

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

98

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

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1. Name of Property

=====

historic name Circle Theater

other names/site number Chilton Building

=====

2. Location

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street & number 10 South Lewis Avenue not for publication N/A
city or town Tulsa vicinity N/A
state Oklahoma code OK county Tulsa code 143
zip code 74104

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination ___ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide X locally. (N/A See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Bob Blackburn

1-21-03

Signature of certifying official

Date

Oklahoma Historical Society, SHPO
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 commenting or other official

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): _____

Ernest H. Beall 3/7/03

ER
Signature of Keeper

Date
of Action

=====
6. Function or Use
=====

Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>RECREATION AND CULTURE</u>	Sub: <u>theater</u>
<u>COMMERCE/TRADE</u>	<u>specialty store</u>
<u>DOMESTIC</u>	<u>multiple dwelling</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)

Cat: <u>VACANT/NOT IN USE</u>	Sub: _____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

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7. Description
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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)

Commercial Style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)

foundation BRICK
roof ASPHALT
walls BRICK
METAL:aluminum
other _____

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

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8. Statement of Significance
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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.)

- 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
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance 1928-1952

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8. Statement of Significance (Continued)
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Significant Dates 1928

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder Burnside, Jim, contractor

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

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9. Major Bibliographical References
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(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: _____

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10. Geographical Data
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Acreage of Property Less than one acre

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

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	15	233890	4005470	3	_____	_____
2		_____	_____	4	_____	_____

N/A 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 Cynthia Savage, Architectural Historian, for the Circle Cinema Foundation

organization Savage Consulting date July 2002

street & number Rt. 1, Box 116 telephone 405/459-6200

city or town Pocasset state OK zip code 73079

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Additional Documentation
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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)

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Property Owner
=====

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

name J.E. Rubin Trust; J.E. Rubin, Trustee

street & number P.O. Box 50217 telephone _____

city or town Tulsa state OK zip code 74150-0217

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SUMMARY:

Constructed in 1928, the Circle Theater is a two-story, brick, Commercial style building with a flat roof. The upper floor of the facade retains its multicolor brick while the lower floor has been sheathed in a vertical metal siding. Underneath the siding is a gray and burgundy tile. The glazed slab doors on the first floor have been boarded as the building is currently not in use. The back doors are metal slab. The second floor windows are wood, six-over-one, hung on the front and sides. The front windows have flat brick headers and cast stone sills. The side windows have no headers and brick sills. The rear windows are wood, eight-over-eight, hung with no headers and brick sills. The windows on the south side have been covered with metal. The majority of windows have metal awnings. The exterior of the building has been altered by the application of metal siding on the front first floor, replacement of the marquee and other signage and incorporation of the small south storefront into the movie theater lobby. The interior configuration of the building remains much as it was with the movie theater occupying most of the first floor and small apartments occupying the second floor. The movie theater portion of the building retains its ticket window, lobby, inner foyer, projection booth and auditorium, although the interior finishes have been altered. Due to the vacancy of the building, many of the interior finishes are also begin to deteriorate.

The building is flanked on both sides by shorter, brick, flat-roofed, Commercial style buildings. None of the other buildings on the block are set as close to the street as the Circle Theater. Typical to movie theater architecture, the entrance of the movie theater is set in the middle of the sidewalk to help entice consumers. All but one of the other buildings on the block have an identical set back with a sizeable sidewalk to allow pedestrians to window shop as they walk. The building located immediately to the north of the theater is set at an angle to cover the distance between the northeast corner of the theater and the southeast corner of the building farther north. This is an original design of the block as there is a special rear walkway off the alley which allows back entrance into the small angle building. Across the street to the east, a new parking lot, brick Public Library building and modern storage units have replaced the historic commercial buildings. All of the buildings on the block to the north of the theater have been painted the same brick red, thus obliterating the individual identity of the buildings. The City of Tulsa has identified the historic shopping center as a potential historic district; however, it is unlikely that the area maintains sufficient integrity. Although an original element of Whittier Square, Tulsa's first suburban

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shopping center, the Circle Theater merits individual nomination for its distinctive historic function and architecture.

EXTERIOR DESCRIPTION:

The Circle Theater is a brick, two-story, flat-roofed, Commercial style building constructed in 1928. Currently vacant, the majority of windows and doors have been boarded. Centrally located on the block, both the north and south sides of the buildings are largely obscured by the adjoining commercial buildings. The Circle Theater is distinguished from the flanking buildings by its unusually narrow setback. The theater is located noticeably closer to the street than any of the other buildings on the block. Although the auditorium for the theater was created by digging below grade, the two-story theater building is also taller than the adjacent buildings, two of which are also two-story with the remainder being one-story. Perhaps one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the theater is the unusual red and green/brown brick on the facade. None of the other buildings on the block are of the same eye-catching brick.

