

The desire during the 1950's for new and modern resulted in the demolition of many of the older downtown buildings and replacement by new modern edifices. Following Hyme Lipsker's death in 1950, his sons Morris and Aaron managed the building until around 1965. Under this direction, the entire second floor was covered with blue aluminum paneling with silver vertical fins of a modern style. [92]

By the 1960's, suburban shopping malls were displacing downtown retailers. By the 1990's, many downtown ground floor retail spaces converted to office and restaurants. The retail spaces that remained were carved into smaller and smaller parcels and served as incubators for start-up businesses. If the business proved successful, in a few years it would move to a more expensive mall space. If not successful, it closed. As new ground floor retailers moved in, the storefronts were

[90] C. Meyers, "Babcock Closes its Doors to Movie Goers-For Now," *Billings Gazette,* 9 June 1981.

[91] C. Meyers, "Group Gives Fresh Life to Old Theatre," *Billings Gazette,* September 1991, p.A1.

[92] "Babcock Remodeling Cost Estimated at $200,000," *Billings Gazette*, 20 January 1957, p.8.

individualized for the new tenant. Many of the tenants did not last long and soon the ground floor of the building was a random collection of poorly constructed facades. Transoms were replaced with a variety of signage and infill materials including ceramic tile, terrazzo, plaster, marble and rustic logs; few of the transoms remained.

Working from historic drawings and photos, the 2008-2012 remodeling removed all of the non-original fabric. The installation of the metal panels had damaged the projecting brick and the terra cotta. Pieces of the original terra cotta trim were found in an attic space in the building and used to form molds for casting replacement stone pieces. Replacement brick was sourced by Art Stone of Chapel Hill, Tennessee. The historic layout of transoms and recessed doorways were replicated and the exterior returned to a harmonious whole.

History of Use – Babcock Apartments

The Babcock building has had a very stable history of use. When first opened in 1907, the second floor provided office space for a variety of professional businesses including dentists, surgeons, lawyers, and real estate agents in addition to providing a physical location to the US Land Office handling homesteading of the surrounding properties. Thirty-one units were built; no unit was numbered #13. Polk directories indicate that a few of the units may have been used as residences in the early years. By 1930, Hyme Lipsak, the building owner, actively pursued converting offices to apartments. He hired well-known local architect J.G. Link to draw up plans for converting second floor offices to apartments and adding a third floor to the building containing 15 studio and one bedroom apartments. (please refer to the historic drawings included in the Continuation Sheets of the nomination) The addition of a third floor never reached fruition; however, the second floor work was completed. Conversion of a greater number of units to apartments occurred during the depression until by 1940, the second floor consisted entirely of apartments, leased mostly by women. The building now housed 21 apartments, none numbered 13. Lewis Babcock (A.L.'s son) lived in unit #1 and Hyme Lipsker and family lived in unit #19 until they moved to the corner unit #16. Mr. Lipsker and his family lived there until his death in 1950. His wife, Frieda, continued to live there until her death in 1965. When their daughter Ruth and her husband Dr. Bertram Moss moved back to Billings from Chicago, they too lived in the building. They converted a few smaller units into a spacious modern apartment in which Ruth lived until her death in 2008.

During the mid-1940's to the mid-1950's, only three to four apartments were leased to locals, the other apartments were reserved for Northwest Airlines transient employees. Starting in the 1960's and continuing until 2008, the downtown apartments lost their appeal and suffered from increased vacancy. By 2008, the roof was in disrepair, leaking into apartments causing ceilings to fail. The plumbing corroded causing damage to the retail spaces below. Rather than make the costly repairs, the owner opted to abandon the units. Over half the apartments were shut down. The new owners have repaired, replaced and reopened all the units. They now provide affordable housing for the downtown service worker.

History of Use – Retail

As designed, the Babcock building was comprised of ground floor retail space, second floor offices and a large theatre. The basement held a bowling alley, candy manufacturing and Union Hall.

The retail spaces faced both Broadway (also known as 28th Street) and 2nd Avenue. Many of the storefronts also faced the interior arcade until the 1923 remodeling when the entrance to the theatre was moved to Second Ave North and the arcade converted to retail space.

The bowling alley in the basement was installed in the early 1920's and remained in operation until the mid-1950's.[93] Water resulting from suppression of the fire of 1935 heavily damaged the bowling alley, but it was repaired and reopened. Access to the bowling alley occurred through the arched arcade on Broadway and down a wide set of stairs, or through the stairs in City Drug. It operated under several names including Van's Alley, Recreation Bowling Alley, Babcock Bowling and finally Broadway Bowl when it closed around 1957.

Retail tenants remained very stable until the 1980's when the suburban shopping mall opened resulting in a loss of downtown retailers. Many tenants remained at the Babcock location for over 40 years. Trott Printing remained the longest, starting in a space on Broadway and then moving to the north leg of the arcade once the theatre entrance moved to Second Avenue in 1923. They operated a large printing production area in the basement and maintained a small street-side storefront from around 1910 to the late 1980's or early 1990's. By 1995, the space was vacant. From 1995 to present, the former space occupied by Trott Printing housed a series of small short-lived retailers.

[93] Polk Directories

Between the theatre entrance and Trott Printing is a small retail space that has been occupied by three different jewelry stores since the 1940's.

Laggis Brothers Confectioners, with candy manufacturing in the basement, initially occupied the corner shop. It subsequently became City Drug and operated as such from at least 1923 (Polk) until 1956 when Barron's Jewelers relocated from down the street. Barron's remodeled the exterior of the building, replacing the terra cotta trim and prism glass with modern marble and brass colored storefront. Barron's stayed at that location for the next 30 years.

Walk over Boot was located next to City Drug at 120 No 28th from at least 1923 (Polk) until 1958 when it became Dixie Shops for a few years, then Monarch Clothing, and lastly a Hallmark/ Crown Gifts until it closed in 2006 after 20 years of business.

The next spaces contained a liquor store, the entrance to the Babcock Apartments and an optician for several years.

Hyme Lipsker had his clothing store in the end space and sold it to J.A. Alweis and Sons, who renamed themselves Jasons. Jasons Men's Clothing and Doyles Women's Clothing held the 2 southern-most retail spaces on Broadway from 1940 to around 1980, when they moved out to the suburban shopping malls. Taubert Clothing moved into the Jasons space but relocated when the apartment plumbing above it began to fail.

Downtown retail spaces suffered in the late 1970's to 1990's and a series of small startup retailers tried and failed, many not lasting the length of a five-year lease. By 2008, one jeweler and one coffee shop remained. Since the remodeling effort of 2008-2012, all the spaces are leased; businesses include jewelry, coffee, 2 galleries, 2 restaurants and soon a market.

Albert Lewis Babcock (December 22, 1851—July 16, 1918)
While not recommended eligible under Criterion B, the Babcock Theatre Building is important for its association with Albert Lewis Babcock, one of Billings' leading businessmen at the turn of the century. Babcock was a pioneer businessman and early investor in Billings' future. His involvement in early commerce and banking helped found and promote a number of businesses and businessmen that were pivotal in the local economy. In addition to his business acumen, he was important to the cultural history of Billings. He built the first opera house in the city, and upon its destruction from fire, he quickly built a new and more grandiose one—the Babcock Theatre.

Babcock's influence extended to economic, financial and cultural circles as well as political circles. He was hardworking and generous and was often referred to as "Mr. Billings" as he continuously and tirelessly promoted the virtues of Billings, Montana.[94]

Albert L. Babcock was born in Albany, New York on December 22, 1851, the son of William C. and Julia (Lawrence) Babcock. When he was five, his family moved to what was then the "far west" and located in Pontiac, Illinois, where they were in the farming and mercantile business.

At 14, according to the customs of the times, he apprenticed. The trade selected for him was a printer but the young Babcock decided he was better suited as a merchant and became a clerk in a country hardware store and tin shop.[95]

In 1873, after turning 21 and saving a few hundred dollars, Babcock joined resources with another businessman and began his business career by opening a grocery store under the name of Babcock and Lobdell. In 1877, he married Miss Antoinette Packer of Pontiac, Illinois. They had one son, Lewis C.

By the time he turned 30, he felt the call of the western frontier and he and his family arrived in Billings in 1882, just as the Northern Pacific railroad platted the township of Billings.

He joined A.W. Miles in a partnership and opened a hardware store and tin shop in the neighboring town of Coulson, two miles away from, and five years older than, Billings. It soon became clear to Babcock that the future was in Billings. In 1900, The Babcock and Miles Hardware store moved from Coulson to Billings relocating on the northeast corner of Montana Avenue and 27th Street. Two other stores in the towns of Twodot and Crow Agency soon opened.

---

[94] Karen Stevens and DeeAnn Redman, *Billings A to Z* (Billings, MT: The Friends of the Library, 2000), p.14.

[95] "A.L. Babcock Dies at Long Beach of Pneumonia Attack," *Billings Gazette*, 7 July 1918.

As Yellowstone Park gained popularity, Miles moved to Livingston to form the Yellowstone Park Camp Company. The Babcock and Miles business was renamed A.L. Babcock Hardware Company. It developed into one of the largest hardware and implement houses in the Midwest region, with a trade area encompassing eastern Montana and Wyoming. In 1903, he sold his hardware interests to Billings Hardware, but he continued the agricultural and implements business, maintaining stores in Bridger and Pryor until 1912.

He was instrumental in the development of several businesses. In May of 1895, he started the Yellowstone Valley Flouring Mill and became its president when it incorporated as the Billings Milling Company. The company was taken over in 1910 by the Russell-Miller Milling Company.[96]

He was president of the Billings Realty Company, which owned large tracts of land surrounding the city. He founded Babcock-Fraser Co. and together with W.A. Selvidge of Helena was instrumental in the development and construction of several buildings in Billings.

He influenced the financial development of Billings. He served as one of the founders of the Yellowstone National Bank. The bank was organized in 1886 by Parmly Billings, the oldest son of Frederick Billings, and his cousin Edward Bailey under the name of Billings and Bailey. It changed after a couple of years to the Bank of Billings and then to Yellowstone National Bank in 1891. Babcock, along with his friends Peter Larson and Charles M. Bair, were listed as directors.[97] Babcock served as Vice President for two years before being elected president in 1893, a position he held until his death in 1918. According to some Billings citizens, Babcock probably did more as president of the Yellowstone National Bank than any man in the city to keep the two banks in Billings from closing their doors during the 1893 financial panic.[98] His generosity to his employees included the installation of a gymnasium for them at the bank.[99]

He was very involved in the development of the community assets. Along with E.B. Hungerford and Charles Spear, Babcock organized the city's first telephone system, coming online in 1890. It operated under various names including Independent Telephone Co., Automatic Telephone Exchange, and Mountain States Telephone and Telegraph. Babcock served as president until 1914, when it was taken over by Bell Telephone Company.[100]

He was one of the founders of the Billings Water Power Company which switched on electric lighting in the town in 1887. He served as president of the Yellowstone Fair Association, and vice president of the Bridger Coal and Improvement Company of Bridger, Montana.

Babcock contributed to Billings' cultural atmosphere as well. In 1895, in partnership with others, he built the 800 seat Billings Opera House and managed it until it was destroyed by fire in 1906. He was instrumental in the quick replacement of the opera house and the development of the Babcock Theatre Building. Confident in the future of Billings, Mr. Babcock and his partners quickly replaced the destroyed opera house with a larger building consisting of an opera house, store and office building on one of the principal corners in Billings. Ambitious for its time, it was the largest theatre between Minneapolis and Seattle. Mr. Babcock managed the building until his death.

Babcock also influenced local and state politics. A staunch republican and great statesman, he served as chairman of the young county's Central Committee during several campaigns as well as chairman of the board of commissioners of Yellowstone County from 1885 to 1889. When Montana was admitted as a state in 1889, Mr. Babcock served as the first state senator from Yellowstone County in Montana's first legislative assembly. He served in the lower house from 1892 to 1894 and in the senate from 1894 to 1898. He also served on the military staffs of Governors White, Toole and Rickards and acquired the military rank of colonel.[101]

Babcock was also involved in many early fraternal organizations, a leader among men. His fraternal associations included serving as grand commander of the Knights Templar in Montana in 1894, and serving as the first Exalted Ruler of the

---

[96] Chere Juisto, *Tales Spun Along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings* (Billings, MT: Yellowstone Historic Preservation Board, 1998).

[97] Lee Rostad, auth., and Ronald Tobias, ed., *Fourteen Cents and Seven Green Apples: The Life and Times of Charles Bair,* 3rd edition (Great Falls, MT: Lee Rostad, 1996).

[98] Boden, p.202.

[99] "Albert L. Babcock-Business Man," *Yellowstone Genealogy Forum,* revised 20 June 2001.

[100] *Billings Gazette*, 7 July 1918.

[101] Ibid.

