NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. Aug 2002)

OMB No. 1024-0018
(Expires: 1-31-2009)

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1152

NOV 13 2009

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form* (National Register Bulletin 16A). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the information requested. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions. Place additional entries and narrative items on continuation sheets (NPS Form 10-900a). Use a typewriter, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property

historic name: Grand Opera House

other names/site number: St. James Opera House

2. Location

street & number: 502 First Avenue South ☐ not for publication N/A

city or town: St. James ☐ vicinity

state: Minnesota code: MN county: Watonwan code: 165 zip code: 56081

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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

Britta L. Bloomberg 11/2/09

Signature of certifying official Date

Britta L. Bloomberg, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, MN Historical Society

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ☐ meets ☐ does not meet the National Register criteria. (☐ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Signature of certifying official/Title Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

☑ entered in the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined eligible for the National Register.
☐ See continuation sheet.

☐ determined not eligible for the National Register.

☐ removed from the National Register.

☐ other, (explain): _____

for Edson H. Beall — 12.23.09

Signature of the Keeper Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property
(Check as many boxes as apply)
- ☒ private
- ☐ public-local
- ☐ public-State
- ☐ public-Federal

Category of Property
(Check only one box)
- ☒ building(s)
- ☐ district
- ☐ site
- ☐ structure
- ☐ object

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

Contributing	Noncontributing	
1		buildings
		sites
		structure
		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: theater, auditorium
Commerce/Trade: financial institution,
speciality store

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions)

Commerce/Trade: business, specialty
store

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions)
Late Victorian: Queen Anne

Materials
(Enter categories from instructions)
foundation Limestone
walls Brick
roof Metal/Synthetics
other

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

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria

(Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

- ☒ A Property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history.
- ☐ B Property is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past.
- ☐ C Property embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components lack individual distinction.
- ☐ D Property has yielded, or is likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

Criteria Considerations

(Mark "x" in all the boxes that apply.)

Property is:

- ☐ A owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes.
- ☐ B removed from its original location.
- ☐ C a birthplace or a grave.
- ☐ D a cemetery.
- ☐ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.
- ☐ F a commemorative property.
- ☐ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Entertainment/Recreation

Period of Significance

1892-1921

Significant Dates

1892

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Bumby, John S. (builder)

Narrative Statement of Significance

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

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography

(Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets.)

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ previously listed in the National Register
- ☐ previously determined eligible by the National Register
- ☐ designated a National Historic Landmark
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey #_____
- ☐ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record #_____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☒ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Name of repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

St. James West., Minn.
1970, Photorevised 1979

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing
1.	15	369270	4870830
2.			
3.			
4.			

☐ See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description
(Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification
(Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

11. Form Prepared By

name/title	Susan Granger, Scott Kelly, and Kay Grossman (Section 8, Significance)				
organization	Gemini Research			date	August 1997
street and number	15 East Ninth Street			telephone	320-589-3846
city or town	Morris	state	MN	zip code	56267

Additional Documentation

Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A **USGS map** (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
A **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative **black and white photographs** of the property.

Additional items
(Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

Property Owner

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

name	St. James Opera House Restoration Project, Inc.				
street & number	70503 10th Ave. South			telephone	507-375-3553
city or town	St. James	state	Minnesota	zip code	56081

Paperwork Reduction Act Statement: This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C. 470 et seq.). A federal agency may not conduct or sponsor, and a person is not required to respond to, a collection of information unless it contains a valid OMB control number.

Estimated Burden Statement: Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 120 hours per response including the 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 National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, 1849 C St., Washington, DC 20240.

DESCRIPTION

1. General

The Grand Opera House built in 1891-1892, stands on a corner lot at the southeastern corner of First Avenue and Fifth Street South near the center of downtown St. James, Minnesota. This is a city of approximately 4,300 residents located in Watonwan County in south central Minnesota. The opera house is surrounded by commercial properties and is similar in scale and age to several of the buildings standing nearby. It occupies the northern portion of its lot and adjoins late 19th to early 20th century brick commercial building to the east. Historic photographs indicate that the building's original setting was similar to its current setting, except that First Avenue and Fifth Street South are now paved and carry motor vehicle traffic.

The opera house was constructed by St. James contractor John S. Bumby, but the designer of the building is unknown. It was reportedly constructed of brick that was salvaged from a railroad roundhouse that had been built in St. James by the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad in 1872 and razed in 1890.

In the 1950s the opera house underwent a remodeling that included covering all the windows on the second floor and in the dormers. A new and lower brick wall and new doors and windows were installed in front of the existing structure on the ground floor, and everything above it was painted white. A restoration project initiated in 1996 supported by a series of grants from the Minnesota Historical Society revealed, repaired, and replaced where necessary most of the property's character defining original materials and structural and decorative features. This remains a work in progress, but the property now exhibits the level of historic integrity necessary for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

2. Exterior Description

The opera house is a two story brick building that is Queen Anne in style. It is faced with soft reddish-brown brick and contrasting buff-colored Kasota stone trim. Much of the above referenced white paint remains in place but it is scheduled for removal. The opera house is rectangular in plan and measures approximately 100 feet long by 50 feet wide. It has two principal facades, the northern (actually northwest) facing First Avenue South, and the west (actually southwest) facing Fifth Street South. The back wall (southeast side) faces an alley across an empty portion of the opera house lot and includes small entries at the ground and second floor levels. The fourth wall has no openings above the ground floor since this is a shared wall. The building stands on a stone foundation over a full basement.