The front of the building faces east onto Lewis Avenue. The distinctive red and green/brown brick covers the second floor, while nonoriginal, red, vertical, metal siding covers the first floor. Underneath the metal is a striking gray and burgundy tile. On the south edge of the facade is a single, wood, slab door which provides access to the second floor apartments. To the north of this are the doors to the theater. Currently, there are three double, glazed, slab doors, all of which have been boarded, that open onto the theater lobby. Historically, the theater was likely accessed through the northernmost set of doors. The other two sets of doors were probably part of the historic south storefront. The south storefront was incorporated into the theater lobby after 1957. North of the triple theater entry is the three-sided ticket window. Currently, the triple window is boarded. North of the ticket window is the small, historic, north storefront. This consists of a wood, glazed, paneled door and double, fixed, wood, display windows, all of which have been boarded. Immediately above the first floor is the full-width, nonoriginal marquee. The lighted marquee slopes from the sides to a point in the center which is marked with a circle.

The second floor of the facade is noteworthy for its combination of red and green/brown brick. On each corner of the second floor, the outside brick columns are decoratively treated with alternating double bands of projected brick, simulating quoins. The fenestration pattern consists of symmetrical,

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single and triple, wood, hung, six-over-one windows. The triple windows are located to the outside with the single windows flanking a centrally located, nonhistoric, vertical sign which reads "Cine Centro" and extends from the roof to the marquee above the first floor. The windows feature narrow stone sills and brick headers with stone squares accenting the corners of the windows. The sill is continuous under the triple windows. Underneath the sill is a decorative band of vertical brick which extends the full-facade. All of the windows have metal awnings. Located immediately above the single windows, is a stone nameplate which reads "19 Chilton 28." The nameplate has a decorative brick surround with stone squares marking the corners. Above the nameplate are two rectangular bands of stone with a stone diamond separating the bands. The roofline is accented by a stepped stone coping with a decorative band of vertical brick under each stepped section.

The north elevation of the Circle Theater is nearly obscured by the adjacent building. Barely visible from the street in front of the building is a section of brick header with stone squares accenting the corners of the windows below. The rest of the second floor windows on the north side are not readily visible from either the east or west sides. Along the north side there are five sets of double windows, several single windows with at least four single doors. West of the easternmost second floor apartment windows, consisting of two paired windows and one single window, the north elevation on the second floor recedes to create a small walkway along the remainder of the second floor. From the east corner of the walkway, there is a single window, then double windows, then a single door, then another single door, then paired windows, then two single windows, then paired windows, then a door, then a small recessed walkway with another door, then the single door located at the top of the back stairs. Except for the door off the recessed walkway, the second floor doors allow entry into individual apartments. The door in the recessed walkway provides access to the main second floor hallway. Although not visible from the exterior, the majority of windows are likely wood, hung, six-over-one. The front paired windows are double, three-pane, metal casement and appear to be covered with metal.

A section of the south elevation is visible from the front. Unlike the facade, the upper wall of the south elevation is composed of common brick which has been painted. The lower wall is clad with vertical metal siding. In the section visible from the front are paired, wood, six-over-one, hung windows in the second floor and two metal display cases for posters on the first. From the back, there are barely visible several sets of single and paired windows. The windows are all covered with metal and have metal awnings. The two

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westernmost sets of windows are slightly larger than the other windows and are multiple, metal, ten-pane casement. Like the north elevation, the middle section of the south elevation is recessed to create a small walkway. East of the two large westernmost windows, there are two sets of paired windows, two single windows, then a double window, then two windows which are either double or a single window with a door, then a double window. There is a door in the west corner of the setback which provides access to the outside walkway from the large suite apartment.

The rear of the building is composed of common brick. On the first floor, there is a large, central, metal vent with drain pipes extending from the roof on either side. At both the north and south corners of the west elevation are single, oversize, metal, slab doors which allow at-grade egress from the below-grade theater auditorium. On the north side of the rear elevation, there is a set of metal stairs which provide access to the exterior, north, second floor entries and walkway. Above the metal stairs, the north corner of the west wall is concrete with metal stairs inlaid with a brick sidewall which has been damaged. The second floor window in this section of the back wall has been covered with wood, as has the entrance to the second floor walkway. South of this there are three uncovered windows on the west elevation. The northernmost windows are eight-over-eight, hung, wood windows and the southern opening contains double, eight-over-eight, hung, wood windows. All three openings have metal awnings and brick sills.