Billings Protective Order of Elks lodge #394 when it was founded in December 1897. He also belonged to the Knights of Pythias and numerous chapters of the Masonic Lodge including the Blue Lodge Chapter, the Ashlar Lodge, and the Royal Arch chapter. Babcock also had ties to the Aldemar commandery and Algerian Temple of the Mystic Shrine of the Masonic Order.[102]

Babcock's personality was such that he was very popular and developed deep friendships. Charles M. Bair, renowned sheep rancher, entrepreneur and philanthropist named his second daughter Alberta Monroe after his good friend Albert Babcock.[103]

He appreciated the help of others and always tried to reciprocate when possible. One example demonstrating his allegiance to people who helped him included his friendship with Martha Cannary, also known as Calamity Jane. During his early years in Montana, Babcock and a friend were captured by Indians and tied up in a tent with the promise of being burned the following day. Calamity Jane reportedly slit the back of the tent and rescued them, saving their lives. [104] In return, Babcock often paid the drinking debts incurred by Jane.

In addition to his other attributes, Babcock displayed a strong work ethic and generosity. Through his many businesses, he employed many young men, offering sage advice and financial assistance when needed.

At age 66, Col. Albert L. Babcock died at Long Beach California on July 16, 1918. During the hour of his funeral, all business in Billings ceased to operate. "Banks and theatres closed for the afternoon and practically every store and business house in the city closed its doors from 2 o'clock until 3 o'clock."[105]

Hyme Lipsker (August 15, 1888—May 1950)

Born in Russia on August 15, 1888, Hyme Lipsker first immigrated to Syracuse, New York later moving to Billings, Montana on April 1, 1908. He was one of the founding members of the Jewish Lodge B'nai B'rinth Lodge No. 815, joining it at the age of 29 in 1917.[106] He was an active member of the Lodge and instrumental in the construction of the temple in 1940.

As a young merchant, he operated the Popular Clothing store on Montana Avenue near the 27th Street intersection for a number of years with his brother Aaron Lipsker. Later he operated the Lipsker Clothing Store on North Broadway, mid-block between 1st and 2nd Avenue. He sold it to the J. Alweis and Sons Company which later became Jason's Men's Store. Jason's was later located in the Babcock Building.

On January 15, 1927, Lipsker purchased the Babcock building from Mrs. A.L. Babcock and her son L.C. Babcock for a sum in excess of $250,000. Enjoying the town and the building, Lipsker moved his family into the building and retained ownership until his death in 1950, at which time the building passed to his heirs.

During Lipskers oversight of the Babcock, he witnessed many highs and a few lows. One of the lows included the destruction of the theatre portion of the building by fire on February 21, 1935. Dedicated to the building and in spite of the depression, Lipsker had the theatre rebuilt in the finest style of the time. It reopened six short months later on August 6, 1935. This was only the first of several remodels he oversaw.

In 1908, Lipsker married Frieda Fefferman.[107] The union produced two sons, Aaron and Morris, and one daughter, Ruth Moss. Aaron graduated from Northwestern University in Chicago, where he met his wife Lillian. Morris attended Shattuck Miltary Academy, served in the WWII and went on to purchase and run Chapple Drug Company. Ruth also attended Northwestern University where she met and married her husband, Dr. Bertam Moss. By the 1930's, the Lipskers numbered among the wealthiest families in the area.

---

[102] "A.L. Babcock Funeral is Held While All of Billings Mourns," *Billings Gazette*, 16 July 1918.

[103] Rostad.

[104] Boden, p.202.

[105] *Billings Gazette*, 16 July 1918.

[106] Julie L. Coleman, *Golden Opportunities: A Biographical History of Montana's Jewish Communities* (Helena, MT: Falcon Press, 1994), p.67.

[107] Ibid. p.81.

Lipsker died at age 61 in early May of 1950 of a heart attack. He was in Jamestown, North Dakota with his wife as they traveled back from wintering in Florida. Frieda and Morris continued the family ownership of the Babcock Building until Morris moved to Mexico, at which time Aaron and Ruth joined in the ownership. Aaron moved to California in 1962 and Frieda died un-expectantly on August 7, 1965. Upon Dr. Bertram Moss's retirement, Ruth and her husband moved back to Billings from Chicago. Ruth and her husband (until he became ill) managed the building while they lived in one of the Babcock apartments. Ruth died while living in the apartment in 2008. For over 80 years, the Lipsker family owned the Babcock building.

Architectural Significance

Due to rapid growth and development as a result of the railroad, Billings quickly transformed from a collection of roughly built wooden structures to more substantial brick and stone buildings at the turn of the 20th century. Efforts by the community to establish more permanency and style in the in the town reflected the belief and vision of long-term growth and development. Many of the buildings of this era were designed and built by local architects and contractors.[108] The Babcock Theatre Building, however, was designed by Edwin C. Houghton, a well-known Seattle theatre architect. The building, designed in the Commercial style, contrasts with the more common Classical Revival styles of its contemporary neighboring buildings.

The Babcock Theatre Building's style is a product of the popularity of the Commercial style trend at the time and the building materials most available in mid-20th century Billings. It is a strong example of a western Commercial building style, a skeletal, rectangular style of commercial buildings of five to fifteen stories, developed in Chicago and popularized in New York, Philadelphia and the west coast. This style was characterized by flat roofs and minimal ornament with repetitive window placement with slight variations that was influenced by Chicago architectural styles and trends developed in the late 19th century. The Commercial style is distinguished by metal skeleton framing in cast iron or steel, exterior masonry cladding, large, regularly spaced divided rectangular windows, and limited exterior ornament. The overall character of the Commercial style is embodied in the Babcock Theatre Building's design.

Under Criterion C, the building is a significant landmark in the downtown fabric. The inclusion of a theatre in the design and construction of the building is also noteworthy. Though designed as an opera house, it transitioned from stage performances to silent films, through the rise and fall of the movie palace. Its evolution through time reflected changes in entertainment. It survived modernization and is an excellent example of the Skouras-Style theatre design, often described as streamline modern, expressing "showmanship" in architecture and is found chiefly in theatres along the west coast. It is one of the last theatres done in this style and one of the few examples outside of California. The theatre is the sole surviving historic theatre in Billings and is an important representation of motion picture facilities and the movie industry of the early to mid-20th century.

Edwin Walker Houghton

Edwin Houghton of Seattle received the commission to design the Babcock Theatre. Born in 1856 in Hampshire, UK, his family was involved in surveying and architectural design in England. He attended public and private schools in Birmingham, England and attended King Edward's College. He apprenticed in the architectural firm of an uncle and of his older brother, Thomas Marcus Houghton. He immigrated to the US in 1884 and went to work as a farmer in El Paso, TX, then as an architect in his own firm in Pasadena, California, before moving north. He settled in Port Townsend, WA in early 1889 and then moved to Seattle after the Great Fire of that year when many of the theatres were destroyed.

Houghton became a distinguished architect in Seattle garnering a reputation for designs of theatre and opera houses; he became known as the dean of theatre architects. Though working mostly in the Pacific Northwest, Houghton did however, design several theatres or opera houses outside that area including the Grand Opera House in Butte and the Helena Theatre in the capital city of Helena, during the heyday of gold and copper mining.

He and his wife Margaret lived in the Occidental Hotel in the center of Pioneer Square in 1900. Edwin practiced architecture with his sons from 1913 until his death in 1927. In his obituary of 1927, The Washington State Chapter American Institute of Architects Monthly Bulletin stated: "During his active career many of the older buildings in Seattle were designed by Mr. Houghton and he was particularly distinguished as a designer of theatres. A genial personality and

[108] Ann Kooistra-Manning, *Billings Townsite Historic District (Boundary Increase 1)*; National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form (United States Department of the Interior, 21 April 2006), p.11-12.

never failing optimism, were characteristic of the man and it seemed fitting that it should continue to the end, which came suddenly while at his office desk." [109]

Conclusion

Throughout its history, beginning in 1907, the Babcock Theatre Building served as an anchor in the northern expansion of downtown Billings. Designed by renowned Seattle theatre architect Edwin W. Houghton, the Babcock provided and continues to provide entertainment, retail, residential and office spaces. When constructed, the Babcock Theatre Building was one of the finest houses between the Midwest and West Coast. It continues to be a significant downtown landmark. The theatre evolved over time but remains an excellent example of the Skouras-Style theatre design, and the sole surviving historic theatre in Billings. Recent efforts have returned the Babcock to its former glory. The Babcock Theatre Building is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A and C at the local level of significance.

Developmental history/additional historic context information (if appropriate)

Theatre History

The following information is from: *Theatres by Craig Morrison, Norton/ Library of Congress Visual Sourcebooks in Architecture, Design and Engineering,* W.W.Norton & Company, New York and London/ Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

"Theatres occupy a unique place in the heart of an affectionate public. Historically, they have been old at thirty-five, obsolete at fifty. Yet, they seem to have been around forever. The memories that they hold make them beloved; we are alarmed when one is threatened and deeply saddened when one disappears."

"Theatres have suffered from loss of fashion and functional change. Some were left high and dry when new entertainment districts grew in other areas of the city. The horseshoe balconies of early legitimate theatres imposed sight lines that were ill-suited to film presentation and many early cinemas proved to be uncomfortably cavernous and reverberant when sound-film technology arrived. The movie palaces that had brought crowds downtown, became obsolete in the post-World War II era when television revealed its superior efficiency in delivering entertainment to mass audiences. Some theatre owners tried to survive by making their buildings look modern, but their efforts, generally partial and under budgeted, rarely were successful."

Even without sound, color or dimension, the moving picture displaced live theatre and quickly became the greatest single force in public entertainment. First there were short – three minutes or so- films viewed by peering into a machine. The first movies were novel adjuncts to live vaudeville acts. "As the 1930's progressed, the stages stood idle and the organs fell silent. The age of the movie palace entered into a long, slow good bye."

[109] "Edwin Walker Houghton,"Washington State Chapter American Institute of Architects Monthly Bulletin, vol. VII no. 5, May 1927, n.p.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

"A.L. Babcock Dies at Long Beach of Pneumonia Attack." *Billings Gazette*, 7 July 1918.

"A.L. Babcock Funeral is Held While All of Billings Mourns." *Billings Gazette*, 16 July 1918.

"A.L. Babcock Theatre Block as it Will Appear When Completed, Finest Opera House in the West Is Almost Complete." *Billings Gazette,* 8 December 1907.

"A New Architecture for the Movie Theatre." *Architectural Record,* November 1948, p. 121.

"Anniversary of the Babcock Theatre-Babcock built by Men of Vision." *Billings Gazette,* 23 August 1925.

"Architect Houghton has Designed Many Theatres." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* 29 December 1907.

"Babcock Plans Gala Opening Tuesday Night, Municipal Band Concert, Phil Sheridan's Orchestra are Programmed Features." *Billings Gazette,* 4 August 1935, p.1.

"Babcock Plans Grand Opening." *Billings Gazette*, 29 June 1955, p.3.

"Babcock Remodeling Cost Estimated at $200,000." *Billings Gazette*, 20 January 1957, p.8.

"Babcock Theatre is Swept by Flames, Arouse Tenants in Apartments as Fire Spreads." *Billings Gazette*, 22 February 1935, p.1.

Babcock Theatre pamphlets, various years. In possession of Mike Deveau, in Billings, MT.

"Babcock to be reconstructed Immediately, Loss in Theatre Fire is Set at $75,000; Apartments Looted by Vandals." *Billings Gazette,* 23 February 1935, report

"Best in the West." Program from the opening of the new Opera House in the Babcock Theatre. 23 December 1907.

Billings scrapbooks, on file; Montana Room, Parmly Billings Library. Billings, MT.

Boden, Anneke-Jan. *Billings: The First 100 Years*. Norfolk, VA: Donning, 1981.

Brockett, Oscar G. *The History of the Theatre.* Boston and University of Texas at Austin: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 2007, pg.583 & 584.

Bruner, Robert F., and Sean D. Warfel. *The Panic of 1907: Lessons Learned from the Market's Perfect Storm.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

"Castilian Design Lends to New Babcock Enchantment-Special Lighting Features-Improvements Cost $75,000." *The Advance,* 28 September 1927.

Coleman, Julie L. *Golden Opportunities:* A *Biographical History of Montana's Jewish Communities.* Helena, MT: Falcon Press, 1994.

"Cool Air Ventilating System Installed at Babcock." *Billings Gazette*, 19 July 193, p.7.

Cooper, Myrtle E. *From Tent Town* to *City:* A *Chronological History of Billings, Montana 1882-1935*. Billings, MT: Parmly Billings Library, 1981.

Dannenburg, Joseph, ed. *Film Year Book 1925.* New York: The Film Daily, 1925.

"Digital Sanborn Maps: 1867-1970," Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, last modified 2008. Accessed years 1885, 1891, 1896, 1903, 1923 (revised 1949), and 1925 on DATE (ex: 6 June 2011) 2011, http://sanborn.umi.com.

"Edwin Walker Houghton,"Washington State Chapter American Institute of Architects Monthly Bulletin, vol. VII no. 5, May 1927, n.p.

"For New Opera House in City, Bids for Building to be Opened Monday, Work to be Pushed." *Billings Dailey Gazette,* 23 November 1906, vertical files.

"Good Music is Featured at the Babcock." *Billings Gazette*, 23 August 1925.

"Illness Fatal to Hyme Lipsker." *Billings Gazette*, 9 May 1950.

Jensen, Joyce. *Pieces and Places of Billings History: Local Markers and Sites.* Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1994.

Juisto, Chere. *Tales Spun Along the Tracks: A History of Downtown Billings.* Prepared for Yellowstone Historic Preservation Board. Billings, MT: 1998.