The opera house has a Mansard roof clad on its sides with pressed metal (galvanized steel) sheets that were designed to simulate slate tiles, and the flat section is covered with a continuous membrane. Projecting from the roof are six gable-roofed brick and Kasota stone dormers---two on the north side and four on the west. The dormers, which provide light to the attic are trimmed with rockfaced Kasota stone pediments, finials, springing blocks, and pilasters. There is a pressed metal cornice on both principal facades extending around the west corner. Historic photos indicate that at three of the upper corners of the second story there were originally molded brick edging shafts that rested on stone corbels and were capped by stone finials. Today only the stone corbels and the circular corners of the metal cornice that encircled these shafts remain.

There were six shorter stone edging shafts originally located on the main entrance and northeast corner (ground floor) that are also gone. The sole remaining stone edging shaft, including base and finial, is located on the southwest corner of the building as part of the third retail storefront originally included in the building (discussed below).

The second story of the building has a series of large arched window and door openings that light the opera house auditorium. These have stone sills and the arches are framed by pilasters that have stone bases and capitals. The openings are set within bays that are recessed slightly between brick piers. The two central openings on the northern façade and the second and seventh openings on the western façade are elliptically-arched and wider than the semicircular-arched openings. The fifth and seventh openings on the western façade originally contained doors leading to metal fire-escape stairways (now removed), while the other openings are fitted with 2/2 wooden sash. The fifth opening is now fitted with one of the original storm windows that were (seasonally) installed on all the second floor windows. These are the original wood frame sash and all include movable multi-pane transoms. The large elliptical arch units are Chicago-style windows, characterized by a single center fixed sash flanked by narrower 1/1 double hung units.

The ground floor of the building is divided into four commercial units. The first of these has its storefront at the northeast corner on First Avenue south and occupies the east half of the building plus an ell across the back end. The name of the business at present is Country Cottage. The storefront features display windows that originally extended to ceiling height. The upper space is now filled in with wood sheathing and a canvas awning, and a low brick wall rises from the sidewalk level. Originally the entrance was centered between two display windows, but it was set off to one side whenever its current appearance took shape, presumably in the 1950s.

The second unit, at the northwestern corner of the building, is an ornate stone and brick storefront that was originally occupied by the State Bank of St. James, reorganized later as the First National Bank. It is now occupied by the Encore Coffee Café. This unit has a canted corner entrance that is recessed behind a polished granite and Kasota stone column that supports two round arches. On either side of the round arches are elliptical arches supported by rectangular piers. The four piers and one column stand on bases placed on pedestals and support large capitals from which the arches spring. This massive entrance ensemble includes Neo-Classical architectural elements that had by the late 19th century become traditional for banks in American architecture for their association with strength, reliability, and security. This expression is retained here despite the fact that many elements of the ensemble were cut away (in particular the capitals, bases, and pedestals) to fit behind the brick wall that enclosed it in the 1950s renovation.

The door is original except for the glass insert, and the large windows at the corner entrance were rebuilt to include insulating glass.

Just south of the entrance along Fifth St. there was a stairway down to the basement level. That the basement was (is) elevated above grade on both the north and west sides is evidenced by both historic photos and extant stone window headers just below the four windows on the west wall. The below grade space (walkway) in front of this wall (an extended window well, in effect) is now covered and inaccessible.

The third and fourth ground floor units are on the south end of the west side of the opera house. These are a storefront and the entrance to the opera house auditorium on the second floor. The storefront includes large

display windows next to a recessed door. South of this storefront is the entrance to the auditorium. It is a Kasota stone-faced semicircular-arched portal resting on inset brick shafts above stone bases. The original double wood doors are in place below a single window that echoes the portal. At present the entrance is not functional since the staircase inside was removed during the 1950s remodeling. Consequently, the sole means of access to the auditorium is by an open steel stairway to a small door on the back (south) wall of the building at the second floor level. This was originally a window providing light to the top of the stairs and it was recently lengthened to door height. An exterior brick chimney (construction date unknown) on the south wall was removed in relatively recent times. Historic photos facing east and remnants in the attic indicate that the building originally had at least six brick chimneys (three on each long side) of which no trace remains on the exterior.

At ground level at the east end of the back wall there is a diagonally shaped vinyl clad section that includes two small rectangular windows and a canopied door. This is the rear entrance to the Country Cottage store. The rectangular structure next to this is an enclosed entry for freight deliveries. This entire section of the back wall dates from the l950s remodeling or later. That segment of the opera house east wall that rises above the adjacent single story building with which it shares the lower wall is at present clad in steel siding.