INTERIOR DESCRIPTION:

The interior of the Circle Theater retains a fairly good degree of integrity. On the first floor, one of the original small storefronts remains intact on the north side. This is a small area with no divisions which was historically used as a barber shop. The walls of the barber shop are plaster with some wood panel wainscoting and the floor is linoleum. The south storefront, probably identical to the north storefront, was incorporated into the theater lobby after 1957. Thus, the lobby area is larger than it would have been originally, facilitating movement of movie goers off the sidewalk into the theater. The lobby has nonoriginal wood paneling and carpeted floors. The ticket window remains located on the far northwest side of the lobby with a small, nonoriginal, concession area immediately to the west. The concession area has a slightly above-grade floor which differentiates it from the rest of the lobby. To the southwest of the concession area are three sets of double doors. These metal slab doors lead to the inner foyer. This rectangular space also has carpeted floors and nonhistoric panel walls. Around the drinking fountain

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on the east wall is a small section of gray and burgundy tile. Off of the inner foyer, on the north and south sides, are the men's (north) and ladies (south) restrooms. Both restrooms feature the gray and burgundy tile also found around the drinking fountain and exterior first floor.

West of the men's restroom are the narrow stairs leading to the mezzanine level projection area. There is a spacious storage room on the north side of the centrally-located projection booth. The projection booth has painted, plaster walls and a tiled floor. South of the projection booth is a small bare room with concrete walls and cement floor that contains a water heater and sink area. On the south side of this, there is a small bathroom for the projectionist.

Back on the first floor, off the inner foyer to the west is the auditorium. The sloped floor of the auditorium was created by digging below grade. The auditorium remains a large open space with a screen on the west side. The auditorium has been altered by the addition of dark wood paneling, other nonhistoric finishes and dropped duct work. Along the top wall remains some possibly original decorative detail which has been painted over except for above some of the nonoriginal duct work. The screen is centrally located on the west wall of the auditorium with two single exits located in either corner. Both exits are fairly steeply ramped to allow at-grade exit of movie patrons. The ramps have painted brick walls and concrete floors. The screen was replaced in the early 1960s with other modifications made at the time to enhance the movie experience. Behind the screen is a small concrete area.

The second floor apartments are accessed by interior stairs located on the far northeast corner of the building. At the base of the stairs remains the brass mail slot for the apartments. The stairs and upstairs corridors all have plaster walls and carpeted floors. At the top of the stairs, there is a single door on the south wall which provides access to the second floor of the adjacent building. There is a short north-south hallway which gives way to the main east-west corridor which extends nearly the length of the second floor. There are a total of nine apartments on the second floor. Eight of these are four room, efficiency apartments. The apartments consist of a kitchen, living room, bedroom and bathroom. The ninth apartment, more aptly called a suite, is notably larger and more well-appointed than the other apartments. The suite is located on the far west side and extends the entire north-south width of the building. The suite includes bedrooms, bathroom, dining room, kitchen and living room. The apartments retain a good degree of integrity, although disuse has resulted in failure of many of the interior finishes. For the most part,

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the apartments feature plaster walls and carpeted floors. The bathrooms have tiled walls with many older fixtures remaining in place. In the kitchens, most of the apartments retain their historic, metal, efficiency stove/refrigerator/cabinets/sink combination units. From the main corridor into the kitchen area of each apartment are small openings with wood doors which were likely used for delivery purposes, probably milk or ice.

ALTERATIONS:

Overall, the Circle Theater retains a good degree of integrity. The most obvious alterations are the addition of metal siding to the exterior first floor and the incorporation of the south storefront into the theater lobby. The metal siding was added by the previous owner who did not want to repair the tile. Although visually notable, the metal siding does not compromise the ability of the building to convey its historic function or significance and is a fairly easily reversible change. The south storefront remains visible on the 1957 Sanborn First Insurance map; thus, the lobby was probably expanded after this date to facilitate use of the building. Although the loss of the storefront is notable, it does not destroy the overall character of the building. Other modifications to the building include a door to the adjacent circa 1948 building to the south, located at the top of the interior stairs; the boarding of the majority of doors and windows; replacement of the marquee and other signage; and, nonhistoric interior finishes including wood paneling and carpeting. The second floor door between the historic movie theater and the adjacent commercial building is not visible from the exterior and is easily distinguished from the historic interior by its location off the main apartment corridor. The other changes relate to the building's continued use through the 1990s with the boarding of the windows and doors related to its current vacancy. Retaining many of its historic exterior characteristics and overall interior configurations, the Circle Theater is easily identifiable as an historic movie theater. The remaining north storefront and second floor apartments retain notable degrees of integrity. As important secondary spaces, the storefront and apartments reflect the speculative venture of movie theater architecture in the late 1920s.

