

WASH DC 11/1/80

United States Department of the Interior
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service

National Register of Historic Places
Inventory—Nomination Form

For HCRS use only

received OCT 20 1980

date entered

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

1. Name

historic Sesser Opera House

and/or common

2. Location

street & number 106 W. Franklin St. n/a not for publication

city, town Sesser n/a vicinity of congressional district 24th

state IL code 012 county Franklin code 055

3. Classification

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

4. Owner of Property

name Sesser Homecoming Association, Inc.

street & number P.O. Box 426

city, town Sesser n/a vicinity of state IL

5. Location of Legal Description

courthouse, registry of deeds, etc. Franklin County Court House - Deed Records Office

street & number 202 W. Main

city, town Benton state IL

6. Representation in Existing Surveys

title See Continuation Sheet has this property been determined eligible? yes no

date federal state county local

depository for survey records

city, town state

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Continuation sheet Sesser Opera House

Item number 6

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Representation in Existing Surveys

1. Inventory of Historic Landmarks in Franklin County
Illinois Historic Landmarks Survey
April 1974

2. Inventory of Historic Structures in Franklin County
Illinois Historic Structures Survey
October 1972

Both Surveys on file at Illinois Department of Conservation
Historic Sites Division
405 E. Washington
Springfield, IL 62706

7. Description

Condition		Check one	Check one
<input type="checkbox"/> excellent	<input type="checkbox"/> deteriorated	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> unaltered	<input type="checkbox"/> original site
<input type="checkbox"/> good	<input type="checkbox"/> ruins	<input type="checkbox"/> altered	<input type="checkbox"/> moved date _____
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> fair	<input type="checkbox"/> unexposed		

Describe the present and original (if known) physical appearance

SESSER OPERA HOUSE
July 21, 1980

DESCRIPTION

The Sesser Opera House was constructed in 1914 by James H. Hill, contractor, with Sam Criswell, his brother, and Canada Jones, to replace a frame version built earlier in 1904 which had burned down.¹ The Opera House is located on the main downtown street of Sesser (106 W. Franklin) facing South.

The structure is approximately 40 feet wide and 35 feet high at the front and 150 feet deep and 45 feet high at the rear stage house. It was constructed with solid brick masonry bearing walls and wood frame floors and roof except at the main auditorium seating area which is of concrete. As decorative elements stucco and terre cotta (by the Criswell brothers) were used at the front facade, and metal pan ceilings, painted decorative plaster, and spaced lights around the proscenium opening were used inside.

The building was initially designed and built to accommodate the showing of films as well as live stage performances.² A projection room with adjacent film storage, splicing, work area, and staff toilet rooms are located above the arcade at the entry and an orchestra pit, below-stage dressing rooms, and above stage loft and scenery rigging/catwalk area exists at the back of the building accessible to the alley.

To enter the Opera House, one moves under the main arch-arcade to the ticket window at the center. A small office was located on the left within the arcade and the concession area was on the right. On entering the doors on either side of the ticket area, one would immediately be in the main auditorium which had a seating capacity of about 250 to 300. The orchestra pit, proscenium opening, and large stage are beyond.

Changes to the building include:

1. Removal and replacement of original seating (1930's).
2. Removal and replacement of original projectors (1930's).
Note that the 1930's projectors are still in place and can be made operational.²
3. Removal of original heating stoves which were located along the side wall of the auditorium in the audience area.
A forced air heating system was added with equipment located at the sides of and below the stage area.
4. Minor modifications were made at the concessions/office and entry area but the original intent is still apparent.

Visually, from the street, the building is basically of a "Mission Style"³, very unique for the Southern Illinois area, using elements, forms, and color contrasts to achieve a striking architectural statement on the main street.

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Important "Mission Style" features are the stucco finish, large arch creating an apparent arcade, the projecting eave with red Spanish roofing tiles, and the terre cotta impost molding and horizontal band. To make this even more striking, elements of other styles are used such as "Egyptian Revival" (smooth stucco and the monumental gateway effect), "Victorian Romanesque" (compound arched entry short columns, and decorative terre cotta bands and patterns) and "Sullivan-esque" (large arched opening, decorative terre cotta panels and bands, and highly decorative frieze) and expectedly, American Vernacular Sculptural details (Indian Motif and "wolf" gargoyles.)

The adjacent buildings on both sides have several visual design elements intended to relate to and to set apart visually the Opera House. 1) The heights are exactly the same with a continuous parapet with identical terre cotta coping, 2) Terre cotta banding of the same color, but of different design and style, 3) Short stout Tuscan columns of the same height and scale as the base of the Opera House arch suggesting an intentional design concept along the street to focus on the Opera House at the center of the grouping.

¹Research notes by Neysa Cummings.

²Letter to Neysa Cummings, June 16, 1980, from Professor of Film and Cinema at SIU, John Mercer.

³Identifying American Architecture - A Pictorial Guide to Styles and Terms, 1600-1945, by John V.G. Blumerson. 1977 - American Association for State and Local History Nashville, Tennessee.

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Research notes by Neysa Cummings

Sesser's first Opera House, a frame building burned in 1914 was soon replaced with the present building. It was built by James H. Hill, contractor, Sam Criswell, his brother, and Canada Jones. The Criswell Brothers did the Stucco and terre cotta trim.

Several Nashville Grand Old Opera Stars have used the Opera House, among them were "String Bean", "Duke of Paducah", and Lou Childers.

Two fellows by the name of Reed and Yemm were the first operators of the silent movies, followed by Keigley, Williams and Schrader Hope.

The building has been used for Liberty Loan Bond Drives, School plays, Minstrel shows by organizations, music recitals, political meetings, King Coal talent shows sponsored by the Franklin County Coal Miners, Dog shows, Cooking schools, and Home talent shows.