3. Interior Description

As noted, there is at present only one way into the opera house auditorium, namely through a small door in the south wall at the second story level. This opens into a hall that to the left leads to an empty stairwell that is now blocked off, and to the right to the original box office (ticket booth). A set of (original) paneled double-leaf doors with a transom separates the hallway and box office from the auditorium.

The auditorium is a large open room with a flat ceiling and walls covered with lath and plaster, although large areas of the ceiling have been removed due to water damage. A number of early ceiling lamps with white glass flattened globe shades are still in place. The floor was originally raked and held 392 seats, but it was replaced in 1921 with the existing flat floor clad with tongue and groove hard maple. Originally there was a stage flanked by small dressing rooms at the north end of the auditorium and all of this was removed when the space was converted to its present arrangement in 1921. At the south end of the auditorium there are doors leading to a balcony, to storage closets, to the box office and hall, and to small restrooms.

The balcony is of woodframe construction in curvilinear form with an ornamented balustrade. It has a tiered floor and originally held 250 seats. There are three small closet-like rooms near the rear of the balcony that have been used through the years as theater technical booths, dressing rooms, and for storage.

Several items of historical importance deriving from their association with the opera house are located in the auditorium. These include several pieces of the original pressed metal (galvanized steel) slate look-a-like roofing in mint condition, storm windows, and two of the original opera house seats manufactured by the S. F. Co. of Grand Rapids, Michigan. They have cast iron frames featuring Eastlake decorative patterns, molded wood seats, and red velvet cushions. They are retractable, in that the seats lift up and back into a narrow compact unit creating a maximum of space for persons moving between the rows.

The auditorium and its associated spaces have the highest level of historic integrity of any part of the opera house building.

The two major retail sales units on the ground floor retain a number of original features. The east unit (Country Cottage) has a segment of its original pressed metal ceiling in place and visible, but to the rear of the store it is hidden behind a dropped ceiling. The walls and floor have been covered with modern materials.

The west unit (Encore Coffee Café), which served as a bank from 1892 to 1972, also has a pressed metal ceiling. Before the current restoration project began the ceiling had been lowered, and after its removal a fragment of the original stencil pattern wall decoration was uncovered. Using this remnant as a pattern, the original design was reproduced and now covers a large segment of the wall surface immediately below the ceiling. The interior door and window trim is matte-finished oak and a new oak floor was installed to replace several layers of contemporary floor coverings.

The former bank includes a basement-level vault dating from when the opera house was first constructed plus two 1920s vintage vaults on the first floor. The basement vault door exterior includes a Neo-Classical decorative surround and Eastlake style floral designs etched on its interior surface.

SIGNIFICANCE

The St. James Opera House, historically known as the Grand Opera House, and the Opera House Block, is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A (significance to the broad patterns of our history) in the area of Entertainment/Recreation. The opera house is locally significant as the building that served between 1892 and 1921 as St. James' principal performance hall. The opera house played an important cultural role by bringing live theater, classical and popular music, comedy, and other performance arts to St. James, as well as serving an educational and recreational function. The property is significant within the statewide historic context entitled "Railroads and Agricultural Development, 1870-1940."

St. James is located in Watonwan County, a largely rural, agricultural area in south central Minnesota. The city was platted by the St. Paul and Sioux City Railroad in July of 1870, four months before the first passenger train traveled the newly-constructed railroad line. St. James was the second town to be established in Watonwan County. The St. Paul and Sioux City had planned St. James at least three years earlier to be a division headquarters along the railroad's route between St. Paul and Sioux City, Iowa. Elias Drake, president of the St. Paul and Sioux City, reportedly named the town St. James for no apparent reason other than it was a simple name and would be easy to remember (Upham 1969:576). The core of the village was built in 1870 when railroad workers, entrepreneurs, and new settlers arrived and constructed houses, hotels, commercial buildings, and railroad shops using lumber that was shipped in on freight trains.

The St. Paul and Sioux City's division headquarters was the town's major focus during its formative years and was a primary employer for several decades. A roundhouse, railroad shops, spur tracks, depots, and railroad offices were all built along the tracks. Hotels, rooming houses, cafes, and stores were established to cater to hundreds of permanent and transient railroad workers who converged on St. James.

As a major railroad division town, St. James grew quickly. By April of 1872 St. James' population had grown to 600 residents and the first village government had been established. In 1878 the county seat was moved from nearby Madelia to St. James. In 1899 a second railroad line, the Minneapolis and St. Louis, was built through St. James in a southwesterly direction toward Jackson County. On April 27, 1899, St. James was incorporated as a city.