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE:

The Circle Theater is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with entertainment/recreation in Tulsa, Oklahoma. From the turn-of-the-twentieth-century through the early 1950s, movie theaters played a critical role in the entertainment activities of the typical American. Evolving from "shorts" which portrayed a single scene to feature-length films which told an artistically edited story by the 1920s, movies gained an audience spanning the social and economic spectrum of American society. Despite the economic crisis of the 1930s which devastated many industries, the movie industry with affordable prices and attractive, escapist product continued to thrive. Movie-going reached its peak in the 1940s with patriotism and romance entertaining the homefront and newsreels bringing world events to every town, U.S.A. Although movie theaters remained an important entertainment option in the 1950s and beyond, the emergence of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s reduced the American reliance on movie theaters for affordable entertainment. The Circle Theater, operating throughout the late 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s, is a good local representation of this popular entertainment venue which captivated the nation.

The Circle Theater is further eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C for its architectural significance as a good local example of 1920s movie theater architecture. Constructed in 1928, the Circle Theater was one of nine movie theaters operating in Tulsa. It was the first suburban theater in Tulsa and billed as the second largest suburban theater in the state at the time of its construction. Although not the most opulent example of movie theater architecture in the city, the Circle Theater is the only pre-1960s movie theater remaining extant in Tulsa. Clearly maintaining its historic movie theater identity, the Circle Theater merits recognition.

Related to the continued entertainment significance of the building, the period of significance for the theater extends from its construction in 1928 to 1952, the current National Register fifty-year mark. Although now vacant, the theater continued in operation through the 1990s although with ever-diminishing importance and success. Because the name of the theater is more closely identified with the historic significance and identity of the building, the nomination is prepared under "Circle Theater," rather than the name of the building "Chilton."

HISTORIC BACKGROUND:

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The town of Tulsa existed as early as 1879 when a post office was established on the Perryman Ranch in the Creek Nation. The town, first called "Tulsey Town," grew slowly. During the early 1880s, the town was a haven for gamblers and "bad men" due to its isolation. At the time of the first government townsite survey in Indian Territory in 1900, Tulsa's population stood at merely 1,390.¹

Shortly after this survey, a momentous event occurred near Tulsa, Indian Territory. This event not only had a major impact on Tulsa but the entire state of Oklahoma. In 1901, the state's first important commercial oil well blew in. Located in Red Fork, this landmark well was across the Arkansas River from Tulsa. Two years later, the Secretary of the Interior allowed the leasing of restricted Indian Territory lands under Department of the Interior supervision. The oil rush was on as oil men from Pennsylvania and other states flocked to Indian Territory. In 1904, three men built a toll bridge over the Arkansas River connecting Red Fork and Tulsa. In addition to allowing Tulsa to benefit from the Red Fork strike, the toll bridge also enabled the town to profit from the fabulous Glenn Pool strike which blew in in 1905. Within months of the discovery, the Glenn Pool field was "famous throughout the industry as the richest small field in the world."²

By 1910, Tulsa's population stood at 18,182 and a building boom was well underway in the city with brick plants working at capacity. Hotels, office buildings and fine residences were under construction as the streets were paved. By 1920, Tulsa's population had grown to 72,075, a tremendous increase in merely ten years. Nearly doubling in the ensuing decade, Tulsa's population by 1930 was 141,258 and the city was the second largest in the state. Although oil drilling activity occurred all over eastern Oklahoma, the oil companies' headquarters were generally located at Tulsa and that is where the oil men in charge made their homes. As such, Tulsa became known as the "Oil Capital of the World."³

¹The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma (Lawrence, Kansas: The University Press of Kansas, 1986), 206-208.

²Ibid., 208. See also Angie Debo, Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital, (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), 86-88.

³Ibid., 208-209. See also Debo, Tulsa, 88 and 97.

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Like the rest of the nation, the oil business and Tulsa did not escape unscathed by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Further worsening the status of the oil industry in Oklahoma was the October 1930 discovery of oil in the East Texas field. Forty-five miles long and five to ten miles wide, the East Texas field quickly yielded a sufficient amount of oil by itself to satisfy national demand. The worsening economic conditions combined to such an extent that by 1933 the price of oil had reached bottom of the barrel prices and a good portion of Tulsa's residents were jobless. Although oil prices stabilized between 1934 and 1940, the decade of the 1930s proved to be difficult for Tulsans, as all Americans. In 1941, the city's population stood at only 142,157. This represented a growth of only 899 citizens since 1930.⁴