The Grand Central Hotel building located on the corner of Broadway and Franklin Avenue was built in connection with the Opera House. This building was practically fire proof, steam heated and equipped with running water system. There was a dining room in the rear part of the building and a bar in the front. The upstairs was used as a hotel.

8. Significance

Period	Areas of Significance—Check and justify below			
<input type="checkbox"/> prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-prehistoric	<input type="checkbox"/> community planning	<input type="checkbox"/> landscape architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> religion
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> archeology-historic	<input type="checkbox"/> conservation	<input type="checkbox"/> law	<input type="checkbox"/> science
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> agriculture	<input type="checkbox"/> economics	<input type="checkbox"/> literature	<input type="checkbox"/> sculpture
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> architecture	<input type="checkbox"/> education	<input type="checkbox"/> military	<input type="checkbox"/> social/humanitarian
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> art	<input type="checkbox"/> engineering	<input type="checkbox"/> music	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> theater
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> commerce	<input type="checkbox"/> exploration/settlement	<input type="checkbox"/> philosophy	<input type="checkbox"/> transportation
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 1900-1914	<input type="checkbox"/> communications	<input type="checkbox"/> industry	<input type="checkbox"/> politics/government	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> other (specify)
		<input type="checkbox"/> invention		(entertainment)

Specific dates 1914 - 1959

Builder/Architect

James Hill

Statement of Significance (in one paragraph)

The Sesser Opera House is a very important structure in the overall plans for the revitalization of the downtown area in Sesser. The structure has a historical significance to the Franklin County area as the building is the only remaining theater building in Franklin County which has not undergone any major structural changes.

The Opera House was one of six such theaters operated by Reid, Yemm, and Hayes in the early 1900's.

In 1896, films were projected in a theater for the first time in the U.S. Almost immediately theaters which regularly presented vaudeville and variety programs began using short films, usually at the end of each program of live entertainment.

By 1900, one-reel (15 minute) narrative films were eagerly viewed by audiences in theaters in the larger cities. Small theaters which showed only films came to be known as nickelodeons. (Odeon is a Greek word for theater.) The theater owners found that many of their customers were immigrants who knew little English, but who could nevertheless understand and enjoy the silent films, especially the comedies.

By 1903, there were film exchanges, and theater owners could rent films rather than purchase them.

The architect who designed the Sesser Opera House in 1904, taking into account the growing popularity of the films, included a projection booth. This design made the Sesser Opera House unusual, in that it is one of the first small-town, twentieth-century opera houses for which a projection booth was an integral part of the original plans.

Around 1912, films began to be longer. The public liked the 30-minute films. By 1915, standard "program" films ran 75 minutes, but there were also a few films which ran three hours. One epic film which became an American classic, The Birth of a Nation, directed by D.W. Griffith, was probably shown in the Sesser Opera House. By 1917, feature films had become standard offerings. They were usually preceded by a short comedy. Americans loved the films and their stars. Audiences were getting close to the "three a week" habit which was prevalent in the twenties.

Silent movies were never really silent, since there was always at least piano music. Many Sesser residents remember the women who played for silent films in the Opera House.

A Sesser eyewitness, Elnora Shurtz, who began going to the Sesser Opera House in 1919, remembers that there were minstrel shows, vaudeville, local entertainment, and films. There were also sometimes plays. The Opera House was used for many other events. It became the community's cultural center.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Franklin County War History, 1832-1919, Harry L. Frier, ed., Hal W. Trovillian, publisher, Ziegler, IL, 1920
 A Pictorial History of Sesser, Citizens of Sesser, 1976
 Personal Interview, Jennie Martel, former pianist for the Opera House, June, 1980 (see also, footnotes, #7)

10. Geographical Data

UTM NOT VERIFIED

Acreage of nominated property LESS THAN ONE

ACREAGE NOT VERIFIED

Quadrangle name SESSER, IL

Quadrangle scale 1:24000

UMT References

A

1	6	3	2	0	1	7	0	4	2	1	7	7	9	0
Zone			Easting				Northing							

B

Zone			Easting				Northing							

C

Zone			Easting				Northing							

D

Zone			Easting				Northing							

E

Zone			Easting				Northing							

F

Zone			Easting				Northing							

G

Zone			Easting				Northing							

H

Zone			Easting				Northing							

Verbal boundary description and justification Five feet, eight inches off the east side of lot 15, all of lot 16, and eight feet of even width off of the west side of lot 17, all in block 6, in the original plot of Sesser, Franklin County, Illinois.

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

state N/A code county code

state N/A code county code

11. Form Prepared By

name/title Neysa Cummings

organization Sesser Area Economic Development Corp. date

street & number 101 W. Franklin telephone 618-625-6440

city or town Sesser state IL

12. State Historic Preservation Officer Certification

The evaluated significance of this property within the state is:

national state local

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

State Historic Preservation Officer signature *D. D. D.*

title *D. D. D.* date 9/17/80

For HCRS use only

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

date

Keeper of the National Register

Attest:

date

Chief of Registration

ENTRIES IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES

STATE ILLINOIS _____

Date Entered MARCH 12, 1982 _____

<u>Name</u>	<u>Location</u>
Sesser Opera House	Sesser Franklin County

Notified

Hon. Charles H. Percy
Hon Alan Dixon
Honorable Paul Simon

Midwest Regional Office, NPS
Rocky Mountain Regional Office, NPS

✓ State Historic Preservation Officer
Dr. David Kenney
Director, Department of Conservation
State Office Building
400 South Spring Street
Springfield, Illinois 62706