In addition to its transportation functions, St. James also became an agricultural trade center as large numbers of settlers moved into Watonwan and neighboring counties to establish farms. By 1896 there were more than 100 businesses in St. James---including four hotels, four banks, two weekly newspapers, and dozens of retail stores and small service businesses---most of which catered to farmers. The town's major industries included the railroad shops, four grain elevators, three carriage and wagon manufacturers, a cigar factory, a bottling works, a creamery, and a flour mill. At the peak of the railroad's influence in 1870-1925, St. James was a bustling trade center served by several passenger and freight trains each day.

Just as the founding residents of St. James worked to build a strong economy, early community members (many of whom were highly-educated and had moved to St. James from larger cities) worked to create a rewarding cultural and social environment. The cultural and social life of the new city initially fell within the domain of approximately eight churches, about seven lodges and fraternal societies, a public library, and a number of women's study clubs and civic organizations.

In 1890 a group of local businessmen apparently recognized the need for a centrally-located facility for cultural, recreational, and social activities and joined forces to finance the opera house. The men who comprised this investment group were all officials of the State Bank of St. James (which would occupy the building's corner storefront) or were merchants who worked downtown. The group, first called the Opera House Block Syndicate and later the St. James Opera House Company, included State Bank personnel Thomas Veltum, Frank O'Meara, and Clinton Ellsworth; J. K. Sonnesyn, who would operate a general store on the first floor of the building; W. W. Gibbs, hotel owner; and J. M. G. Price. The local newspaper reported in July of 1891:

> A syndicate of gentlemen have for some time been figuring on building a handsome block on the Aldritt property at the corner of 1st Ave. and 5th Street, and (on) the first of the week arrangements were completed which assures the immediate building of a brick block 50 x 110 feet on the ground and about 36 feet high. The corner room will be occupied by the State Bank, and the rest of the building by J. K. Sonnesyn and Bro. for their general merchandise store, they having two fronts, one on 1st Ave. and one on the rear of the bank, on 5th St. The upper story will be fitted up as an opera house, and we are assured that we will have one of the finest opera houses between Minneapolis and Sioux City. The building will cost from $15,000 to $20,000.
> (*St. James Journal*, July 24, 1891)

The name of the architect who designed the opera house is not known. The syndicate commissioned contractor John S. Bumby, a brother-in-law of Thomas Veltum who was a member of the investment group and later President of the First National Bank, to construct the building. Bumby had moved to St. James in 1890 from Wisconsin where he had worked as a contractor with his father and brother. He eventually lived in St. James for 59 years, working as a builder and holding various public offices including that of Street Commissioner. He was a charter member of the St. James Fire Department and belonged to the Modern Woodmen. He constructed many residences, commercial structures, and farm buildings in the St. James area including the Veltum Block (later known as the Lunde Building), an addition to the public school, and the barn at the Alfred R. Voss farmstead south of town (listed in the NRHP on October 27, 1988).

The opera house, which eventually cost $35,000 ($714,000 in today's dollars) to construct, was built as part of a downtown business boom that occupied St. James residents in 1891-1892. Several buildings, including the Grand Opera House, were started in 1891 and completed in 1892. They included two story brick commercial buildings built for J. P. Heiertz, A. W. Schweppe, Frank Reichlinger, Lars Swenson, J. J. Thornton, W. W. Gibbs, and A. K. Peck, and a three story brick building constructed for Hans Olson (*St. James Journal*, Sept. 18, 1891).

The construction of the opera house was chronicled in detail by the local press. By September of 1891, the foundation was being laid. The stone column and arches at the bank entrance were installed at the end of October. Construction stopped during the winter of 1891 and was delayed by a wet spring in 1892. By the last week of April 1892 work had begun again. In August of 1892 the building was painted by Winter and Company of LaCrosse, Wisconsin.

When the building was nearing completion, J. K. Sonnesyn moved his mercantile business into the eastern store and held a grand opening on August 27, 1892. Sonnesyn was a Norwegian-born merchant who had moved to Madelia in 1882 where he worked in (or owned) a general store. In 1886, he moved to the larger market town of

St. James. Sonnesyn was a stockholder, director, and one-time president of the First National Bank of St. James. He also organized the Twin-City Oil Company of Minneapolis in 1906 and the Sonnesyn-Sundt Company, a general mercantile corporation, in Velva, North Dakota. Peter Sterrie joined Sonnesyn as a partner on January 1, 1893, and in 1927 he purchased Sonnesyn's share of the mercantile store. The Sterrie family operated the store in the Opera House Block until 1967.

The State Bank of St. James moved into its new quarters in the building in late September of 1892. The bank had been organized in 1890 by Frank O'Meara. It was reorganized as a national bank and renamed the First National Bank of St. James in March of 1893. The first officers of the national bank were: Thomas Veltum, president; Clinton Ellsworth, vice president; Frank O'Meara, cashier; and Thomas Tonnesson, assistant cashier. By the turn of the century the First National was the largest of St. James' four banks.