American's involvement in World War II proved to be a major redeeming event for Tulsa, as well as the nation as a whole. Although Tulsa and Oklahoma did not benefit from the increased military spending of early 1940, it quickly became apparent Tulsa enjoyed certain important characteristics that made it ideal for subsequent military spending. These features included its central, secure location in the middle of the country; ready sources of cheap fuel; a good network of roads and highways; and, a large pool of trained and unemployed workers. In early 1941, the War Department named Tulsa as a potential site for the new \$15 million Douglas Aircraft Company plant. On 2 May 1941, a ceremonial ground breaking heralded the start of construction on the mile long building which by the summer of 1942 occupied one-and-one-half million square feet of floor space. By the fall of 1942, the Douglas plant was in need of expansion and the plant payroll included nearly fifteen thousand workers earning an average of just over \$185 a month.⁵

The Douglas Aircraft plant was not the only wartime plant impacting Tulsa in the early 1940s. Although the aircraft industry expended more than twenty million dollars during the period to expand their facilities in Tulsa, other factories in the city spent more than seven million dollars in expanding their industrial plants during the war. In 1939, Tulsa manufacturers employed eleven thousand Tulsans in primarily oil-related manufacturing jobs. By 1945 forty-two thousand residents worked in local manufacturing plants. The majority of

⁴Danney Goble, Ph.D., Tulsa! Biography of the American City (Tulsa, Oklahoma: Council Oak Books, 1998), 139-140, 143, 151 and 181. See also WPA Guide, 205.

⁵Ibid., 170-180.

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these in non-oil related capacities. In 1945, the United States Department of Labor determined that Tulsa was among the top three cities impacted by the wartime industrial expansion. In terms of the numbers of residents, between 1940 and 1945, Tulsa's population expanded by nearly a third to reach 185,000.⁶

Following the end of World War II, Tulsa continued to enjoy a prosperity unthought of in the 1930s. Responding to consumer demands for goods of all types, Tulsa continued to expand its manufacturing base. Further boosting the city's economy was continued spending by the Federal government on military-related industries during the Cold War of the late 1940s through the early 1990s. This remarkable varied industrial development spurred Tulsa's growth through the 1950s and 1960s. By the early 1970s, Tulsa led the state in manufacturing.⁷

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE:

It is only within the last century or so that the "development and practice of leisure activities for refreshment, diversion, amusement or sport" reached all levels of society.⁸ Previously leisure activities were restricted to the higher echelons of society by a lack of money, time and opportunity. As industrialization moved America from the country to the city and modern inventions created a multitude of new, affordable, leisure-time activities, entertainment and recreation became industries of their own. Encompassing activities from sports to travel to performing arts, entertainment and recreational pursuits became increasingly available for all ages and both sexes through the twentieth century. Although some of these new pastimes did not require their own facilities, the majority resulted in discernable additions to the built environment. Altering in many ways the fundamental lifestyles of Americans, attention must be paid to the contribution these entertainment and recreational activities made to the broad patterns of American history.

⁶Ibid., 181.

⁷Ibid., 242-245.

⁸National Register Bulletin 16A "How to Complete the National Register Registration Form," (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Interagency Resources Division, 1991), 40.

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Beginning in the late 1890s with the advent of Thomas Edison's "moving picture machine," the Kinetoscope, the American public became enchanted with motion pictures. Although public interest with the Kinetoscope faded within a few years, short motion pictures continued to be part of the entertainment venue in cities and towns across America. Debuting in 1896, many Vaudeville performances included a showing of motion pictures via the Vitascope, an improvement on the Kinetoscope which used a projector to project the film onto a separate screen. Vaudeville shows, the most popular entertainment form at the turn-of-the-century, typically also included singing, dancing, comedy skits and novelty acts by live performers.⁹

Although Vaudeville and motion pictures continued to be linked for many years, traveling film exhibitors quickly began setting up in vacant storefronts on and off the Vaudeville circuit. Offering only the minimum of accommodations, these make-shift movie theaters increased the popularity of motion pictures. Even more cheaply opened in numerous small towns across the United States were the "air dome" or open-air theaters. Needing only four walls with seats located between the projector and screen, these economical theaters also offered advantages from the stuffiness and fire hazards of other enclosed theaters. Ever widening the attraction of motion pictures in the United States was the 1905 introduction of Nickelodeons. Rather than showing movies only in the evenings, Nickelodeons introduced the practice of continuously showing movies from early morning until late night. With the price of admission only five cents and opportunistic viewing times, Nickelodeons opened the motion picture industry to entire families of various economic levels.¹⁰

Although immensely popular, Nickelodeons soon gave way to "moving picture theaters." Further spurring this shift was the replacement of the "shorts" of early day motion pictures with feature-length films after 1915. In addition to increasing the ticket price, these longer films required more comfortable setting, scheduled showings and extended runs. With increasing revenue and nationwide possibilities, buildings constructed expressly as motion picture theaters, often by noted architectural firms, became the norm. Continuing a tradition of theater opulence, these new movie "palaces" were frequently

⁹Maggie Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk: An Architectural History of the Movie Theater, Starring S. Charles Lee (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1994), 16-17.