Kaufmann, Preston J. *Skouras-ized For Showmanship.* Theatre Historical Society of America, Annual #14, 1987 T.H.S.

Kooistra-Manning, Ann. *Billings Townsite Historic District (Boundary Increase I).* National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. United States Dept. of the Interior, 21 April 2006, p.11.

"Largest Stage Between Twin Cities and Coast That of Babcock Theatre Billings." *Theatre and Town Magazine*, Anniversary Number Program, 22-28 August 1925.

"Magnificent Ovation is Given to President, Enthusiastic People of Midland Empire Greet Him." *Billings Dailey Gazette,* 20 October 1911.

"Mat Game Loses Out at Babcock, Scates Quits Chain After Looking at Scant House." *Billings Gazette,* 15 May 1934.

Melnick, Ross, and Andreas Fuchs. *Cinema Treasures: A New Look at Classic Movie Theatres.* St. Paul, MN: MBI Publishing Co., 2004.

Meyers, Christine "Babcock Closes Its Doors to Movie Goers-For Now." *Billings Gazette*, 9 June 1981.

Meyers, C. "Group Gives Fresh Life to Old Theatre." *Billings Gazette,* September 1991, p.A1.

Meyers, C. "The World's Demise Yields Remnants from Its Heyday." *Billings Gazette*, 3 December 1978, p.B1.

Mighetto, Lisa and Marcia Babcock Montgomery. *Hard Drive to the Klondike: Promoting Seattle During the Gold Rush.* Seattle, WA: Northwest Interpretive Association, 2002.

Morrison, Craig. *Theatres*. Part of the Norton/Library of Congress Visual Sourcebooks in Architecture, Design & Engineering. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company and Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 2006.

"Music is Wonderful Aid in Interpretation of Movies." *Billings Gazette,* 25 April 1920.

"New Movie Palace for Billings, This Spring is Certain." *Billings Gazette,* morning edition, 13 January 1929.

"Play house for Billings, Work Will Start Soon—Will be Modern in All Respects." *Billings Dailey Gazette*, 11 November 1906, vertical files.

Polk, R.L. *Billings City Directory.* Salt Lake City, Utah: various years between 1885 and 1950.

Poppeliers, John C. and S. Allen Chambers Jr. *What Style Is It? A Guide to American Architecture.* Historic American Buildings Survey. John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 2003.

Powell, John, Edward. *A Guide to Historic Architecture in Fresno, California*. John Edward Powell, 1996.

Program from the re-opening of the Babcock Theatre. 7 June 1928.

"Proposed New Billings Theatre Follows Mayan Indian Design." *Billings Gazette*, 16 January 1929.

Putman, Michael. *Silent Screens: The Decline and Transformation of the American Movie Theatre.* Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000.

Reich, James M. *Post Card History Series Billings*. Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2009.

Rostad, Lee. *Fourteen Cents and Seven Green Apples: The Life and Times of Charles Bair.* Edited by Ronald Tobias. 3rd ed. Great Falls, MT: Lee Rostad, 1996.

"Safely Test at Theatre, Great Weight is Used." *Billings Gazette*, 22 December 1907.

Segrave, Kerry. *Drive-In Theatres.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 1992.

Stevens, Karen, and DeeAnn Redman. *Billings A to Z*. Billings, MT: The Friends of the Library, 2000.

"The Opera House Makes Big Blaze, Fire Attains Good Headway and is Bursting Through Side of Building Before Alarm is Turned On." *Billings Dailey Gazette,* 22 September 1906, p. 1.

"The Rapid Evolution of the Modern Theatre Type." *American Architect,* 23 September 1914.

"Theatre Goers Praise Remodeled Babcock." *Billings Gazette,* 7 August 1935, p.1.

"Theatre Work Begins Monday, Babcock Equipment is Being Torn Out and Sold" *Billings Gazette,* 7 June 1927.

Van West, Carroll. *Capitalism on the Frontier: The Economic Transformation of Billings and the Clark's Fork Bottom in the Nineteenth Century.* Billings, MT: 1991.

Van West, Carroll. *Images of Billings*: *A Photographic History.* Billings, MT: Western Heritage Press, 1990.

Yellowstone County. Deed Record Books, Office of Clerk and Recorder, Yellowstone County Courthouse. Billings, MT.

Yellowstone Genealogy Forum. "Albert L. Babcock-Business Man." Revised 20 June 2001.

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 # _____
____recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

_x_State Historic Preservation Office
____Other State agency
____Federal agency
____Local government
____University
____Other
Name of repository: _____

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than 1
(Do not include previously listed resource acreage.)

UTM References
(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet.)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	12	693882	5072710	3			
2				4			

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The Babcock Theatre sits on lots 7-12 and part of lot 6 in Block 93 of the Billings Original Townsite.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
Corresponds to the physical legal boundary description of the property that has not changed since the building was constructed in 1907.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Kimberly Olsen

organization O2 Architects date September 2010

street & number 208 North Broadway, #350 telephone (406) 259-7123

city or town Billings state MT zip code 59101

e-mail kimo@o2architects.net

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **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. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Continuation Sheets**
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items.)

Please See "Continuation Sheets"

Photographs:

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. Key all photographs to the sketch map.

Name of Property:
City or Vicinity:
County: State:
Photographer:
Date Photographed:
Description of Photograph(s) and number:
1 of ___.

See Continuation Sheets

Property Owner:

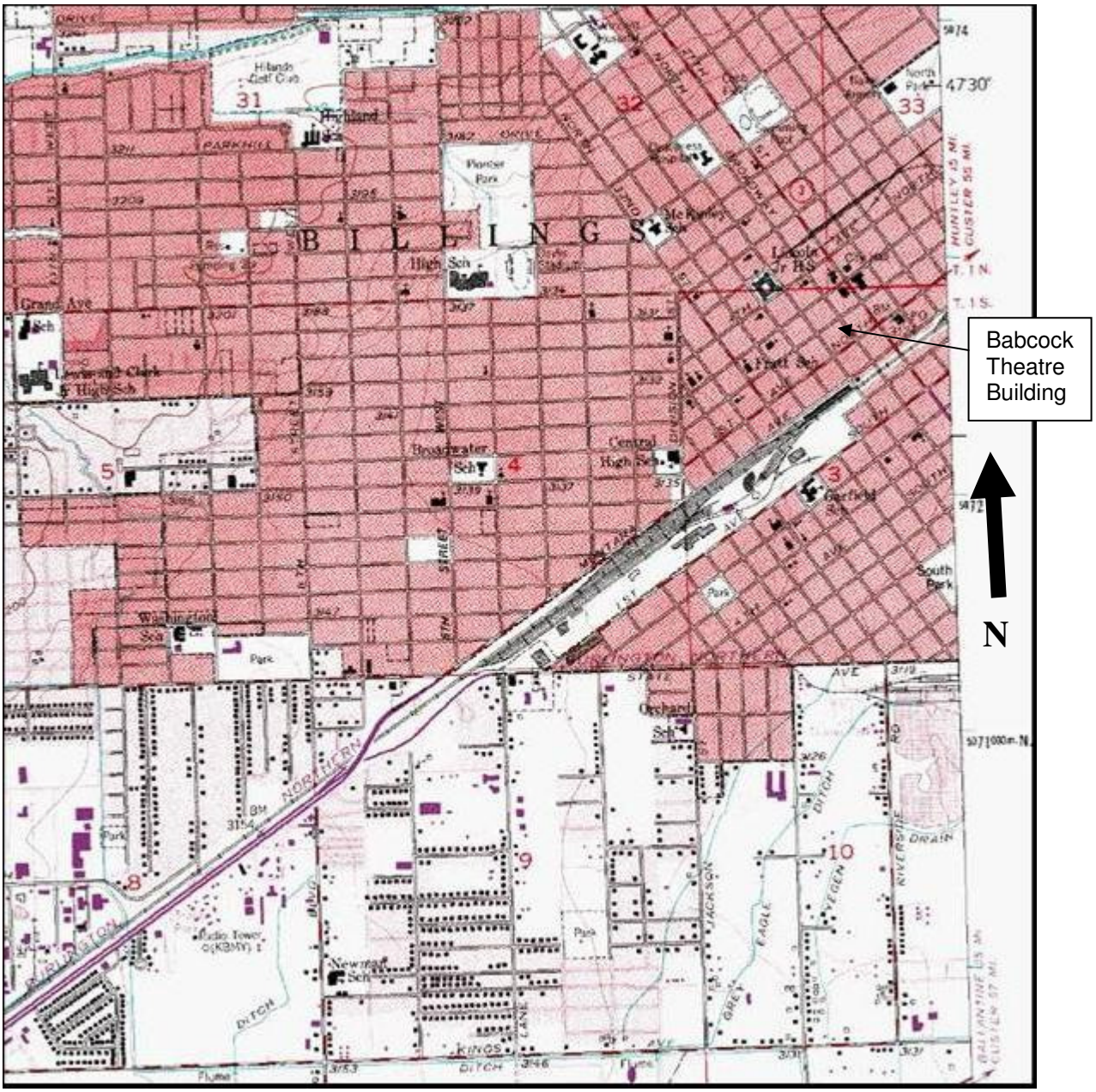
(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Babcock, LLC

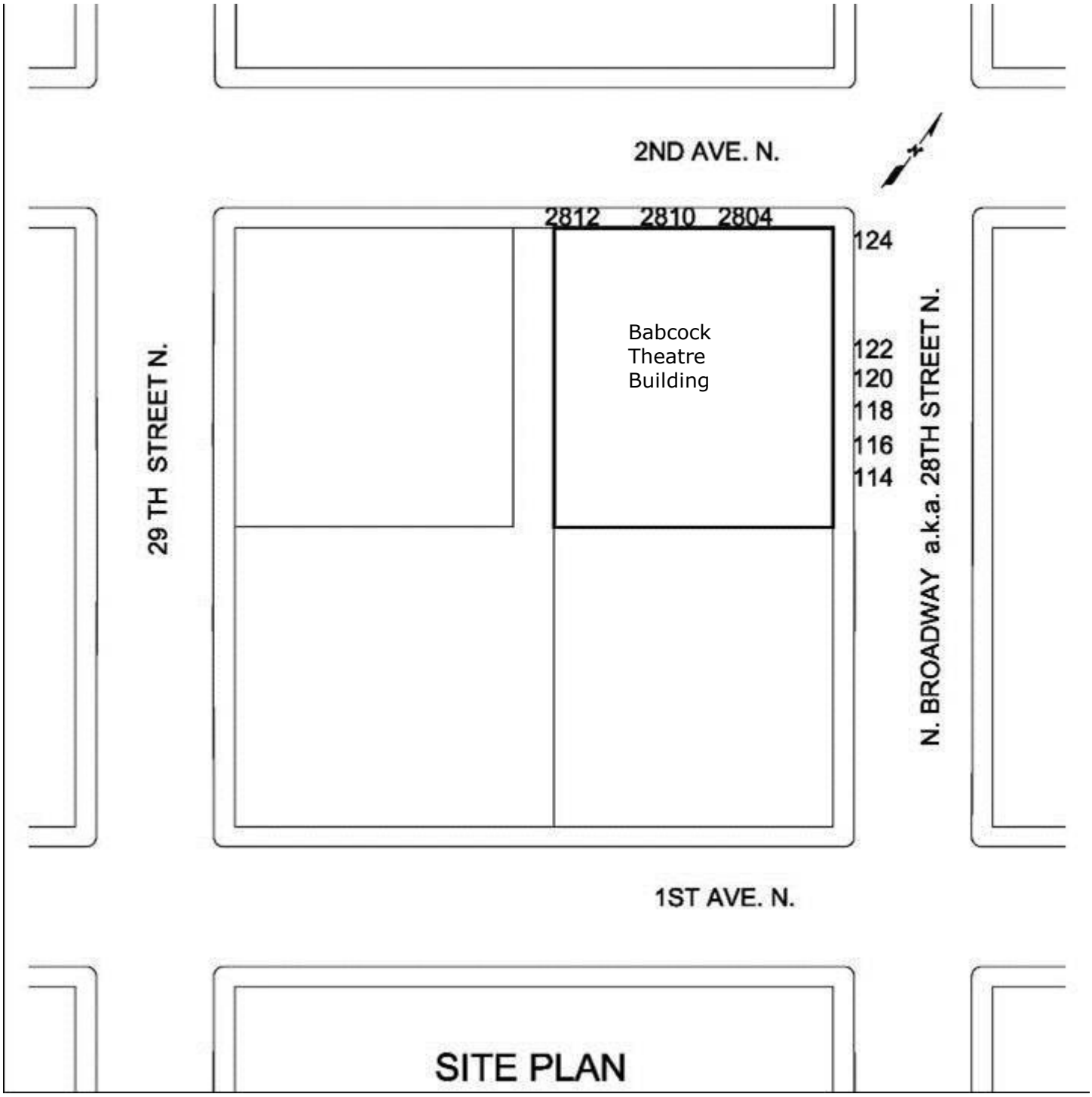
street & number 208 North Broadway, #350 telephone (406) 259-7123

city or town Billings state MT zip code 59101

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.460 et seq.).
Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18 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 Office of Planning and Performance Management. U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.