The bank's new facilities in the Opera House Block were toured by the *St. James Journal*:

> The counters rest on a marble foundation and are surmounted by an electro-bronze wire screen with chipped plate-glass trimmings. The wire design is very neat, with windows for cashier and paying teller. Behind this railing are money racks and drawers of the latest design, handsome business desks, letter files, legal blank cases, and everything in the way of bank furniture that will expedite and simplify business. Just back of this is a large fire-proof vault which contains at present one of the most perfect burglar-proof, time-lock safes ever invented, and a case and pigeon holes for books, papers, etc. Later about 200 safety vaults will be put in, which will be rented to the public. Back of the lobby is a room which will be devoted to the use of the customers of the bank, where will be found a table, chairs, stationery, etc. Back of this is the directors' room, which is as yet unfurnished, but it is handsomely papered and the ceiling is hand-painted. We are informed that this room will be fitted up as a parlor, with carpets, easy chairs, directors' table, etc. The three rooms and vault cover a space 28 x 48 feet (*St. James Journal*, Sept. 30, 1892).

The article reported that the woodwork and furniture in the bank had an antique oak finish, and that the walls and ceilings were papered, frescoed, and painted. The floor of the banking room was tiled and the words "First National Bank" were written in tiles at the main entrance.

The St. James Opera House was typical of hundreds of opera houses that were constructed across the Midwest during the years 1880-1910 with both public and private money. These opera houses or "opera halls" were often incorporated within large business blocks that had one or more income-producing retail stores on the first floor. Opera houses were often constructed adjacent to, and attached to, surrounding buildings, rather than being set apart from neighboring structures on larger lots. Like the St. James Opera House, many Midwestern opera houses of its size had raked or tiered main floor seating and one balcony. They often had no lobby but instead used a large hallway with a ticket booth as a receiving area. These auditoriums were often simple in form with small stages and very basic scenery and lighting. Large windows opened to provide ventilation. The halls were then superficially decorated with elegant painted walls. Interestingly, portraits of famous poets, authors, and playwrights---like those seen in St. James---were very popular (Jacobsen 1988:F8).

The Grand Opera House opened on November 26, 1892. Weeks before the opening, the event was publicized with bulletins announcing: "The Grand Opera House will be opened to the public on the 26th inst., by the Calicotte Comedy Company, one of the best troupes on the road" (*St. James Journal*, Nov. 11, 1892). The day

before the opening, the *St. James Journal* described the new theater:

> As you step into the hall at the foot of the stairs you are greeted by an air of cosy warmth, and as you mount the stairs, your eyes are attracted by tasteful decorations, which are observable even before you enter the hall. . . . Passing the box office at your right you enter the hall, a room 66 x 48 feet in the clear, and you look down at the stage below you. The walls and ceilings are exquisitely tinted and frescoed, and after taking a look at the handsome drop curtain your eye is raised to a handsome medallion portrait of Shakespeare above, and going further into the room you find that six portraits of similar style adorn the ceiling, and the work on each are exceedingly fine. At the right of Shakespeare is Beethoven; next comes Schiller, Wagner, Goethe, and Mozart. The walls are tinted gray and a dull red, with trimmings of gold. The drop curtain is a thing of beauty and represents an Italian sunset scene, with sky and water of that hue only seen in pictures of sunny Italy. The scenery consists of seven sets, representing a parlor sitting room, kitchen, prison, street, landscape and water. All the above work was done by John Weinard and his brother, of the firm of Weinard and Finke, of Minneapolis. The gentlemen have proved themselves workmen of exceptional ability. The parquet (main floor) is seated with 392 opera chairs, 170 of them upholstered with red plush, perforated seats and maple finish, and 218 finished in cherry. The floor is inclined, and we predict that chairs from the eight to the fourteenth rows back from the stage will be in the greatest demand, as they are on a level with and slightly above the stage, and the acoustic properties of the hall are such that one speaking in ordinary tone can be heard on the back of the hall. The balcony is not yet seated, but 250 chairs have been ordered for it and will be put in as soon as they arrive, and in the meantime temporary arrangements will be made. The stage is 24 x 48 feet, this including two small dressing rooms. If there can be any criticism made on the arrangements of the house, we think it will be lodged here. We believe had the architect extended the stage six or even ten feet further into the hall making it 38 x 48 feet, it would have been better, but this is a matter which would tend to the convenience of the players, not adding to the pleasure of the audience. The new 'Grand' is a success, and all honor is due the syndicate of gentlemen who have put their money and time into its building, and we believe the citizens of St. James will consider it a privilege and a pleasure to support it right royally (*St. James Journal*, Nov. 25, 1892).

In the late nineteenth century many opera houses like the Grand Opera House were built with the intention of presenting "legitimate theater," meant to elevate public taste and appeal to genteel audiences. Legitimate theater was distinguished from vaudeville and burlesque, two popular types of performance that were designed for different audiences and purposes. Vaudeville, an outgrowth of "variety acts," was usually comprised of music, singing, dancing, or comedy performed in a series of short, independent acts. Burlesque was a theatrical performance that poked fun at or mocked an idea or well-known person, often with crude humor, the use of the term "opera house" was an attempt to emphasize musical performance over vaudeville and burlesque, which were considered evil or immoral by a large percentage of the American public. Opera houses attempted to broaden theater audiences to include more conservative patrons, and were often given noble names such as the "Grand Opera House" or the "Academy of Music."