¹⁰Ibid., 22-29.

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ostentatious Period Revivals in which the architectural accouterments rivaled the main showing itself. The 1927 introduction of the "talkie" coincided with a more streamlined approach to movie theater architecture, frequently echoed by the stylistic trends of the late 1920s, 1930s and 1940s.¹¹

By the late 1920s, Tulsa was thriving as a major industrial center in the state of Oklahoma. The second largest city in the state, Tulsa enjoyed the latest diversions and recreational pursuits. Motion pictures, possessing across the board appeal, were a mainstay in the entertainment options available in the city. By 1928, the city had eight theaters showing motion pictures. Typical to the time, all of these theaters were located in the downtown area. They included the Dreamland at 129 North Greenwood; the Gaiety Theater at 18 South Main; the Lyric Theater at 103 South Main; the Main Street Theater at 210 South Main; the Rialto at 15 West 3rd; the Ritz Theater at 18 West 4th; the Strand Theater at 117 South Main; and, the Wonderland Theater at 118 South Main.¹²

On 15 July 1928, the city's ninth motion picture theater opened its doors. Unlike the others, the Circle Theater was not located in downtown Tulsa. Instead, the theater was situated to the northeast of downtown in Whittier Square. Part of a growing trend nationwide, Whittier Square was Tulsa's first suburban shopping center. With the tremendous population boom in Tulsa during the 1920s, residential development quickly moved several miles east of downtown. Development to the west was constrained by the Arkansas River. Although the importance of the original central business district held on for many years, beginning in the late 1920s, suburban shopping centers gained in popularity across the country. Aimed at providing the basic needs of the suburbanites within a short distance, these shopping centers contained a variety of retail businesses, as well as some governmental entities, such as a Post Office. Frequently becoming a hub for nearby neighborhoods, these suburban shopping centers also provided entertainment options for various ages. After several years of development, Whittier Square was described in 1928 as a "...thriving business district with practically every line of business

¹¹Ibid., 29 and 34.

¹²Tulsa Foundation for Architecture, Historic Preservation Resource Identification Form "Circle Theater," (On file in the Oklahoma Landmarks Inventory, Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; 12 March 2002).

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represented."¹³

With admission prices at twenty-five cents for adults and ten cents for children, the Circle Theater opened for business on 15 July 1928 with the premier Oklahoma showing of "Across the Atlantic," starring Monte Blue. This was following by an "...uproarious comedy featuring Lupino Lane, a Lyman Howe travelogue and a news reel, Kinograms." The Sunday opening included one matinee and two evening showings. According to one of the local newspapers, all of the nearly seven hundred seats were filled each time. Movie goers were of the opinion that "The theater was beautiful. The music was of high order and the program was excellent." In addition to the "Great bouquets of flowers, sent to the management by other theaters, motion picture distributors and Tulsa business firms," the theater was highlighted by the "Pretty girl ushers, attired in spic and span new red uniforms, (who) showed the patrons to their seats."¹⁴

Like most movie theaters of the late 1920s, the Circle Theater did not solely rely upon pretty flowers and girls to attract public interest. Jim Burnside, a local contractor, worked with the owners of the theater, Fred Smith and Billy Sobelman, to design the theater. Despite the fact that "No blue print or architect's drawings were used....," the movie theater was described as "distinctive in arrangement and appointments." Following the current trend in movie theater architecture, the interior of the Circle Theater utilized an opulent and colorful Spanish Revival style, described by the local newspaper as "'jazz' Spanish style". In addition to the attractive front entrance, the theater had a "...spacious and inviting lobby..." which gave way to the foyer which was "...artistically decorated and illuminated with red and green lights...". In addition to the rest rooms located at opposite ends of the foyer, there was a row of windows, no longer existing, which opened off the foyer into the adjacent auditorium. The auditorium was held as "...a commodious showhouse which is perfect in appointments and artistically pleasing in decorations." The walls of the auditorium were "...a blend of brown, yellow, purple and red..." with "an indirect lighting system of red and green." Of interest to all attendees was the "modern cooling system" which included "Two giant fans on both sides of the curtain send(ing) cooling breezes over the audience." Related to the safety and comfort of the movie goer was the

¹³The Tulsa (Oklahoma) Tribune, 15 July 1928.

¹⁴Ibid., 16 July 1928.