Location of the Babcock Theatre. Found on: Billings West, Mont. (1957, Photorevised 1969 and 1975) 7.5' quadrangle map.


2ND AVE. N.
2812
2810
2804
124
122
120
118
116
114
Babcock
Theatre
Building
29 TH STREET N.
N. BROADWAY a.k.a. 28TH STREET N.
1ST AVE. N.

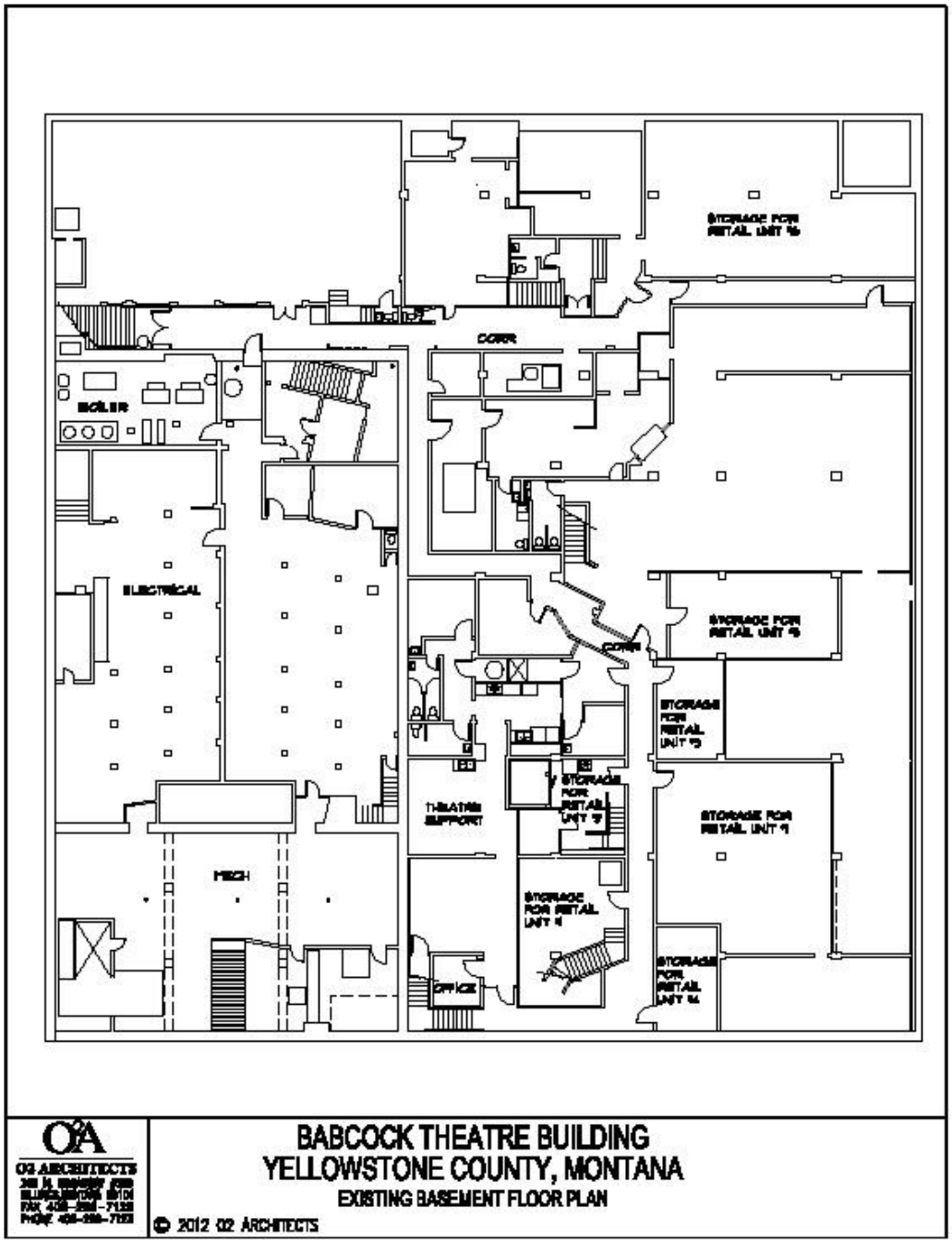
SITE PLAN

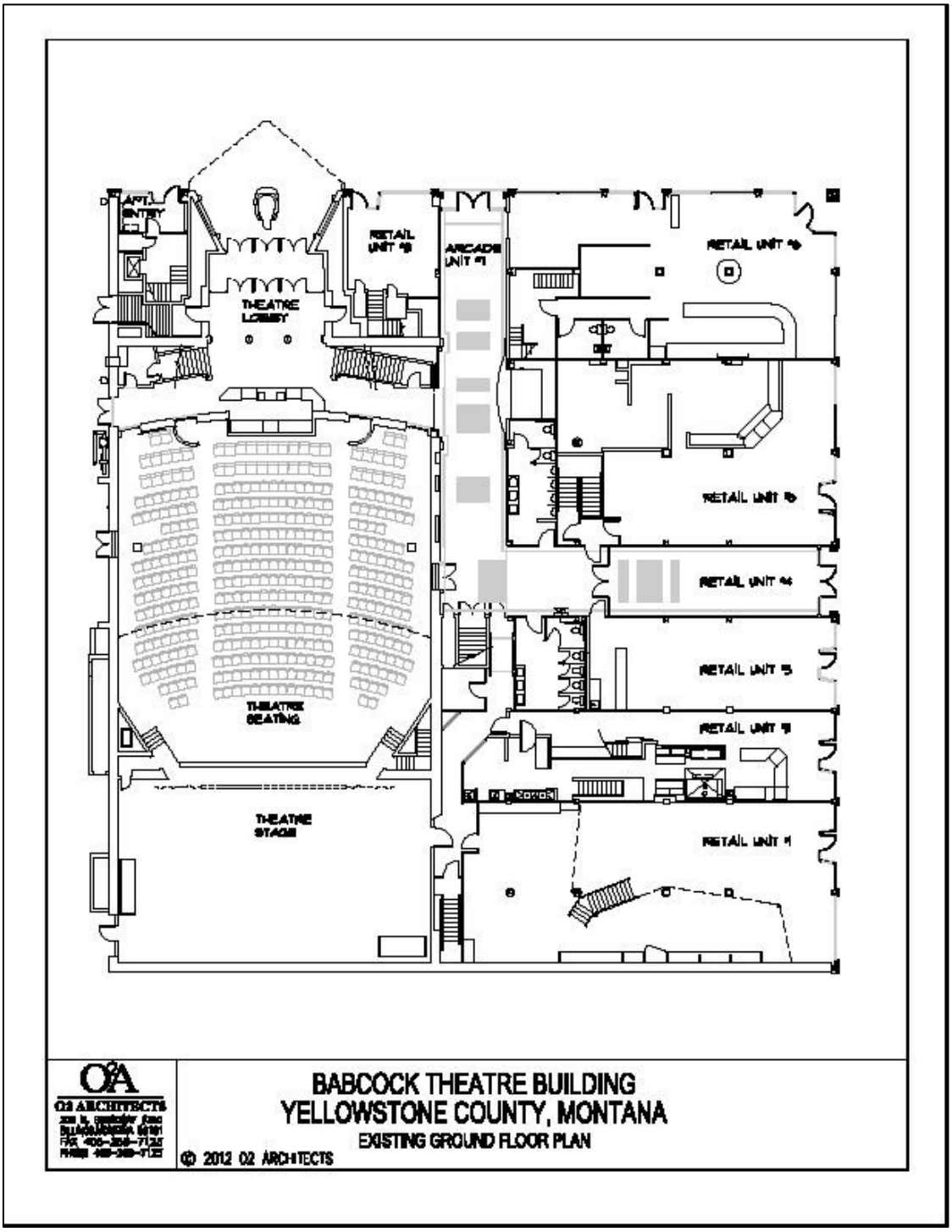
United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

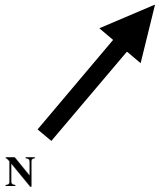
National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

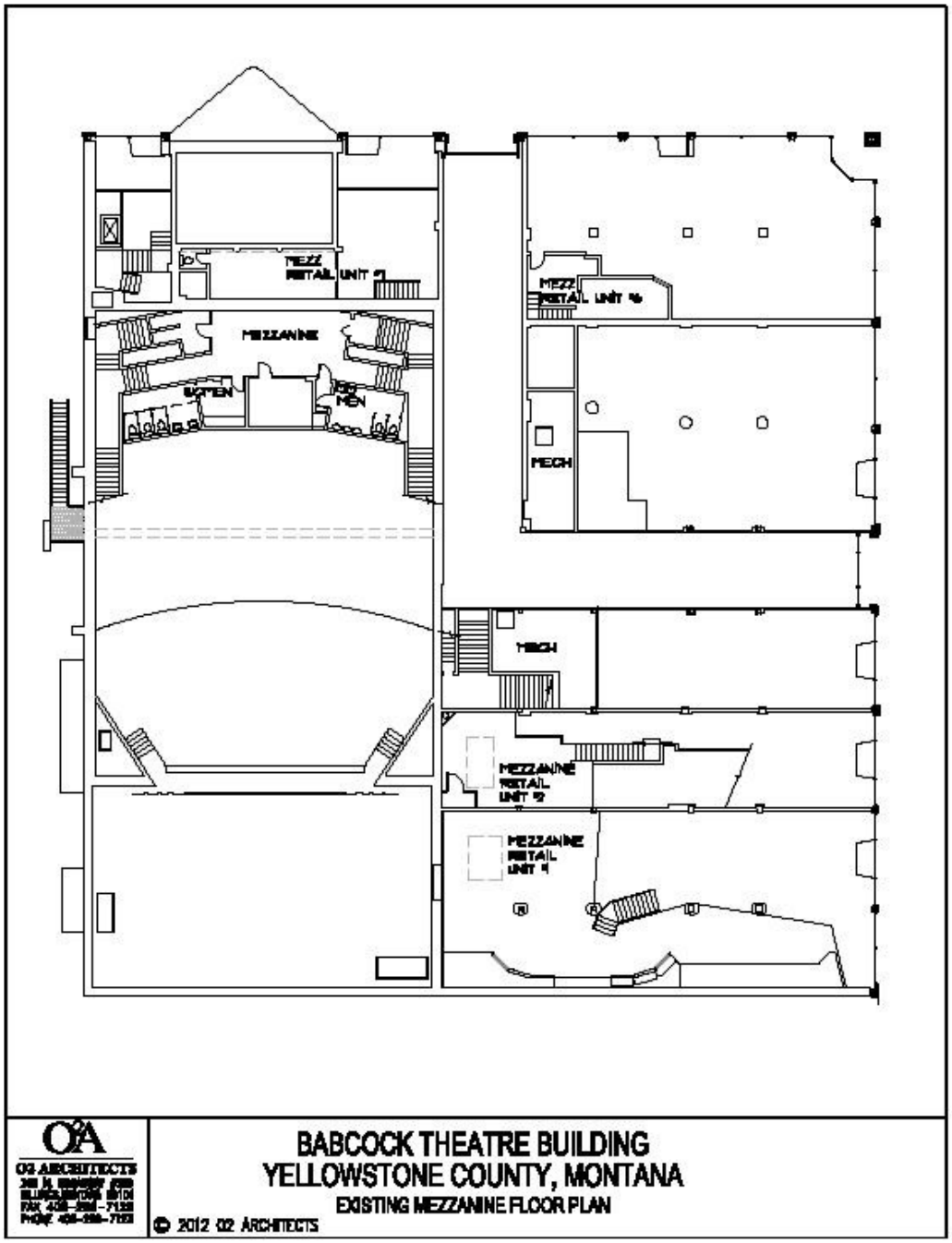
Babcock Theatre Building
Name of Property
Yellowstone, Montana
County and State
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

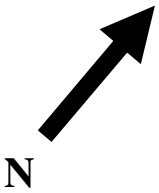
Section number Additional Documentation—Maps and Plans Page 40