The Grand Opera House, known after the early 20th century as the St. James Opera House, brought the arts to St. James. Performances exposed members of the community and surrounding farm families to a wide range of actors, directors, musicians, comedians, and other performance artists who came to St. James from all parts of the country. In the era before movies, radio, television, and automobiles, the opera house played a particularly important educational and cultural role in bringing information and ideas from the "greater world" to this small,

somewhat isolated town.

Initially, the Grand Opera House was primarily a venue for touring companies and traveling shows. Its owners leased the facility to a succession of managers who booked shows and operated the hall. The first managers, a Mr. Denny and Mr. Vandaworker, leased the Grand for its initial year. They booked the Warner Comedy Company for the week of December 26, 1892, as one of the first acts to appear on its stage. During its early years, many opera house productions were booked through syndicated national circuits. For example, a sampling of productions from 1913 includes a production of Shakespeare's "Twelfth Night" that reportedly featured some of the most noted Shakespearian stars in the country; a presentation of "The Rosary," a play that had a three-month engagement in Chicago and a two-month run at the Garden Theater in New York City prior to its engagement in St. James; Gilson and Anderson's production of "The Awakening of Helen Richie," presented in August of 1913; and the play "The Thief," with Janet Allyn in the leading role, presented in October of 1913.

The extent and efficiency of the country's newly-completed railroad network made it possible for traveling theater productions to play the Grand Opera House. It was common for theater companies to play "one night stands" at small towns like St. James (that had suitable theaters) to help finance the cost of traveling by rail between larger cities like Chicago and Seattle. Thus it was possible for a small town like St. James to host productions that would otherwise be seen only in larger cities (Jacobsen 1988:E6).

In addition to theater, a variety of concerts, recitals, and dances brought classical, popular, and ethnic music to St. James. The St. Olaf Concert Band, for example, played to a full house in 1913. An evening of music in April of that year featured "Folk Dances" by Olaf Thorshaug who was "the World's Most Famous Norwegian Folk Dancer" and Nils Borge who was billed as "Europe's Greatest 8-String Violin Player." A large audience bought 25, 35, and 50 cent tickets to see the production (*St.James Plaindealer*, April 12, 1913).

The Grand Opera House also served as the principal performance stage for local plays, concerts, and recitals. For example, a local production of the play "Bibi" in February of 1901 featured a cast of 77 local residents. It was followed later in the year by an operetta produced by the St. James Methodist Society. The Senior Class play produced by St. James High School students was also an annual event at the hall.

Opera house managers often booked speakers from a popular lecture series to fill evenings when traveling companies were not available. These well-attended lectures served an important educational function by bringing accomplished scholars and speakers to the city. In June of 1913, for example, University of Minnesota faculty presented a week-long lecture series that included topics such as "Books as Tools of Efficiency" by Clara Baldwin, "The Industrial Struggle or Business and Health" by Dr. Raymond V. Phelan, "Early Greek Civilization" by Professor John C. Hutchinson, and "Sex Education" for mothers and daughters. Luncheon talks were held on weekdays for businessmen and on Saturday afternoon the series offered Farmers' Day which included the lectures "Financing the Farmer," "Education for Efficiency," and "Successful Cooperation." Evening entertainment during the week featured debates such as "Resolved, That the Women of the United States Should be Given the Ballot" and "Resolved, That Socialism is Preferable to the Present Order," a University Glee Club concert, a University Dramatic Club presentation of the play "Judah," and, on the final evening, an illustrated lecture on the Panama Canal (*St. James Plaindealer*, May 24 and June 7, 1913)

The St. James Opera House was also the site of many community events and gatherings. Local organizations such as the fire department, fraternal organizations, and schools held public dances in the opera house, and the hall proved an elegant setting for the community's fanciest balls. One of the first events held there was a regional conference of Minnesota newspaper editors that was held in late December of 1892. The editors arrived by train and were taken to the Hotel Gibbs. They attended conference meetings at the opera house and a final banquet at the hotel (*St. James Journal*, Dec. 30, 1892). A wide range of public meetings were held at the opera house. For example, pro-temperance citizenry organized by the No-License campaign rallied there in March of 1914 with P. J. Youngdahl, past president of the Anti-Saloon League of Minnesota, speaking to the crowd. Programs and meetings on political and social issues such as patriotism, politics, and regional economic development were held in the hall.

From 1897 through 1920, the opera house hosted the St. James High School graduation ceremonies. The first graduating class of St. James High School held its commencement exercises there on Friday evening, June 4, 1897. The class was comprised of three young men---Charles Lantz, Frank Ellsworth, and Harry Price. Music was provided by the high school orchestra. Winfield Scott Hammond, a local educator, attorney and later Congressman, was the speaker. The last high school graduation ceremonies were held in the opera house in 1920.