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"...thoroughly fireproof" projection room, located over the foyer. Equipped with two large Powers projectors, the projection room was "...isolated and shut off from the rest of the building." Although not in place for the opening, a \$15,000 Robert Morton organ was ordered with installation expected around the end of the first month of operation. The total 1928 cost of the theater and fixtures was set at \$62,000.¹⁵

The Circle Theater was located in the Chilton Building, also constructed in 1928. Owned by W. R. Chilton, the building included "...a modern apartment house and two store rooms," in addition to the movie theater. Although the movie theater itself was not actually owned by Chilton, he was credited in 1928 with seeing "...the need of a modern suburban theater" for Whittier Square and acting upon that need. Although not as common in later movie theater architecture, the incorporation of commercial and domestic space in the same building as a movie theater was not atypical in the 1920s. As with all commercial buildings, "...theatres represented first and foremost an investment for the owner, who hoped for a financial return." By including both apartments and retail space, Chilton obviously sought to maximize the return on his investment of \$50,000 on the building.¹⁶

The small storefronts located on either side of the theater were quickly rented. When the theater opened in mid-July 1928, J. D. Lee had already rented the north storefront for a barber shop, which it remained as until the current vacancy of the building. The south storefront was under contract in 1928 to open as a confectionary run by "associates of Fred Smith," owner/operator of the theater. More than likely providing refreshments for movie goers, the confectionary was an auspicious use of the retail space. Although the north storefront remains intact, the south storefront was incorporated into the theater lobby space in the late 1950s. It was probably at this time that a concession stand was constructed in the lobby to save the movie goer time and effort in obtaining the staples of movie theater goodies, popcorn, candy and sodas, during the shows.¹⁷

¹⁵Ibid., 15 July 1928.

¹⁶Ibid. See also Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk, 9-10.

¹⁷Ibid.

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The second floor of the building was devoted entirely to domestic space. In addition to a large suite, likely for the building owner or manager, on the west side, there were eight four-room efficiency apartments upstairs known as the Chilton Apartments. The apartments consisted of a kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and living room. Each apartment was "...elaborately decorated and equipped with electric refrigerators." The apartments were also furnished with a "roller bed."¹⁸

From the beginning, the dominant tenant in the building was the Circle Theater. The full page of advertisements heralding the opening of the theater, makes numerous references to the Circle Theater with only three noting the Chilton Apartments. The barber shop in the north storefront was simply called the "Circle Theater Barber Shop." None of the advertisements use the name "Chilton Building." Providing the primary identity, "Circle Theater" is the best and most closely associated name with the history of the building.

The Circle Theater remained in operation through the early 1990s. As such, it was doing business during the height of movie theater attendance. Although the national economy underwent a dramatic downturn a little more than a year after the Circle Theater opened, movie going continued to be a popular pastime through the 1930s. During the period, weekly attendance at movie theaters fluctuated between 90 million in 1930 to 80 million in 1940. A low in attendance was felt in 1931 and 1932, the depths of the national recession crippling the country, when just 60 million Americans a week went to the picture show. Boosting movie attendance were the improvements to the overall movie experience, including better sound effects and improved synchronization between the film and sound. Many theater operators also sought to bring in customers using various promotional stunts. During the trying times of the Great Depression, theater management often resorted to special contests sponsored by local businesses or even providing free dishes to attendees.¹⁹

As the American economy rebounded in the 1940s, movie going reached its peak. War movies and newsreels attracted numerous movie goers who sought romance, patriotism and the latest information from the front. Between 1941 and 1945,

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk, 6 and 195. See also David Naylor, Great American Movie Theaters (Washington, D.C.: The Preservation Press, 1987)25-26.

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weekly movie attendance held steady at 85 million. Following the end of World War II with G.I.'s flocking home and a booming post-war economy, movie attendance went up to 90 million a week before sharply declining in 1949 to 70 million. Although there were several factors in the decline of movie going, the largest was the growing number of television stations. In 1945, there were only nine television stations located in five cities. Within five years, the number had grown to eighty stations with capacity to serve three million homes. By 1952, two thousand television stations across the country brought entertainment directly into the home. Between 1947 and 1957, ninety percent of American households bought a television set. Those who did not have their own, went to the neighbors to enjoy this new form of free entertainment. As television broadcasting continued to improve with advances in color and programming, more and more Americans chose to stay home and watch the latest entertainment on their own sets. After 1949, weekly movie attendance continued a slow decline through the 1950s and 1960s before hitting a low of 15.8 million in 1971.²⁰ Of course, movie going has never fallen entirely from favor as evidenced by the continued construction of multi-plex movie theaters at the present time.

From 1928 through the early 1950s, the Circle Theater provided an important entertainment option to Tulsans, particularly those living in the adjacent neighborhoods. The theater was built with the growing suburban neighborhoods in mind, and along with the Whittier Square shopping center, targeted the new suburbanites as its core audience. The local residents obviously enjoyed the picture shows shown at the Circle Theater as evidenced by the continued existence of the theater. Fundamentally an economic concern, a lack of crowds would surely have resulted in the closure of the theater. The only surviving movie house in Tulsa that predates the Vietnam War and as a tangible reminder of this popular entertainment choice in Tulsa during movie going's peak years of the 1920s through the early 1950s, the Circle Theater is historically significant.