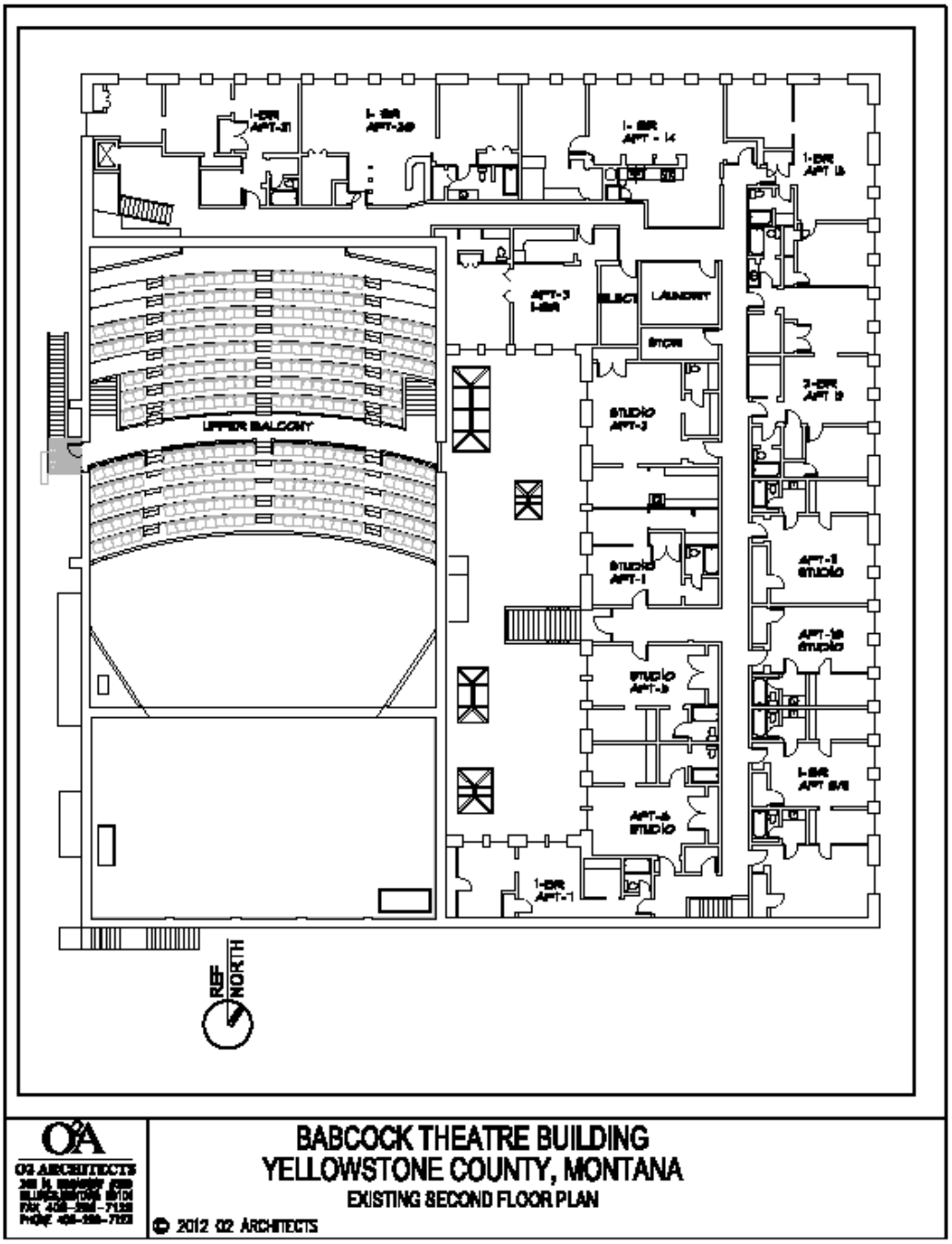


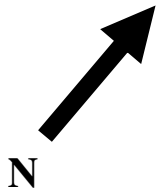

APT. ENTRY
THEATRE LOBBY
RETAIL UNIT #8
ARCADE UNIT #1
RETAIL UNIT #6
RETAIL UNIT #5
RETAIL UNIT #4
RETAIL UNIT #3
RETAIL UNIT #2
RETAIL UNIT #1
THEATRE SEATING
THEATRE STAGE
BABCOCK THEATRE BUILDING
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA
EXISTING GROUND FLOOR PLAN
© 2012 O2 ARCHITECTS

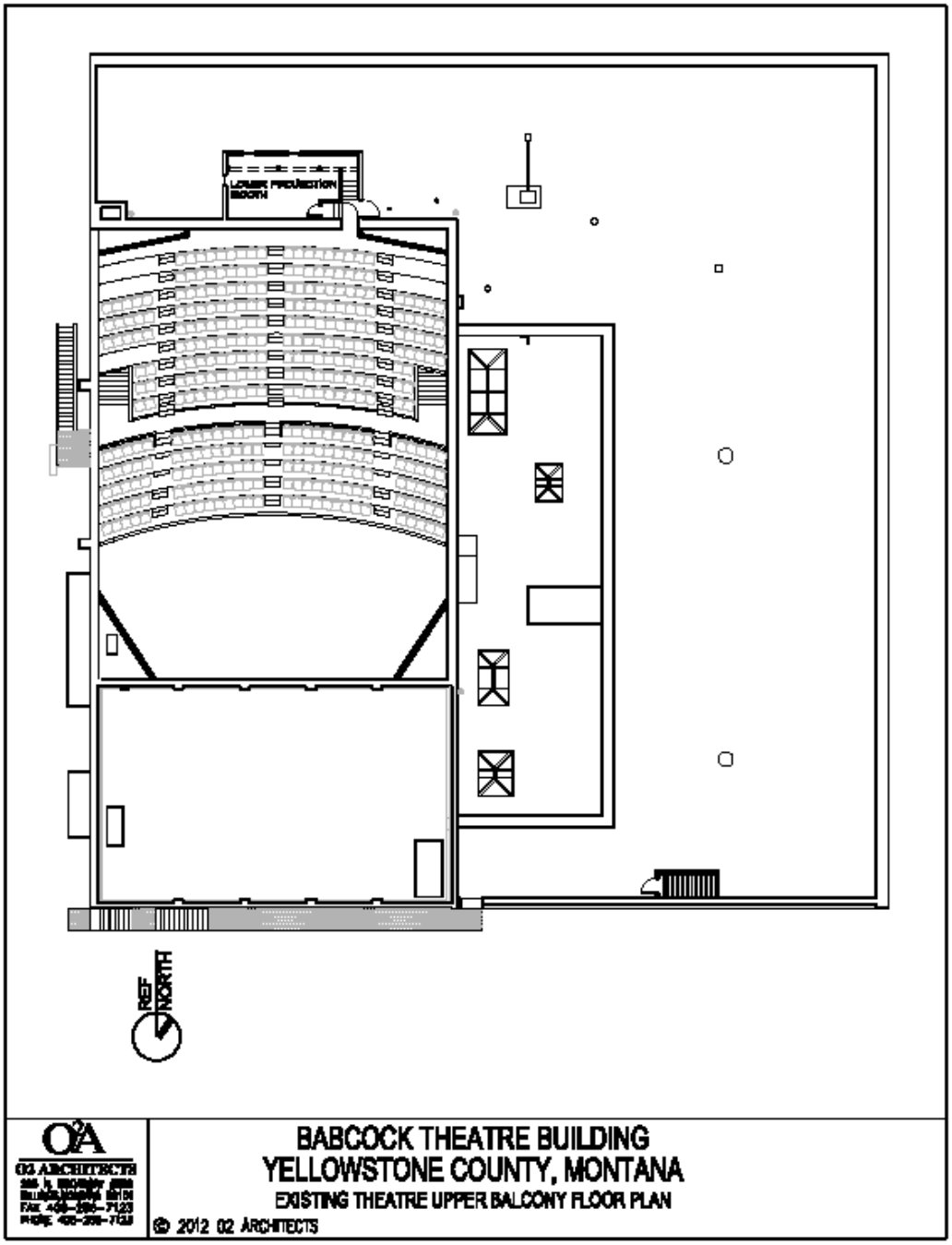

N


MEZZANINE
MECH
MECH
MEZZANINE RETAIL UNIT 2
MEZZANINE RETAIL UNIT 1
BABCOCK THEATRE BUILDING
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA
EXISTING MEZZANINE FLOOR PLAN
© 2012 O2 ARCHITECTS

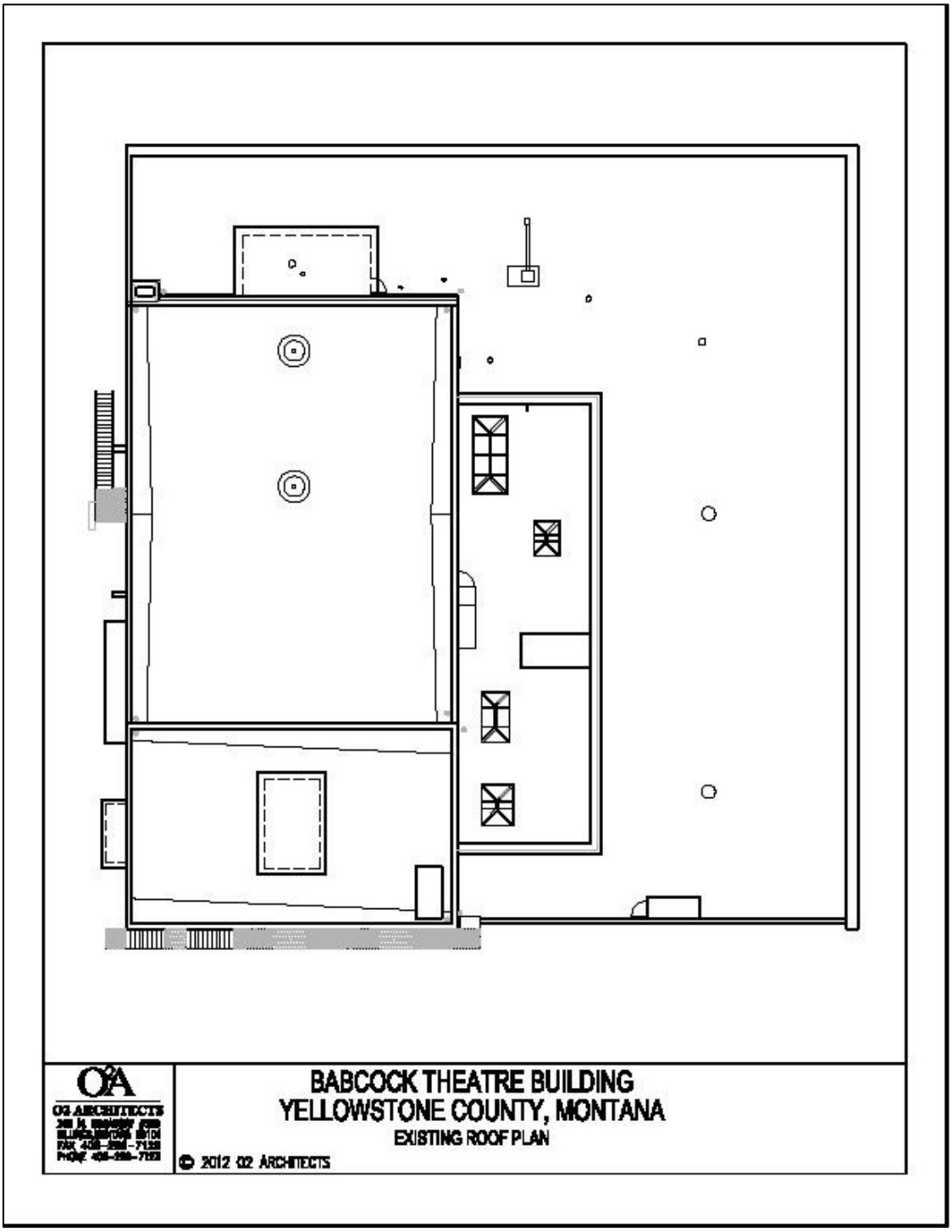

N


UPPER BALCONY
LAUNDRY
REF NORTH
BABCOCK THEATRE BUILDING
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA
EXISTING SECOND FLOOR PLAN
© 2012 O2 ARCHITECTS

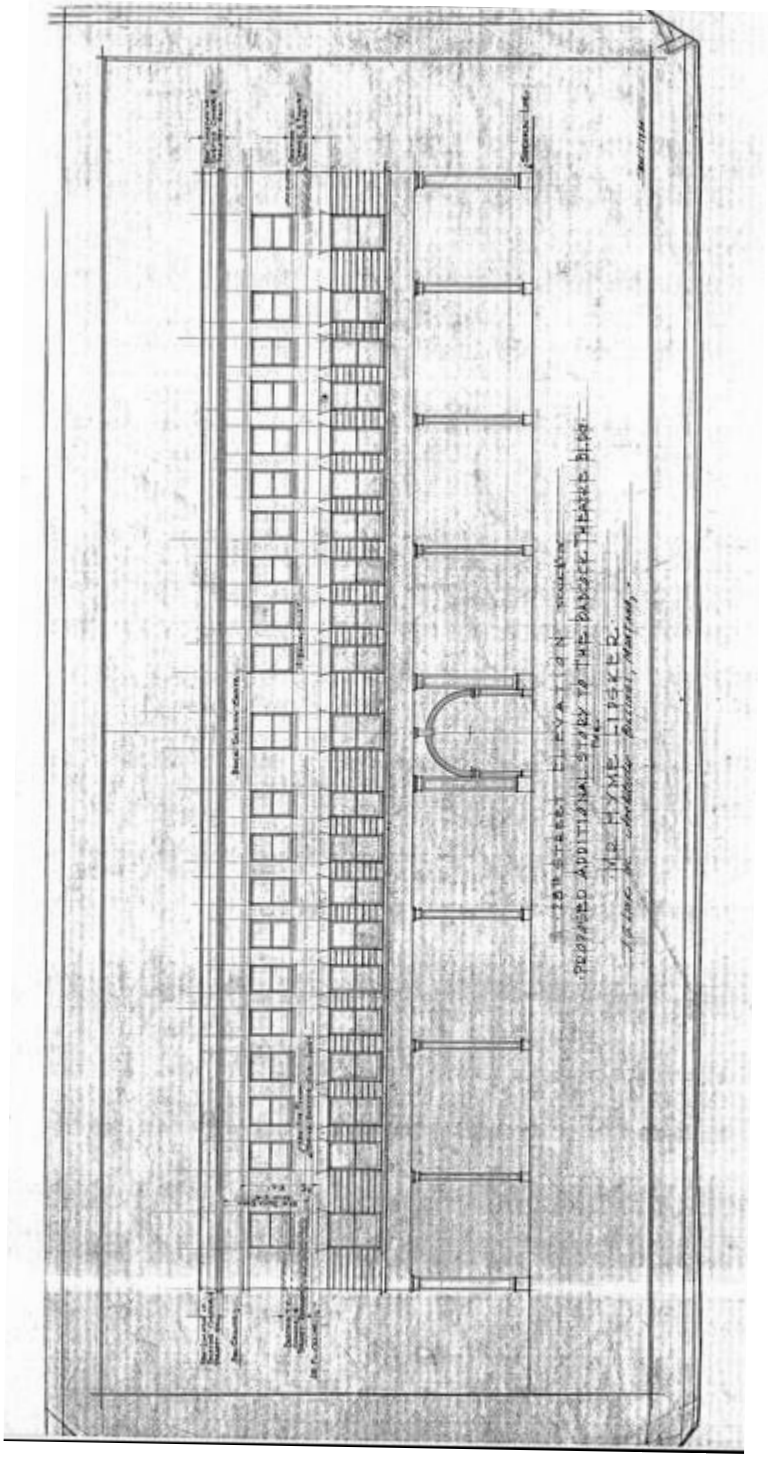

N


LOWER PROJECTION BOOTH
REF NORTH
BABCOCK THEATRE BUILDING
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA
EXISTING THEATRE UPPER BALCONY FLOOR PLAN
© 2012 02 ARCHITECTS