One of the most notable historic events that occurred at the opera house was the celebration honoring Winfield Scott Hammond when he was elected the Governor of Minnesota in 1914. It was estimated that 7,000-10,000 people attended the festivities. Special trains from the Twin Cities and across southern Minnesota transported supporters to the governor-elect's hometown. Five bands played during the evening, including the Minnesota State Band, the LeSueur Band, the Mankato Band, and the Second Regiment Band of New Ulm. A parade of over 200 vehicles drove from the depot down Armstrong Avenue, through the town, and finally to the opera house. Dignitaries included Senator Works (treasurer of the state Democratic committee), Congressman-elect Carl C. Van Dyke of St. Paul, Professor Andrist of the University of Minnesota, who was candidate for lieutenant governor, D. D. Daly (chairman of the executive committee), Senator Thomas Cashman, Senator Julius A. Coller of Shakopee, Adjutant General Wood of the Governor's staff, and Colonel E. L. Welch. The celebration was held at two locations, the courthouse and the opera house, to accommodate all of the people who attended (*St. James Plaindealer*, Nov. 7, 1914.)

The popularity (and therefore profitability) of opera houses began to decline during the late 1910s due to several factors. Inflation during World War I raised transportation costs for traveling companies. Automobiles made people more mobile and allowed them to travel out of town for entertainment. The spreading popularity of radio brought music, comedy, and radio theater to private households. Finally, the advent of motion pictures and the rise of movie stars in the 1910s began to monopolize the nation's entertainment dollars (Jacobsen 1988:E7-E8). In St. James, the Princess Theater, which was constructed across the street from the opera house in 1911, became St. James' most popular movie house. Not only did it provide the opera house with stiff competition by showing films, but the Princess could also hold a larger crowd and thus began to host school plays and other functions that were previously held in the opera house.

In 1921, after several years of declining revenues, the First National Bank sold the second floor of the building to the Modern Woodmen of America for $5000 for use as a lodge hall. The fraternal organization remodeled the auditorium by removing the stage and opera house chairs and replacing the slanted floor with a new hardwood

(maple) gymnasium-type floor. The St. James chapter of the Modern Woodmen of America, known as the Sylvan Camp No. 1538, had been founded in September of 1897. At the turn of the century, it was one of about nine fraternal groups in St. James. By 1916, the Modern Woodmen had about 150 local members.

Even after the hall was sold to the Woodmen, many public events continued to be held in the former opera house. For example, the American Legion's Winter Carnival, a three-day event, was held there in February of 1925 with vaudeville acts, choral and band concerts, dances, comedy skits, and a large community ball with music provided by Pearson's Orchestra of Mankato (*St. James Plaindealer*, Jan. 22 and Feb. 21, 1925). During much of the 1920s the hall served as the town's principal gymnasium. All St. James High School basketball games were held there, and the Modern Woodmen also had their own team during the 1920s.

Just as the rise of the grand Opera House was representative of a larger national trend, so was its decline typical. A new generation of high school auditoriums and gymnasiums were built in the 1920s and replaced opera houses like the Grand as the sites of school dances, graduation ceremonies, class plays, and lectures. Many opera houses throughout the Midwest were sold to fraternal organizations and many, like the Grand, were converted to roller skating rinks or dance halls (Jacobsen 1988:E7-E8).

In November of 1935 the First National Bank moved from the Opera House Block into a new building that the bank had just completed nearby. The bank's former quarters were then occupied by the Citizen's State Bank. The opera house auditorium was used as a roller rink, its final venture, beginning about 1937 (Knudson 1995:23). Rooms in the basement of the building were rented to various businesses such as Doc's Radio and TV (1946) and the veterinary practice of Dr. Clifford Enge (1950). The opera house auditorium was no longer open to the public after about 1940. The Citizen's State Bank moved out of the building in 1972.

In conclusion, the Grand Opera House (later known as the St. James Opera House), served for nearly 30 years as the community's principal cultural gathering place where plays, concerts, recitals, and lectures were held. It functioned as a community center and served public and parochial schools as the home of graduation ceremonies, debate contests, school plays, and basketball games. For these reasons the Grand Opera House is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A and the Area of Significance of Entertainment/Recreation.

At present the auditorium is being restored. When this has been completed, the owners intend to make the space available for public and private gatherings that would include wedding receptions, anniversary parties, and the like.

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GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Verbal Boundary Description:

Lot 6, Block 16, Original plat of St. James.

Boundary Justification:

The boundary of the nominated property includes the parcel of land historically associated with the opera house.