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE:

In addition to reflecting an important trend in American entertainment preferences, the Circle Theater is also architecturally significant as a good example of 1920s movie theater architecture. Relatively simple in style, the Circle Theater is distinctive from the opulent and frequently exotic style of

²⁰Ibid., 163-164 and 195-196.

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movie palace architecture popular at the time. Additionally, the Circle Theater is the only extant example of pre-1960s movie theater architecture remaining in Tulsa.

As previously mentioned, there were eight movie theaters operating in Tulsa when the Circle Theater opened. None of these theaters remain extant. Movie theater construction within the city also did not end with the Circle Theater. Many theaters were constructed in the 1930s and beyond. For example, the Delman Theater was erected in 1938 not far from the Circle Theater at 15th Street and South Lewis Avenue and in 1941, the Will Rogers Theater was built at 4502 East 11th Street. Following declining profits caused by ever decreasing crowds and new modern theaters, many historic theaters in Tulsa closed their doors in the 1970s, including the Majestic, Palace, Orpheum, Rialto, Ritz, Will Rogers and, even for a time, the Circle Theater. Other theaters, such as the Delman Theater, held on until the late 1980s before finally closing and being demolished.²¹

Erected in various architectural styles popular at the times of construction, many of the demolished movie theaters were of a higher style than the relatively-plain Circle Theater. For example, the Wonderland Theater was remodeled in 1935 in the Zigzag Art Deco style by noted Tulsa architect Joseph R. Koberling and renamed the Palace Theater. The Ritz Theater, constructed in 1926, was Tulsa's flagship "movie palace" of the 1920s. Costing \$400,000, the theater boasted "Art work, statuary, mirrors and an elaborate use of terra cotta (which) combined to create a glamorous symbol of a glamorous industry." Both the Palace and the Ritz were demolished in 1973.²²

The Circle Theater is noteworthy for its simplicity in exterior architectural style. The restrained use of style, unusual in big city movie theater architecture of the 1920s, is probably attributable to three factors: the lack of a professional architect in the design, the mixed use of the building, and and the placement of the theater in an early suburban shopping center. Unlike

²¹Tulsa Preservation Commission and the City of Tulsa's Urban Development Department, "Tulsa's Historic Preservation Resource Document," (Available at the Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma: September 1997), E-2-E-3. See also The Tulsa Tribune, 22 December 1988.

²²Ibid., "Tulsa Historic," E-2-E-3.

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the rest of the movie theaters in Tulsa at the time, the Circle Theater did not have any competition with other large, high style buildings in the vicinity. Located in downtown Tulsa, the other theaters had to rely on ornate exteriors to attract customers. Constructed in the Commercial style and of brick, the Circle Theater was in keeping with the rest of the Whittier Square Shopping Center. However, the theater did not meld in entirely with the rest of the late 1920s business district. The theater featured a distinctive, multicolor brick and, although only two-stories like many of the other buildings in the shopping center, was unrivaled in height.

However, the setback of the Circle Theater is the most noticeable characteristic that set the theater apart from other buildings in the shopping center. As originally designed, the theater was located conspicuously closer to the street than any other building on the block. This setting relates directly to the historic function of the building. Throughout the history of movie theater architecture, the "...physical environment of the theatre began, literally, at the sidewalk." Unlike the other businesses in the shopping center, the Circle Theater was selling an intangible product. As such, it had to create a psychological environment that offered "...the patron an event worth remembering and repeating." By locating the theater unusually close to the street, the theater had its own intimate setting that none of the other buildings in the center shared. Thus, the theater existed in a separate dimension that, importantly, lured patrons off the street repeatedly to enjoy a fleeting experience.²³

As an example of a Commercial style movie theater of the late 1920s and the last remaining pre-1960s movie theater in the city, the Circle Theater is architecturally significant within the context of Tulsa. Further, the theater represents a popular entertainment option of the 1920s through the early 1950s. Available to persons of various sizes, both sexes and all economic levels, motion pictures and the buildings in which their were shown "...created an emotionally charged atmosphere in which millions of Americans learned about life, culture, politics, romance, and sex through what was shown and implied and what was both said and suggested on screen." As a tangible reminder of the heyday of movies, the Circle Theater is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

²³Valentine, The Show Starts on the Sidewalk, 9-10.

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VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION:

Lot 3, Block 22, Gillette Hall Addition, Tulsa, Tulsa County, Oklahoma.

BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION:

The boundaries include the property historically associated with the Circle Theater.