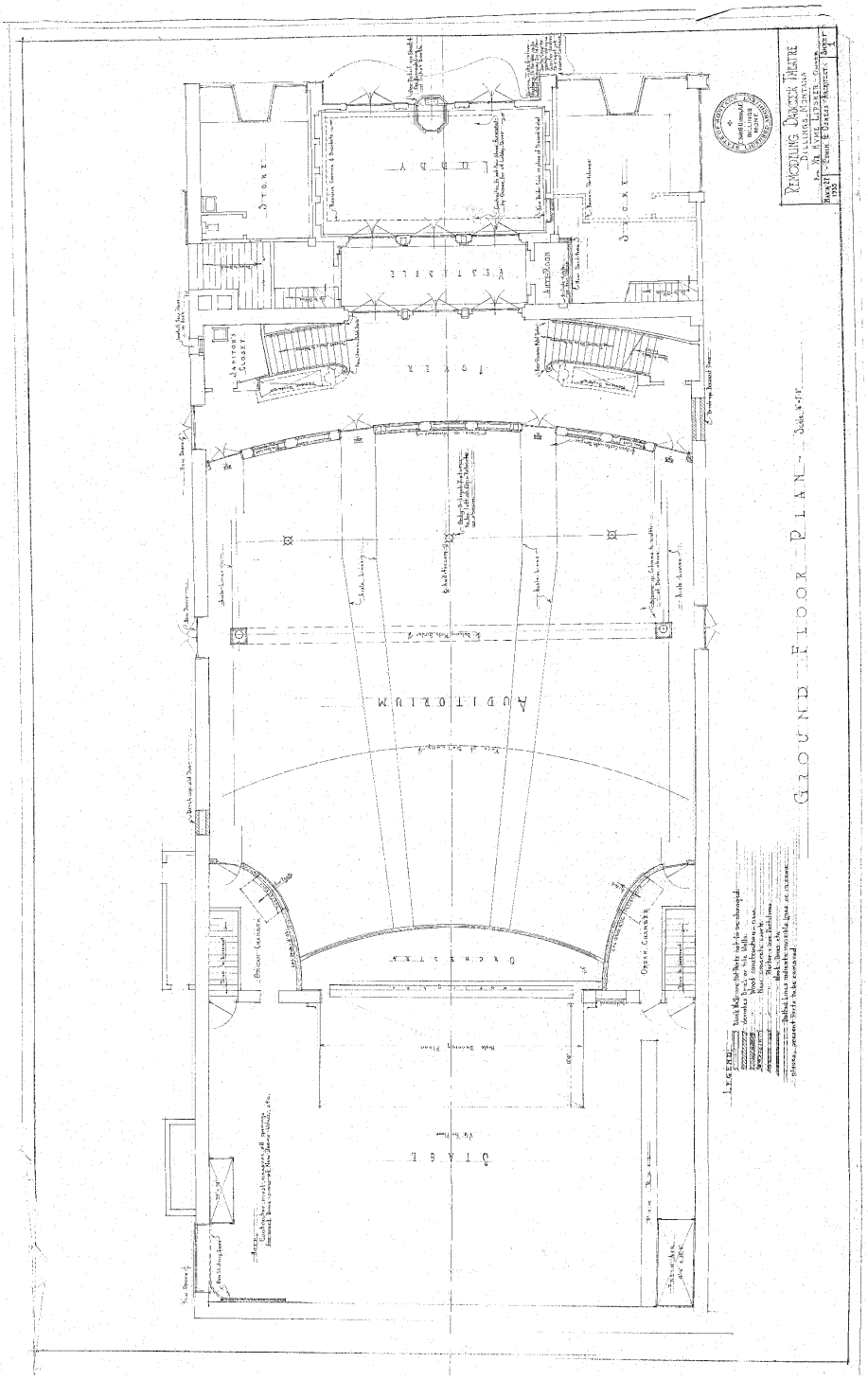
N


BABCOCK THEATRE BUILDING
YELLOWSTONE COUNTY, MONTANA
EXISTING ROOF PLAN
© 2012 O2 ARCHITECTS

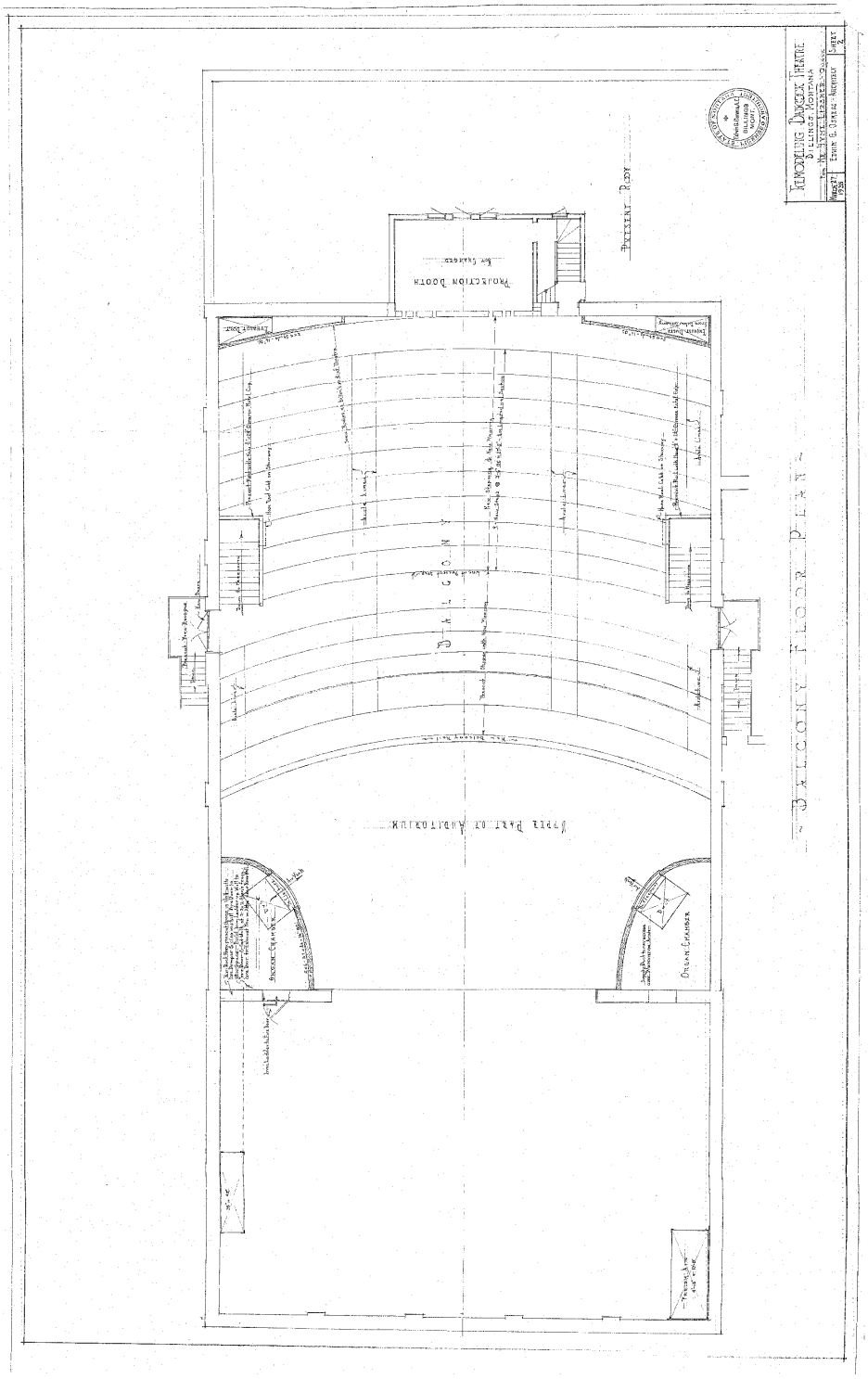
N



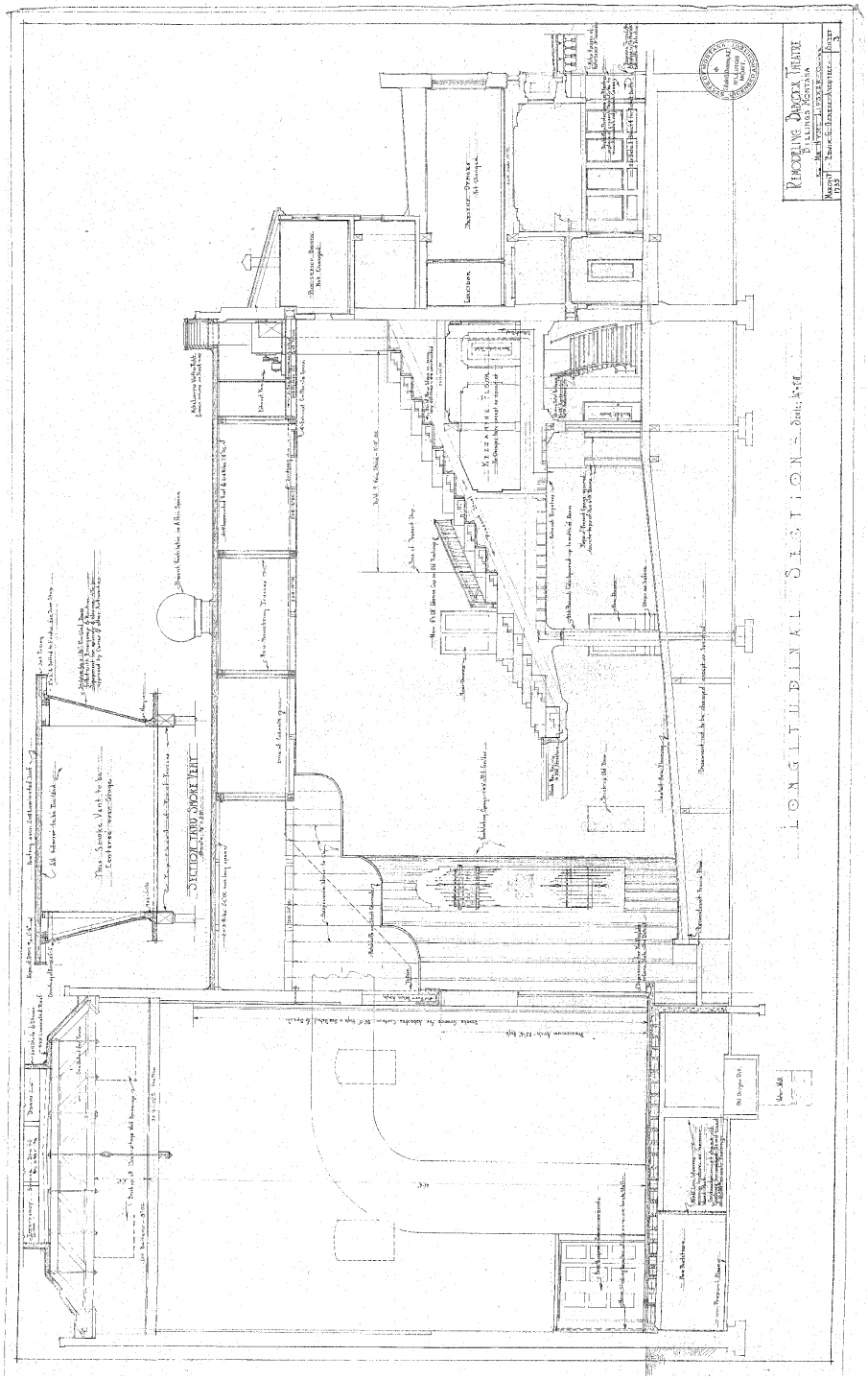
"Proposed Additional Story to Babcock Theatre BLDG". J. G. Link, Architect, Billings, MT. 1930.