FORM PREPARED BY

(Section 7, Description)

David C. Anderson
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Waukon, Iowa 52172
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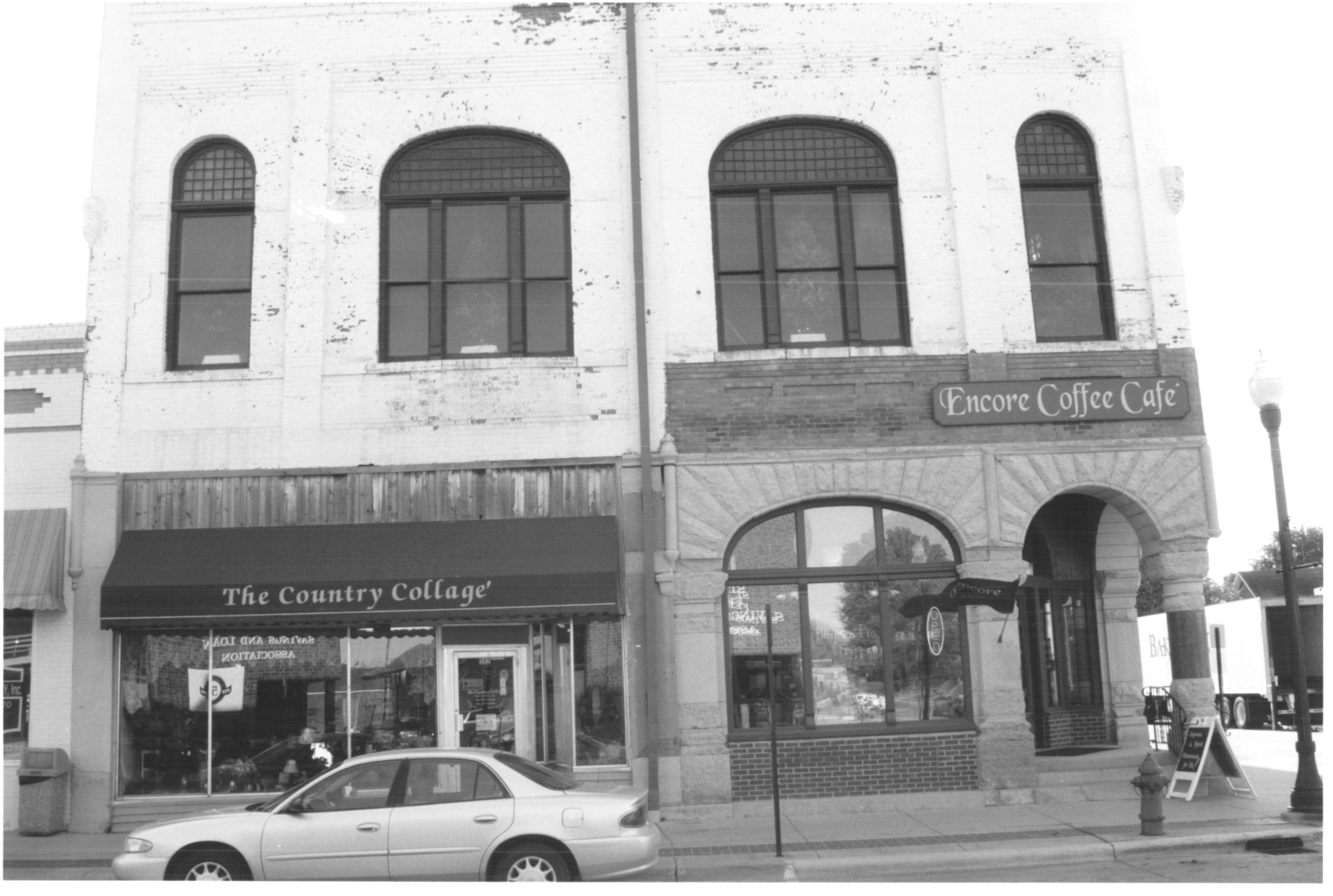
May, 2009


Encore Coffee Cafe'
The Country Collage'

015050-2

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO.

PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL, MN 55102

Looking Southeast at storefront (left) and
State Bank entrance (right) on First
Ave South which is principal facade

Encore Coffee Cafe
Encore Coffee Cafe

015050-7

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO

PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL, MN 55102

LOOKING EAST

OPERA HOUSE
RESTORATION IN PROGRESS
ONE WAY
DO NOT ENTER
STOP

015050-12

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO.

PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL, MN 55102

LOOKING NORTH

Encore Coffee Café
STOP
Espresso
& Lunch
Homemade
for You!

015050-15

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO., MN

PHOTOGRAPHER DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL, MN 55102

Looking NORTHEAST at entrance to what was STATE BANK of ST James. This is portion of entrance along Fifth STreet

ENCORE
BRUNCH
11-2
FIRST
SUNDAY
OF MONTH

015050-16

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO., MN

PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL MN 55102

Looking North at entrance to Second Floor Auditorium. Entrance is Near Rear of the building on Fifth Street

015050-19

GRAND OPERA HOUSE

WATONWAN CO.

PHOTOGRAPHER: DAVID ANDERSON

OCTOBER 2008

MN HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 345 KELLOGG BLVD W.,
ST PAUL, MN 55102

INTERIOR of SECOND FLOOR OPERA HOUSE