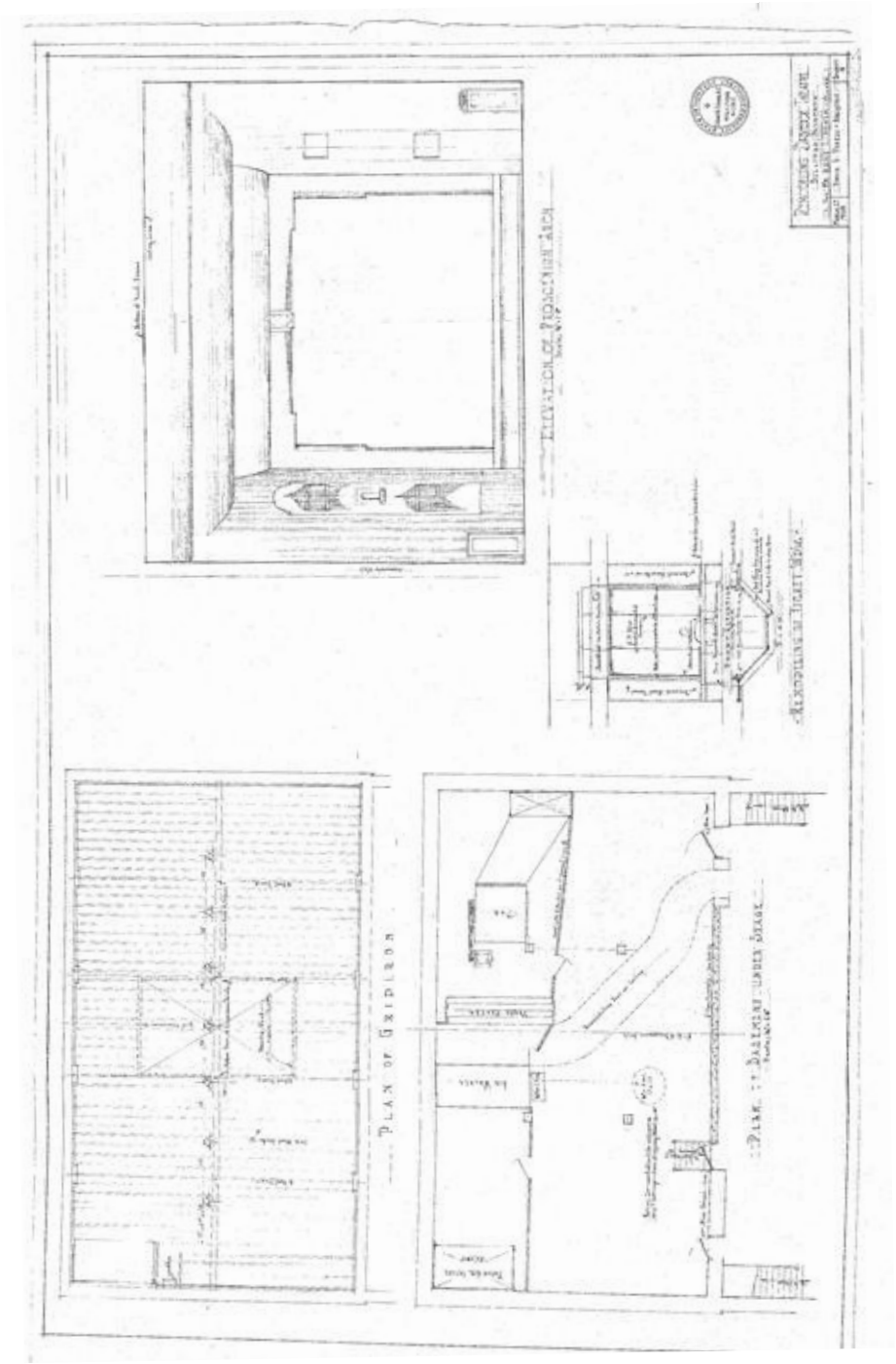
Theatre Remodel Plans
"Ground Floor Plan" Sheet 1. Edwin G. Osness Architects. 1935.



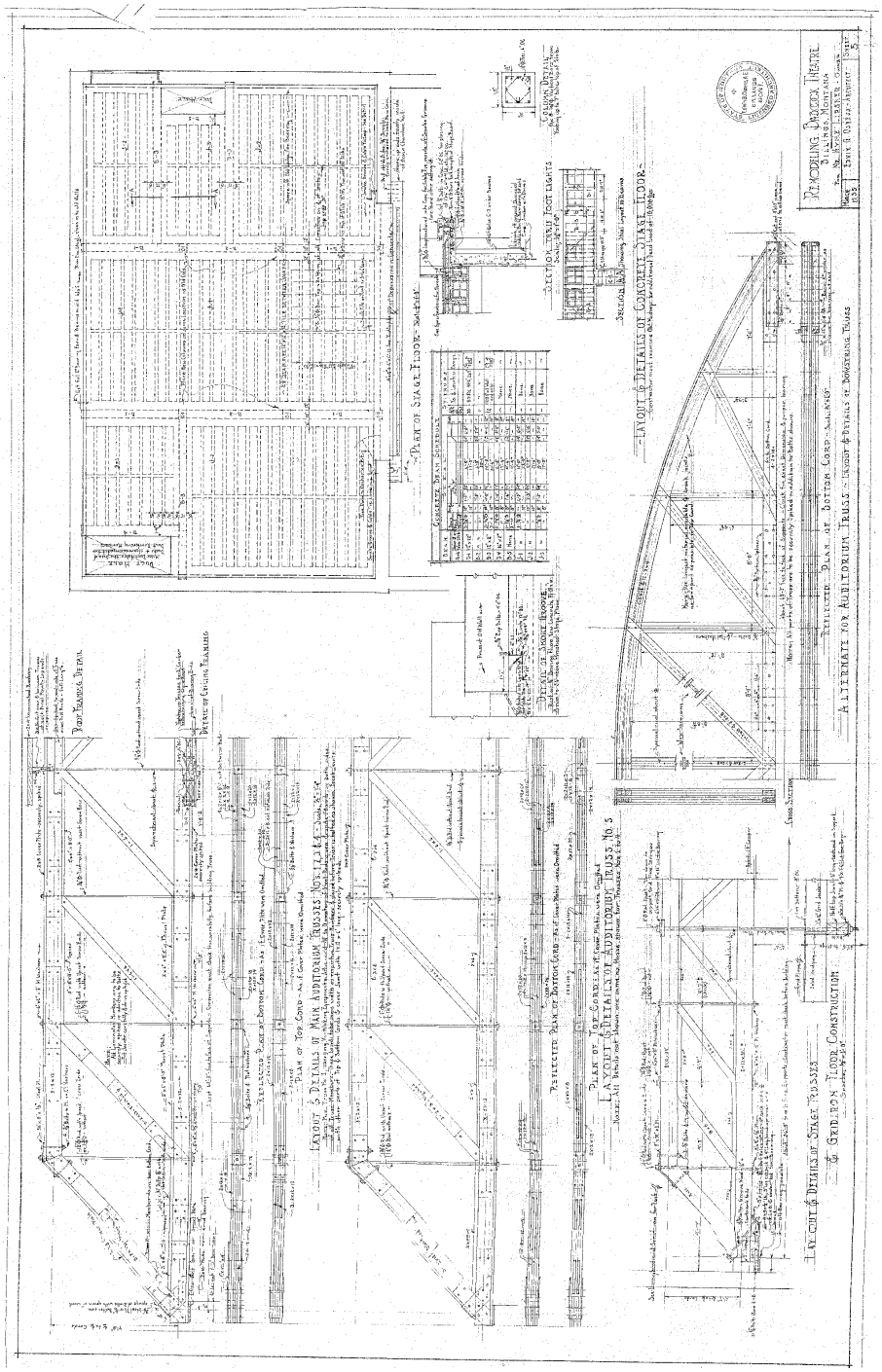
Theatre Remodel Plans
"Balcony Floor Plan" Sheet 2. Edwin G. Osness Architects. 1935.



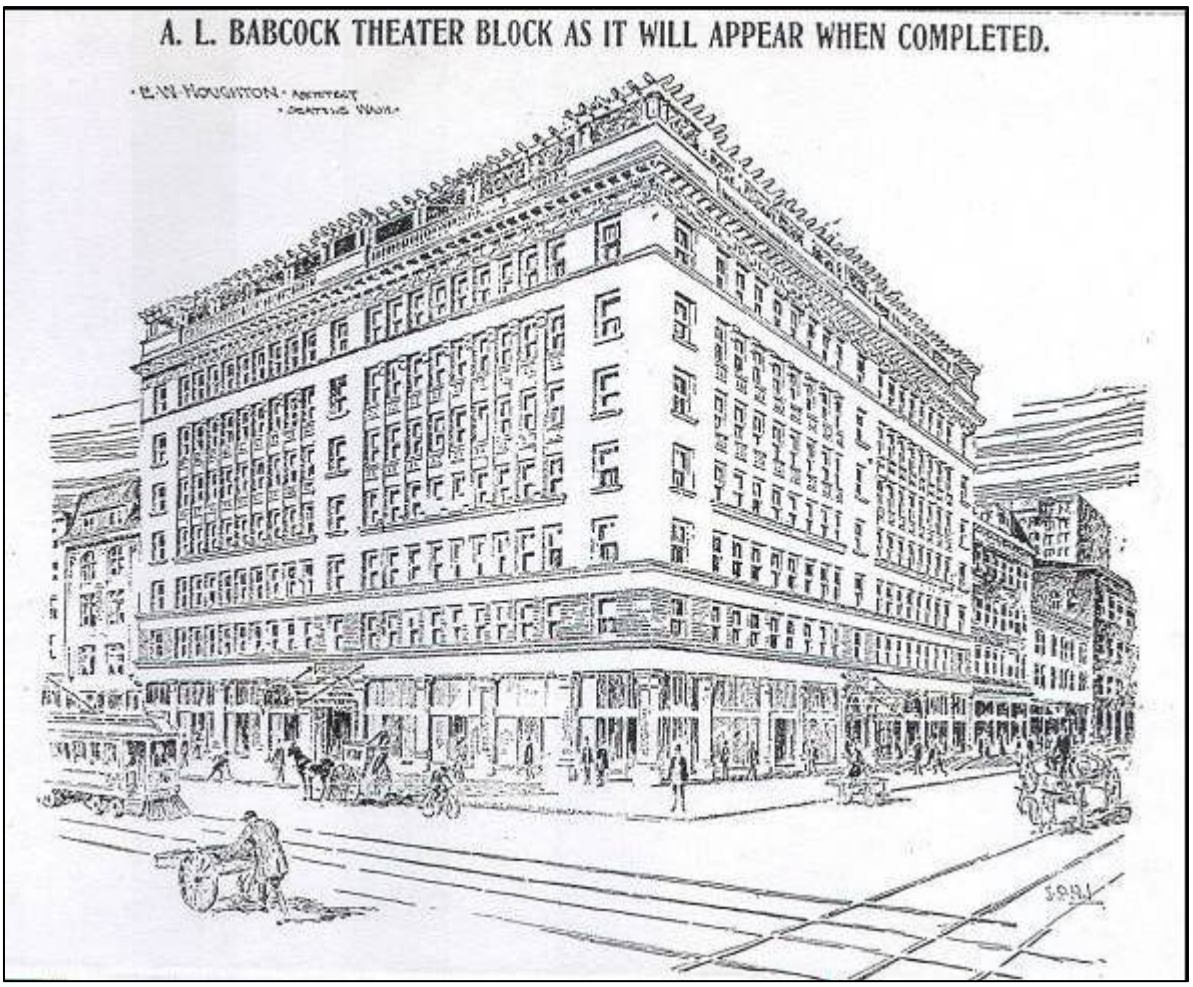
Theatre Remodel Plans
"Longitudinal Section" Sheet 3. Edwin G. Osness Architects. 1935.



Theatre Remodel Plans
"Plan of Gridiron/Plan of Basement Under Stage/Remodeling of Ticket Wdw/Elevation of Proscenium Arch" Sheet 4. Edwin G. Osness Architects. 1935.



Theatre Remodel Plans
"Layout & Details of Main Auditorium Trusses No's 1, 2, 3, &4/Layout & Details of Auditorium Truss No. 5/Layout & Details of Stage Trusses & Gridiron Floor Construction/Alternative for Auditorium Truss/Plan of Stage Floor/Layout & Details of Concrete Stage Floor" Sheet 5. Edwin G. Osness Architects. 1935.



Proposed Design of Babcock Theatre, 1907. Photo Courtesy of Billings Gazette

Historic Photographs

View from Northeast of Babcock Theatre Building shortly after completion, 1907. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View from Northeast, Babcock Theatre Building from Street, 1908. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View from Northeast of Babcock Theatre Building. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View of interior mall circa 1907, showing theatre entrance on right, apartment entrance in center and retail on each side. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

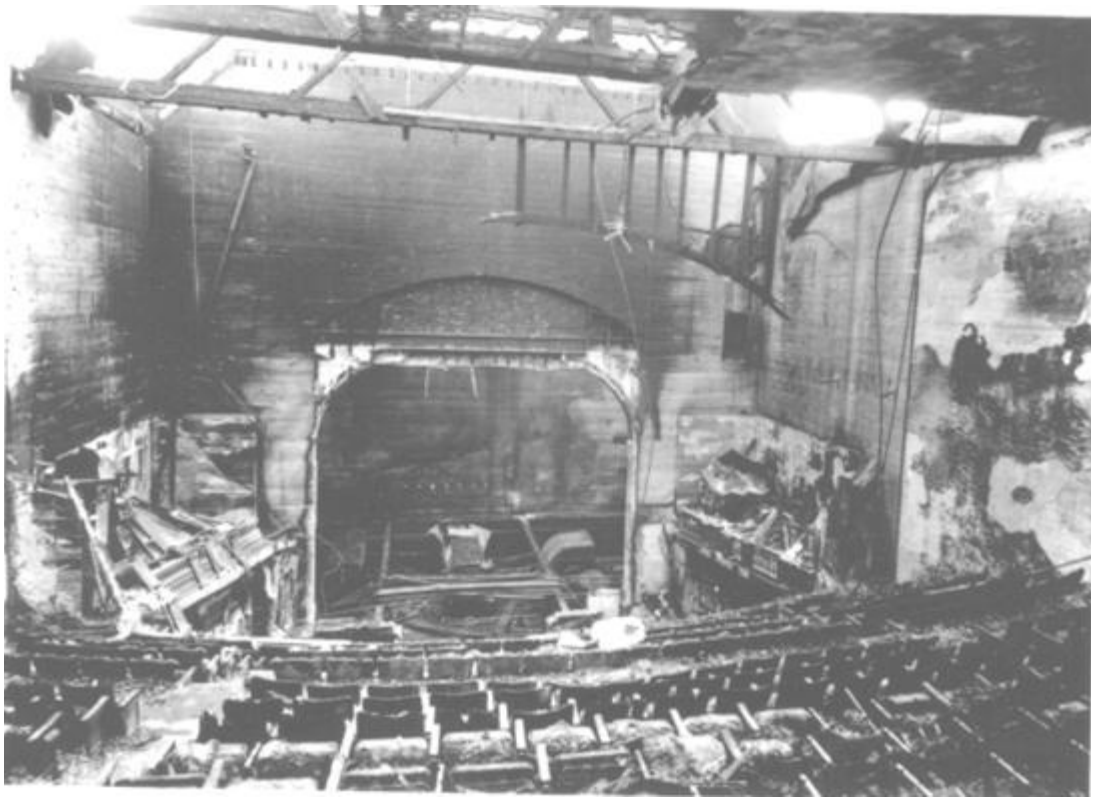
View of Main Entrance to Theatre (from interior mall), 1907. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View from Theatre Lobby to Mall Entrance, 1907. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

One Tier of Boxes, Babcock Theater, Billings, Mont.

View of Original Theatre interior- Opera House. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View of Interior remodel - Castillion Design , 1927. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.



View of Interior 1935 Fire Damage. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View looking west showing 1920's sign and marquee. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

View of north elevation after c. 1960's façade alterations. Photo courtesy of Western Heritage Center.

All Interior photographs of Babcock Theatre Building in Billings , Montana taken by Kim Olson in July 2012

Corner of arcade

Doors to apartments and theatre – corner of arcade

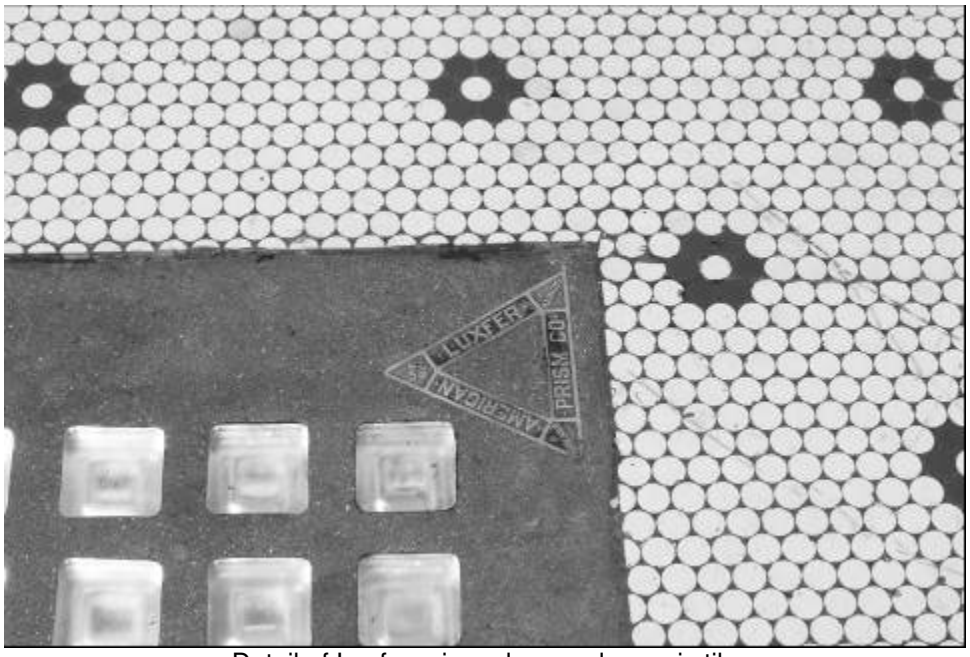
Skylight in arcade

Detail of cove lighting in arcade

Close up of original doors to apartments

Close up of original stained glass at apartment door area

Close up of original signage in arcade



Detail of Luxfer prism glass and mosaic tile

Arcade looking east through retail unit #4

Looking east unit #4

Looking east through retail unit #3

Looking west through retail unit #3

Looking west through retail unit #2

Looking east through retail unit #5

Looking northwest trough retail unit #5

Stair at apartment lobby

North corridor apartment level

East corridor apartment level

Interior detail apartment level – delivery doors to apartment

Interior detail apartment level – window into apartment

Typical apartment interior

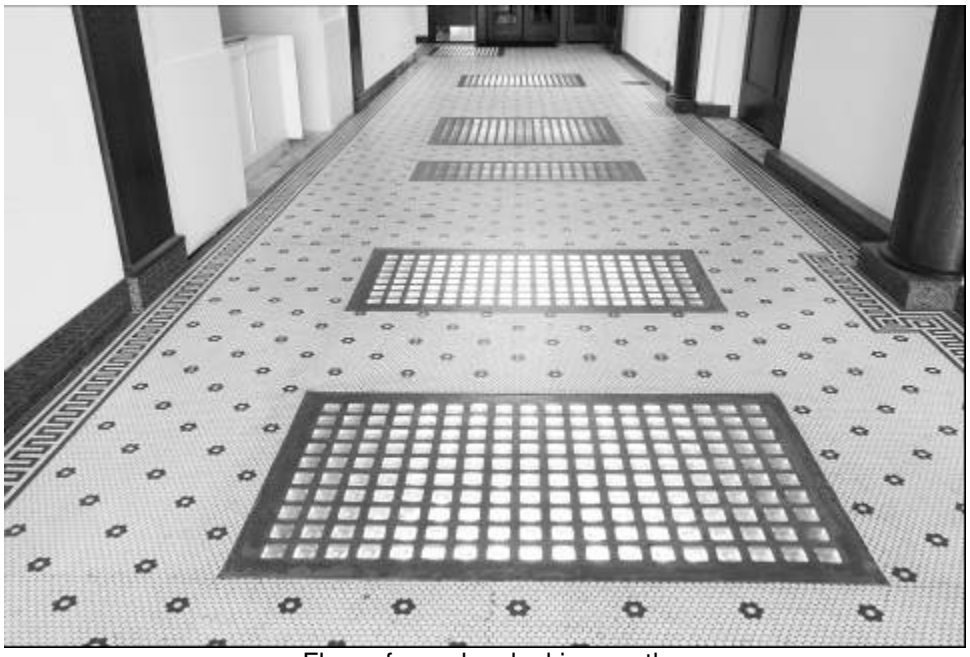
Typical apartment interior

Typical kitchen in apartment

Typical apartment closet

Apartment bathroom

Interior of north entry – arcade looking south



Floor of arcade – looking south

Vestibule to theatre lobby looking W

Theatre lobby looking W

Theatre lobby looking N

Theatre lobby looking SW

Southwest corner of lobby

Theatre interior looking north from stage

Theatre interior east wall

Theatre interior view of proscenium opening from balcony

Theatre interior looking SW

Theatre interior looking SE

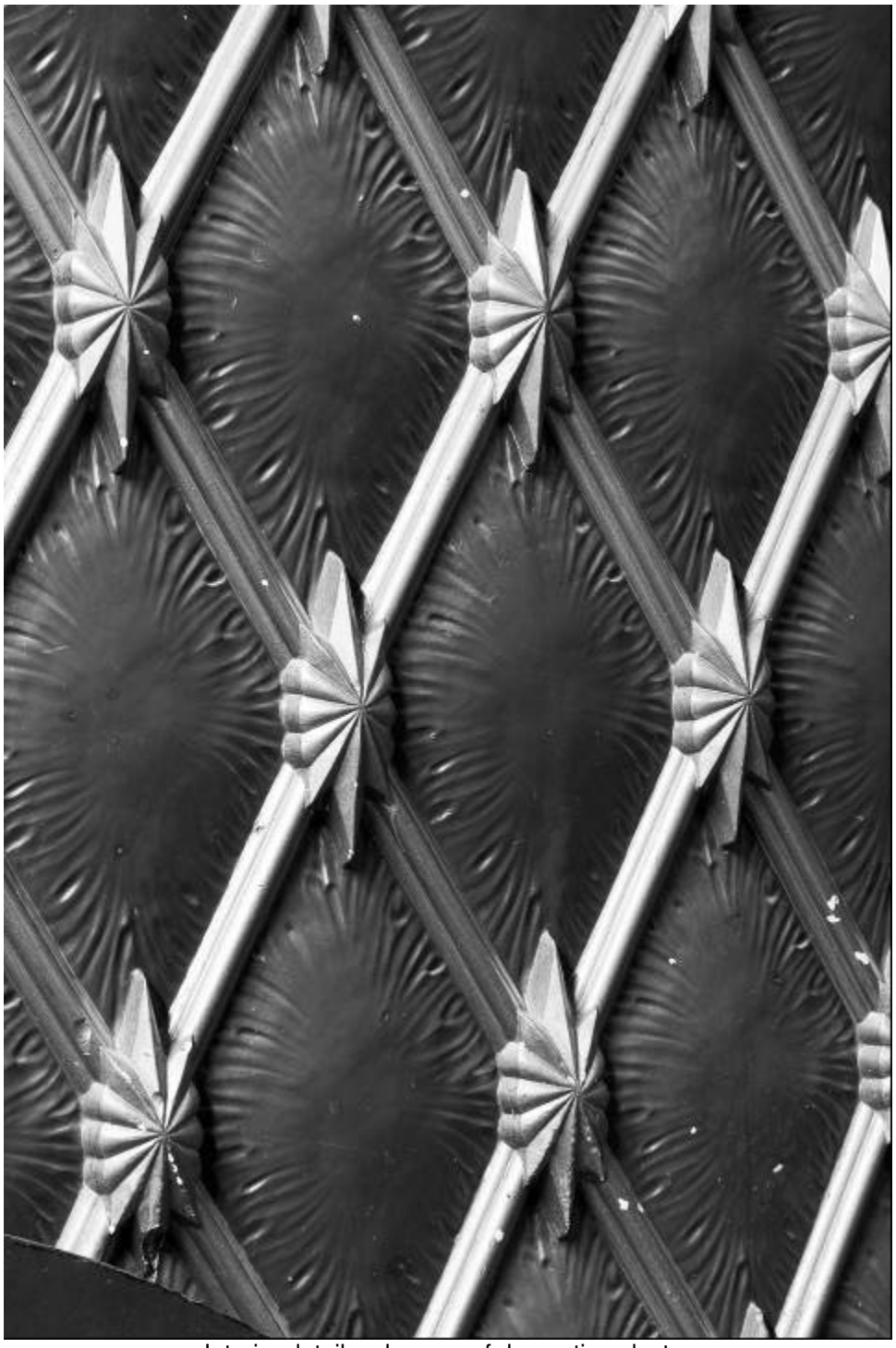
Theatre interior detail of decorative plaster above stage

Theatre interior West wall

Theatre interior detail – decorative staff plaster

Interior detail – decorative plaster cornice in theatre

Interior detail – east wall and decorative plaster above stage



Interior detail – close up of decorative plaster

Projection booth interior

National Register Photographs

All National Register Photographs:
Name of Property: Babcock Theatre Building
City or Vicinity: Billings
County: Yellowstone State: MT
Photographer: Kim Olson
Date Photographed: July 2012

Photo #0001 (MT_YellowstoneCounty_BabcockTheatreBld_0001). View of neighborhood at east elevation, view to the SW

Photo #0002 (MT_YellowstoneCounty_BabcockTheatreBld_0002). View of east elevation, view to the SW

ERROR: undefined
OFFENDING COMMAND: ‘~

STACK: