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United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form



This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in *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 nominated, 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, word processor, or computer, to complete all items.

1. Name of Property Rialto Theatre

historic name Rialto Theatre; Paramount Theatre

other name/site number Cine Plaza; Inventory No. 147

2. Location

street & number: 318 E. Congress Street \_\_\_\_\_ not for publication  
city/town: Tucson \_\_\_\_\_ vicinity  
state: Arizona code: AZ county: Pima code: 019 zip code: 85701

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).

James W. Garcia AZSAPD 24 JULY 2003  
Signature of certifying official Date

ARIZONA STATE PARKS  
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): \_\_\_\_\_

John E. Beall  
Signature of the Keeper

Entered in the  
National Register  
Date of Action  
SEP 12 2003

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

One \_\_\_\_\_ buildings  
 \_\_\_\_\_ sites  
 \_\_\_\_\_ structures  
 \_\_\_\_\_ objects  
 One \_\_\_\_\_ Total

Name of related multiple property listing

(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing).

HISTORIC      AND      ARCHITECTURAL  
 RESOURCES    OF    DOWNTOWN    TUCSON  
 ARIZONA

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 \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions)

RECREATION AND CULTURE / theater \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

7. Description

Architectural Classification

Other, unembellished engineered auditorium building; Art Nouveau and faux 18<sup>th</sup> century interior décor.

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

Materials

(Enter categories from instructions)

foundation Concrete  
 walls Reinforced concrete, brick, hollow clay block  
 roof Laid composition  
 other \_\_\_\_\_

Narrative Description

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

SEP 15 2008

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 7 Page 1

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

#### Summary

The Rialto Theatre is part of the Rialto Building, a large, triple-use complex that combines a theater, street-level commercial and second-story residential apartments. According to Longstreth's definition, as it appears from Congress Street and S. 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, the building is a typical two-part commercial block with very different architectural treatment and structure for each zone. The building also incorporates what is being called in this nomination a "type 1 theater," where the entrance lobby simply forms one bay of an otherwise commercial building. Almost obscured from "Main Street" is the massive auditorium with its fly-loft which can be seen, however, from the alley to the east, the lot to the south and S. 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Owing to a recent real estate split between components of the Rialto Building, the auditorium and its lobby are now under separate ownership. Although artificial to separate what has been united through much of its history, this nomination will focus upon the Rialto Theatre component of the Rialto Building.

The Rialto Theater is significant under Criteria A and C both for its role as an entertainment-related contributor at the east end of Tucson's once thriving commercial district and as an excellent example of an impressive, architect- and engineer- designed edifice with an interior originally decorated in the Art Nouveau style. Much of the sculptural plaster ornamentation of this graceful late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century style remains, although in deteriorated condition.

#### Description

Due to the recent real estate split between components of the Rialto Building complex, the theater and its lobby, tax parcel numbers 117-06-177B and 117-06-168C, are now owned by the Rialto Foundation. The street level commercial spaces, second story apartments and parking lot south of the theater are now owned by Rialto Redux LLC. (Rialto Redux's holdings include tax parcel numbers 117-06-168A, 117-06-168B and 117-06-177A.)

The original, extensive Rialto Building was somewhat U-shaped in plan configuration. Like its parcels, however, which related to the irregular layout of early Tucson, the building complex itself had trapezoidal rather than rectangular wings. The auditorium formed the east leg of the U while the commercial/apartment component angled parallel to Congress Street then formed a leg to the west along S. 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Sometime during the 1930s, a makeshift structure was built in the former courtyard of the U to extend some of the ground floor commercial spaces.

As measured recently by architect-in-training Natasha Winnik, the east façade of the mixed-use building, which most clearly shows how the auditorium joins, has 187'-2" total frontage in plan. According to the assessor's archival building record card, of that total, the north 69'-9" is a brick wall which incorporates both the corner commercial and apartment spaces plus 12'-2" of the projection room or north end of the auditorium. The remaining 117'-5" is the length of the tall, reinforced concrete frame wall of the auditorium and very tall fly-loft to the south. The south exterior wall, the rear wall of the fly-loft, is 68'-5" in length. As noted on the as-built plan, this end is angled, not rectilinear. On the west façade, the auditorium runs 60'-8" to the intersection of the south wall of the 1930s makeshift addition.

The Rialto Theatre comprises several zones starting with its north-facing entry on E. Congress Street. The 19'-9" wide entrance foyer is accessed through a plastered, segmental-arched opening forming the second bay from the east end of the Rialto Building. The distinction of this bay from the flanking commercial storefronts is a modest indication of the very different use within and of the imposing auditorium space to the south. The flanking entry pilasters have matching

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ornamental friezes of plaster, currently under restoration. This ornamentation appears along the inner face of the pilasters and along the intrados of the arch as well. An anodized aluminum window wall of recent installation provides an entrance door.

The entry and its recessed foyer have been altered several times throughout the history of the theater. Missing today are the horizontal projecting marquees and vertical signs that pertained to earlier eras. The historic photo published opening night in the *Tucson Citizen*, August 29, 1920, shows that the original marquee was a thick rectangular canopy which extended well over the sidewalk, both to protect patrons from the elements and to allow for elaborate ornamentation and modest signage. The graceful, sculpted vertical sign announcing "Rialto Theatre" in capital letters was mounted to the left of the theater entry on the second-story wall of the east end block, to not obscure the view from the balcony. Early photos of the Paramount and Plaza eras (see Section 8) show a replacement marquee, triangular in plan and coming to a point near the street, with its wide end mounted at the Rialto Building's transom level extending half the width of each adjacent commercial space. This marquee style allowed ample space for signage. The accompanying vertical sign was much larger than the original one, centrally mounted above the marquee and supported from the roof by a steel frame structure.

Missing today as well is the ticket booth (kiosk) of which there have been three versions. The foyer was originally recessed back to the plane of the doors, two sets of double single-lite French doors flanking a centrally located, ornate, copper-clad ticket booth that projected slightly into the foyer. After the Publix takeover in 1929, the theater entrance was altered by the addition of a larger, hexagon-faceted ticket booth that extended closer to the sidewalk. This kiosk featured a graceful rounded roof. During the Plaza and Palace eras, a replacement ticket booth was built, free standing, faceted and simple with a flat roof.

The lobby is part of the commercial component of the Rialto Building. Atypical of the other commercial spaces, however, is its upward sloping, tile-clad floor, rising a full 3'-0" from the entry to a level foyer at the south end. As shall be explained, this slope was designed to relate to that of the auditorium beyond. The original 1919 floor tiles, tiny rectangles in shape, are tan, rust and orange colored. According to Paul Bear, this tile floor was later carpeted. On the east wall near the entry is the door into 320 E. Congress, currently the owner's office. In 1919, this space served "The Arizona Hut," a sweet shop for theater patrons and later a candy shop. Restrooms, not observed for this study, are located west of the lobby. Early photographs show an Art Nouveau style, ornamental, plaster relief cornice in the lobby and ornamental stenciled bands to decorate the walls. No longer existing, today the cornice has been obscured by sprayed acoustical material and the wall décor has been painted over. Framed historic photographs and promotional material now hang from the lobby walls.

The lobby slopes to a level space to the south, a second foyer the width of the auditorium beyond, which contains matched concrete stairs on the east and west ends to access the balcony lobby above. The stairs, once clad in a floral pattern carpet, featured wood handrails, today replaced by heavy pipe railing. At the south end of this foyer is a centrally-located refreshment bar of dark wood, a Paramount-built installation dating around 1948 where pop corn and soda were once sold. Prior to that time, there was a curtained opening in that location to allow a view from the lobby into the auditorium.

To discuss the interior space and components of the Rialto Theatre auditorium, it is helpful first to study the as-built plans and other drawings and to evaluate the impressive structural system, a massive 18" thick reinforced concrete frame edifice with unique steel roof trusses that, according to Paul Bear, resulted from the collaboration of a talented architect

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and a skilled structural engineer who is said to have specialized in railroad bridge design. From the exterior walls, this component of the Rialto Theatre measures over 8,000 square feet in plan. As seen from the east façade, the building exterior is a uniform reinforced concrete frame with seven vertical columns and horizontal spandrels at the ground, mid- and wall-top levels. Hollow clay tile panels fill between the concrete framing members.

Like much of the auditorium structure, the sloping ground floor up to the stage is also of reinforced concrete. Some of this has been installed on fill above grade and some on excavated soil below grade to create the slope needed to accommodate the sight line requirements of the seating. Grade (0'-0" elevation) is assumed to be the northeast corner of the Rialto Building and considerable upward slope is built into the lobby initially. As mentioned, from the entry to the level foyer at the south end of the lobby, there is a 3'-0" rise. Once within the auditorium space, the slope changes, but not continuously, down the orchestra seating zone of the main auditorium floor to 4'-0" below grade at the stage. The surface of the stage itself lies at grade. Below the elevated stage and fly-loft, there is a 2,310 square foot basement.

According to Paul Bear, the roof is built of trusses resting on the reinforced concrete columns of the exterior wall frame. Fabricated from wide flange steel members riveted together with plates, these trusses are evidence of the engineer's railroad bridge technology. The individual truss shape has a flat bottom chord and a flat top chord with symmetrical sloping sides, somewhat like a bowstring truss with a flattened top. This configuration, which allows the roof to drain, can be seen from a distance. Four inches of poured concrete above steel deck caps the roof to create what was intended to be a "fireproof" system.

The main floor, zone of the orchestra seating, measures around 5,367 square feet in plan. Today none of the permanent seating remains but temporary seating can be installed for performances. A 1930 photograph shows that the rows of permanent seating curved and were grouped into three sections, one central and two side ones. There were thus four aisles, two along the walls and two flanking the central seating section. (Including the balcony seating, the Rialto Theatre had a total of 1,240 seats.) In section, the auditorium has a very high, flat ceiling measuring approximately 45'-0" from the base of the stage and 37'-0" at the north end, due to the floor slope. The interior walls of the auditorium were initially rectilinear but in 1923 they were angled on both sides up to the stage to accommodate the installation of organ pipes. In front of the stage there is an orchestra pit, today covered with wood sheeting. Two doors from this pit allow access into the basement. The elevated, wood floored stage is approximately 2,310 square feet in size, large enough to accommodate opera. Rare for vaudeville but customary for opera, this stage has a 38'-0" x 14'-0" trap room below. The ceiling of the fly-loft, much higher than that of the auditorium, has been used to accommodate backdrops.

There is a basement directly below and equal in size to the stage. It has 9'-0" high ceilings and dressing rooms as well as a "green room," a space where actors congregate before they perform. Today approximately one quarter of the original dressing rooms remain and the rest are used for storage.

There is a balcony seating area of approximately 3,410 square feet, accessed from the previously-mentioned balcony lobby. This area consists of an upper balcony and a loge or lower balcony, separated by an aisle. Today's permanently-installed upper balcony seats of wood date back to 1921 and are imports from the Phoenix Rialto. These seats are also arranged in three groups. Originally the upper balcony seats were 16" wide, far too narrow for today's patron. In the early days, the Rialto, like most theaters, was racially segregated and minorities were obligated to sit in the upper balcony. Today's loge seats, also permanently installed, are 1950s-vintage red upholstered ones. In the past, the loge held the most expensive seats in the house and were 20" wide. Directly behind the upper balcony is the central

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projection booth of concrete. Today this component is badly damaged and in poor condition due to the prior owner's attempts to demolish it.

Information with respect to original infrastructure, such as air conditioning, stage lighting, etc. appears to have been written up in the *Tucson Citizen*, August 29, 1920, the edition which gave extensive coverage to the opening night. Unfortunately, the microfiche text is practically illegible. There is mention of "washed and cooled" air providing "low temperature in the warmest weather" as well as a "modern four-color lighting system" which permitted "handling of big road productions in (the) most artistic manner." Apparently in 1930 along with alterations in the furnishings and décor, Paramount-Publix, installed the latest in sound equipment and made air conditioning upgrades.

Interior Décor: Art Nouveau and Later

Photographs from 1930 clearly show the once lavish décor of the Rialto Theatre auditorium after renovations by Paramount/Publix. According to Paul Bear, during this renovation some of the original décor, which appears to have been Art Nouveau-inspired, was spared and it remains today, in deteriorating condition. Characterized by ornamental, sinuous lines, Art Nouveau was a graceful, international style that flourished from the early 1880s to the beginning of World War I. Based on the natural forms of flora and fauna as influenced by the elements such as wind and water, and found in the work of such artists as Louis Comfort Tiffany, it was a style of ornamentation. Today Art Nouveau-inspired ornamentation in the auditorium is found along cornices, on the balcony wall face and elsewhere. It is of plaster relief formed into fruit, floral forms, arabesques and other designs within regular paneled bands. The initial color scheme was said to have been predominately gray and blue.

Changes in décor occurred most notably during changes in ownership. The 1930 photographs show an absolutely sumptuous stage proscenium which included the original Art Nouveau frame with details like pineapples in relief, surrounding a lace-like curved wall of Arabic-inspired webbing. Draped curtains of luxurious fabrics appeared in appropriate locations for the stage, on the curved wall of the orchestra pit, on doorways and above the organ pipes.

Publix had the auditorium seats upholstered in floral designs and the lobby and auditorium aisles clad in a patterned carpet. Publix also had large, nostalgic, 18<sup>th</sup> century-style murals painted on the auditorium walls. These murals depicted people in period dress with idyllic, green landscape backgrounds. Largely painted over by the previous owner, the murals are gradually being restored today. The ceiling was also decorated in elaborate stenciled bands relating to the columns to give a paneled look. Polychromatic effects to the walls and plaster relief details were created by paint and applied gold leaf.

The overall integrity of the building structure, exterior and interior spaces is excellent. The lobby and auditorium have been sufficiently stabilized so that performances can take place on the premises. The former splendor of the Rialto Theatre décor, however, is currently in a deteriorated state. Under the direction of the Rialto Foundation, funds have been and are being raised. However, to restore the former "Queen of Theaters" to a fraction of its former state will cost several million dollars. Owing to the recent award of a grant, the façade is currently being restored and there has also been a partial mural restoration. Steps are being taken to replace the marquee and sign. The interest in and ongoing renovation of the Rialto Theatre is an encouraging indication of a strong movement to revitalize downtown Tucson, once a thriving hub of activity.

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.

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 #

Areas of Significance

(Enter categories from instructions)

Community Development/Planning

Architecture

Period of Significance

1919-1970

Significant Dates

1919

Significant Person

(Complete if Criterion B is marked above)

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Architect/Builder

Alexander Curlett of William Curlett & Son (architect)

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State historic preservation office
□ Other state agency
□ Federal agency
√ Local government
√ University
√ Other

Name of Repository:

UA Arizona Architectural Archives; Arizona Historical Society/Tucson; Assessor's Office; Los Angeles Public Library; owners' personal collection

**10. Geographical Data**Acreage of Property Less than one acre**UTM References**

(Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing	Zone	Easting	Northing
1	12	503130	3565030	3	_____	_____
2	_____	_____	_____	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 Patricia Rogers and Janet H. Parkhurst / Janet Stritmatter, Inc.organization University of Arizona Preservation Studies Class date May 10, 2002street & number College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture,  
University of Arizona, P.O. Box 210075city or town Tucson state: AZ zip code 85721-0075**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 Rialto Foundationstreet & number P.O. Box 621

telephone \_\_\_\_\_

city or town Tucsonstate AZzip code 85702

**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.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 18.1 hours per response including time for reviewing instruction, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Chief, Administrative Services Division, National Park Service, P. O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; and the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reductions Projects (1024-0018), Washington, DC 20503.

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Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

### NARRATIVE STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

#### Summary

The Rialto Theatre, 318 E. Congress Street, is significant under Criteria A, for its association with Tucson's central business district development, and C, as an extant example of the Late 19<sup>th</sup> and Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Revival architectural style and for its association with the prominent architectural firm, William Curlett and Son, related to the context of Architecture in Downtown Tucson. The original 1,240 seat showhouse, which opened in late August of 1920, was strategically located at the far east end of Congress Street, Tucson's "Main Street." One of the finest theaters in the West, the Rialto was equipped to show full-scale opera and live vaudeville acts as well as film. An irreplaceable part of Tucson's community heritage, the Rialto represents the theme of theater and entertainment during the third (1896-1935) and fourth (1935-1970) periods of downtown development. With respect to its structural system and form as well as its interior décor, some of which is Art Nouveau derived, the edifice is an excellent example of the work of skilled designers and artisans. Characteristic of its era and earlier, the massive auditorium structure is more or less hidden from its primary Congress Street view. The simple arched entrance lobby, which forms one bay of an otherwise commercial storefront zone, belies the expansive and once lavish auditorium space within. The period of significance for this building begins with its construction in 1919 during the third period of Tucson's central business district development (1896-1935) and ends during the fourth period of downtown development (1935-1970).

#### Historical Overview

The following is based largely on an interview with Paul Bear, present co-tenant of the Rialto Theater and former co-tenant of the Rialto Building, two books by Roy P. Drachman, member of the developer's family and former manager of the Rialto and ephemera from the Arizona Historical Society Library, Tucson. Primary sources consulted were numerous newspaper articles about the theater covering its opening night, ups and downs and recent preservation efforts. Also consulted were historic photographs and instruments of title transfer found by retired title officer Bob Brey. Burns and Wald Hopkins Architects provided a set of as-built drawings in progress by architect-in-training Natasha Winnik.

In an effort to stimulate growth on the east end of Congress Street, a location just south of the Southern Pacific Railroad Station, in 1919 a team of prominent Tucson pioneer merchants and developers hired a Los Angeles architect and, in split Block 91, built the Hotel Congress, 303 E. Congress Street, on the north side of the street, and the Rialto Building due south on the opposite side of the street. A bargain and sale dated July 30 1919 between Leo Goldschmidt, unmarried, Mose Drachman and Ethel M. Drachman, his wife, and William H. Sawtelle and Mary Martin Sawtelle, his wife, and the East Congress Street Building Company, a corporation, identified the parties involved in the development of the Rialto Building. Although the original Rialto plans have been lost, it is known that the architectural firm of William Curlett and Son designed the both the Rialto Building and the Hotel Congress. Alexander Curlett, son of William Curlett, was the designer of the Los Angeles firm's only Tucson buildings. The building was completed in 1920 and opened to the public the end of August that year. The name "Rialto," a common one for theaters, was very old and referred to an island of that name in Venice, Italy. The Isle of Rialto was the locale of actors and playwrights.

Mose Drachman (1870-1935), one of Tucson pioneer couple Philip and Rosa Drachman's ten children, was a noteworthy Tucson businessman and real estate entrepreneur. Active in cattle, mining and wholesaling, he began to buy real estate near the University of Arizona and became a partner in building development projects with Judge William H. Sawtelle as well as brothers Emanuel and Harry. Various of these groups built the Congress Hotel, the Rialto Building

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Rialto Theatre  
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and the Sawtelle-Drachman block located between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, on Congress Street. (Plaza 1982: 39.)

Leo Goldschmidt (also known as Ben Goldsmith ?) (1852-1943) was born in Hamburg, Germany, and arrived in the area in 1878. Related to the Zeckendorfs and Mansfelds, Tucson pioneer families, Mr. Goldschmidt decided to establish his home in Tucson. Although a bachelor, he reared, nurtured and housed three generations of his own family in his fine home, "The Owls." When Leo first arrived in Tucson, he started his own furniture importing and manufacturing business from a shop on South Meyer Street. In 1888, he sold that company and bought a flour mill which became Eagle Milling Company, with branches in Mesa, Phoenix and Safford. A man of culture, Leo Goldschmidt was known for his interest in music, literature and the fine arts. (Plaza 1982: 49.)

Roy P. Drachman stated that the Rialto Theatre, developed by uncle Mose and partners, was initially leased to Rickards & Nace, a theater company from Phoenix. In 1922, the Rialto Theatre was turned over to Roy Drachman's father, Emanuel, at that time operator and co-partner with Ben Goldsmith of the Tucson Opera House. A deal had been struck with Rickards and Nace, the original lessees. Prior to that time Emanuel Drachman had gained considerable experience in the theatre business. He owned and operated an amusement park, the Elysian Grove (the former Carillo Gardens), a 13-acre park he and a partner had purchased in 1902. The park was expanded to incorporate a pavilion for dances, movies and live theater, an outdoor theater with bench seats and Tucson's first swimming pool. In 1915 Ben Goldsmith and Emanuel Drachman built the Broadway Theatre. (Plaza 1982: 42.) The pair also took over the Tucson Opera House, a venue for silent movies, vaudeville and road shows like the soon-to-be-built Rialto Theatre.

According to Paul Bear, the Rialto Theatre was reputedly the most elegant and luxurious playhouse "west of the Mississippi." Its unique architecture made a dramatic showcase for plays, films and vaudeville. The large 32' deep stage, full fly-loft and stage drop adapted the Rialto for opera as well. Its walls, cornices and proscenium were decorated with plaster relief ornamentation and polychromatic murals, largely of subdued gray and blue tones, in the Art Nouveau style. (See Section 7.) Accompanied by a seven-piece orchestra and a player piano (later a \$7,500 organ), early performances may have been as elaborate as the opening night's six-act program described in the *Tucson Citizen*, August 29, 1920. Headlines declared "Rialto Theatre Opens Tonight - William S. Hart in 'The Toll Gate' - a Paramount Artcraft Picture. The first act was Herbert's overture "Princess Pat" played by the Rialto Concert Orchestra under the direction of Gene Quaw. Second was a current events film followed by a violin solo by Dadler played by M. M. Montijo. Then followed "Captain Kidd's Kid," a Harold Lloyd comedy. Next a vocal solo "Where the West Begins" was performed by Mr. Redfield. The finale was the feature film "The Toll Gate," by director William S. Hart.

Owing to his father's failing health, young Roy Drachman left his studies at the University of Arizona to manage the Rialto Theatre in 1925. In his two books, Roy Drachman wrote of the silent film and especially of the live theater performances held at the Rialto Theatre during its first decade in the 1920s. Included were such world-renowned performers as the Sistine Choir, the Hungarian National Chorus, the Boris Goudinoff opera, Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, Metropolitan and Italian opera star Galli Curci, the George White Scandals (a road company), May Robson, a light-hearted comedian, Harry Lauder, a legendary Scot who performed in a kilt, the young dancer Ginger Rogers and actress Dolores del Rio. In 1926 the Junior Orpheum Vaudeville circuit from Chicago supplied 5-act vaudeville troops to perform in small western towns like Tucson. Every Wednesday a troop would arrive via the Southern Pacific Railroad and would perform a matinee and two evening shows that day. (Drachman Cowtown:

In the late 1920s, great changes were occurring in the moving picture industry with the introduction of sound. These

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Pima County, Arizona

changes caused a significant impact on the nature of entertainment in general, gradually driving out silent film and live performance such as vaudeville in favor of "talkies," moving pictures with sound. To stay competitive, theaters such as the Rialto that once showed silent films accompanied by the mood music of an orchestra or organ were required to finance and install expensive sound equipment. At the same time, large film production and distributing companies, such as Fox, Paramount/Publix and RKO, aggressively began to acquire theaters.

On September 29, 1929, reacting to such outside pressure, all theaters in Tucson sold overnight. Emanuel Drachman, Ben Goldsmith and their partners, Rickards and Nace, sold the Rialto and the Opera House to the Paramount-Publix. The Diamos brothers, who owned Lyric theaters in Tucson and had a new one under construction (today's Fox) sold out to Fox West Coast. Overnight Roy Drachman and his brother began to work for Paramount-Publix while Emanuel Drachman and Ben Goldsmith retired, both having received \$62,500 for their interests. (Drachman 1979: 74-75.) Henry Nace remained as the district manager for Publix, headquartered in Phoenix. In 1930 with Paramount-Publix and the installation of the latest in sound equipment came rehabilitation and renovations such as air conditioning, new seats, new paint, draperies, carpet and wall murals ("Publix Spends..." 1930.) In the early 1930s both "talkies" and live revue stage shows, such as the Wilbur Cushman Revue, were performed. Eventually the bill of fare was primarily "talkies."

In spite of ups and downs in the economy, the Rialto Theatre remained a premier movie house and its marquee lit up east Congress Street until August 22, 1948, when the name changed to Paramount. In 1949, Paramount Pictures built the Catalina Theatre, outside of the central business district. Competition from the new Catalina and the popular Art Deco style Fox Tucson further west on Congress Street slowly relegated the former Rialto to a second-run theater and started its gradual decline. The Paramount closed permanently on June 18, 1963 due to the decline of the downtown commercial district and location at the "wrong end" of one-way Congress Street. At that time, furniture store owner John F. Mitchell and his partner, Mrs. Fay Ward, purchased the theater to complete their ownership of the Rialto Building. They used the once grand auditorium space to store furniture. Apparently Mr. Mitchell had hoped to reopen the theater but the plans ended with his death on March 11, 1969.

In 1971 the Cine Plaza, initially a Spanish language theater, opened in the old Rialto Theater. The Cine Plaza, which for decades presented Spanish-language films to the city, was once located in a building built in 1929 by Aaron Kauffman which was razed during the urban renewal era. The first Spanish-language theatre (and possibly Tucson's first movie theater) was probably the Teatro Royal, which was showing movies in 1915. In 1971 Edward C. Jacobs, a member of a pioneer Tucson family, opened the Cine Plaza in its Rialto location. Due to competition from another Spanish-language theater, Cine Azteca, in the early 1970s Jacobs then leased the theater to a new manager who turned it into an English-language pornographic movie house. In 1978, when its competition was gone, Jacobs' son Eddie Jr. renovated the theater under the name of Palace and brought back first-run Spanish-language movies. ("Cine Plaza" 1984.) After a fire in 1981 and a boiler explosion in 1984 the theater closed. The unused Rialto Building with its theater condemned was then purchased by California investors who had hoped to refurbish it. The next owner, real estate entrepreneur Rich Rogers had planned to demolish the Rialto Building for high rise development.

With the goal of saving and restoring the former "queen of theaters" in May 1995, Paul Bear and Jeb Schoonover, doing business as the Rialto Theater Company, purchased the Rialto Building from Rich Rogers. Very recently, due to a real estate split, Mr. Bear and Mr. Schoonover, under the name of Rialto Foundation, now own the theater and its lobby while the remainder of the Rialto Building, the commercial spaces and apartments, are owned by Doug Biggers under Rialto Redux (see Section 7). Rialto Foundation is continuing to raise funds for the rehabilitation and renovation of the once-grand theater. Fortunately, it has remained very much in use since the partners' purchase and hosts a variety of

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 8 Page 8

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

performing artists and special events. According to Mr. Bear, during the summer, a slow season, there may be two performances a week, while there may be four or five a week otherwise. With a capacity of 1,200, the restored theater will nicely fill a void between large formal venues like the university's Centennial Hall and Tucson Community Center Music Hall and very small theaters.

### Architectural Significance

Theater design is a very specialized art involving the creation of a building so equipped that actors and musicians may perform before an audience. Sight-lines, lighting and acoustics play important roles and there are specialized spaces, zones and appointments to accommodate both the performers' and patrons' needs. To be competitive, theaters such as the Rialto had to remain flexible and up-to-date, at first offering silent film and live performance and later mostly sound film. Changes in décor accompanied by changes in technology occurred from time to time, most notably with new ownership.

The original interior decoration of the Rialto lobby, auditorium, restrooms and other spaces appears to have been Art Nouveau-inspired (see Section 7). Characterized by ornamental, sinuous lines, Art Nouveau was a graceful, international style that flourished from the early 1880s to the beginning of World War I. This style symbolized the end of a century of change and the beginning of another one; a transition between the overwrought abundance of Victorian "historicism" and the functionality of Modernism. Based on the natural forms of flora and fauna as influenced by the elements such as wind and water, it was employed in the fine arts, the applied arts, architecture and decoration of all types. Art Nouveau was thus found in the paintings of Gustav Klimt, the cut glass work of Louis Comfort Tiffany and the buildings of Antonio Gaudi and Charles Rennie Mackintosh. The style stressed innovations yet also drew major inspiration from Oriental art as well as other ancient, historic sources. (Sternau 1996: 5, 6.) When Publix took over, the new furnishings and polychromatic murals were an eclectic blend of Art-Deco-inspired motifs with mock-18<sup>th</sup> century idyllic landscape motifs.

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 9 Page 9

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

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**National Park Service**

## **National Register of Historic Places**

### **Continuation Sheet**

**Section Number 9 Page 10**

**Rialto Theatre**  
**Pima County, Arizona**

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Sonnichsen, C. L. Tucson – the Life and Times of an American City. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987.

Sternau, Susan A. Art Nouveau – Spirit of the Belle Epoque. New York: Todtri Productions Limited, 1996.

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Tucson Citizen. Various Microfiche Articles. August 29, 1920.

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*See also Section I: Major Bibliographic References of the Multiple Property Documentation Form for Historic and Architectural Resources of Downtown Tucson, Arizona.*

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number 10 Page 11

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

## GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

### VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

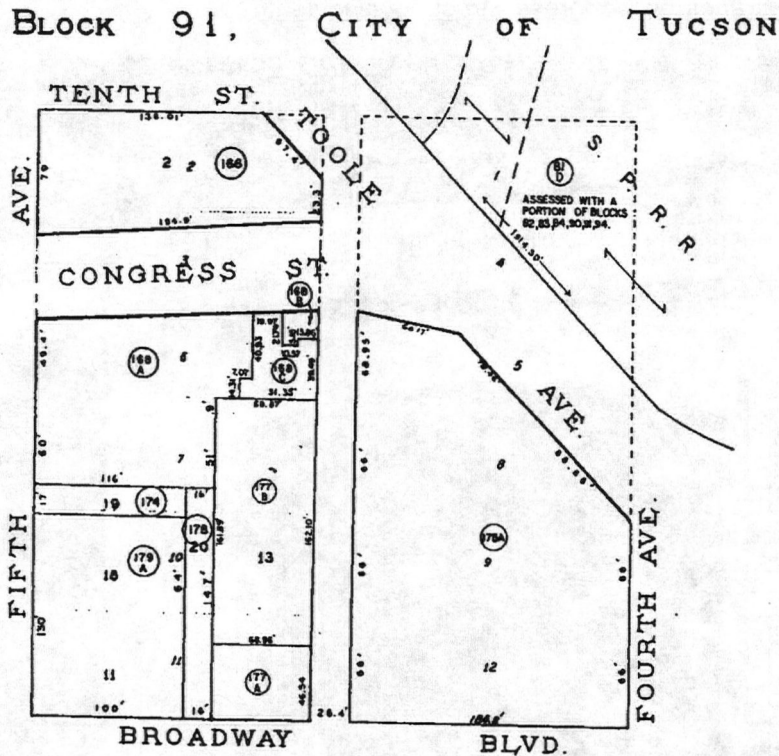
The boundary of the Rialto Theatre incorporates tax parcel numbers 117-06-177-B and 117-06-168-C, in Block 91, City of Tucson, now owned by Rialto Foundation. These parcels define the theater lobby (168C) and auditorium (177B).

### BOUNDARY JUSTIFICATION

The boundary of the nominated property corresponds with the current ownership and contains the building walls.

## ASSESSOR'S RECORD MAP

117-06  
13/25



*2002 Map*  
*C.O.T.*

0 25 50 75 100  
FEET  
2002-1  
S 12 T. 14S., R. 13E.  
SEE BOOK 3, PAGE 71 M & P.

SCANNED

665 (2)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 12

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

NOTE: Archival pen used to label all original photos.

PHOTOGRAPHER:	Goran Radovanovich
DATE:	April 13, 2002
NEGATIVE NUMBER:	DTT-C-19A
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES:	Arizona Architectural Archives College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture P.O. Box 210075 The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #1: Theater entrance on Congress Street, looking south



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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 13

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Goran Radovanovich  
DATE: April 13, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-C-6A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #2: Three-quarter view of intersection of Congress Street and Herbert Avenue showing theater auditorium and fly-loft portions of the building (unplastered) behind the Rialto Building; looking SW



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National Park Service

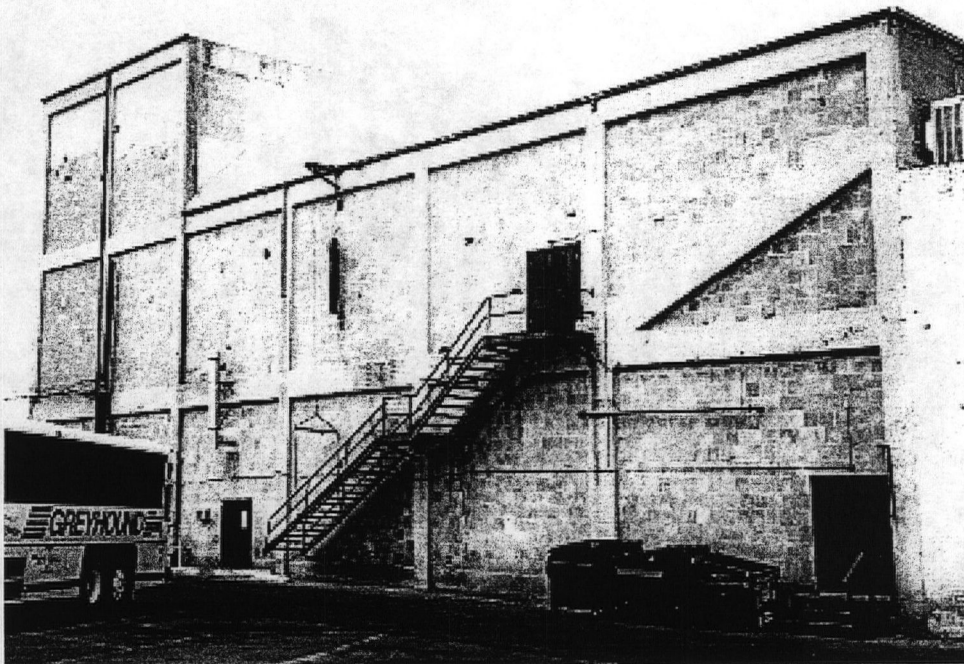
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 14

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet Parkhurst  
DATE: August 2, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-6-0A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #3: Three-quarter view of Rialto Theatre auditorium, east façade, showing reinforced concrete frame and hollow clay tile wall panels; looking SW.



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National Park Service

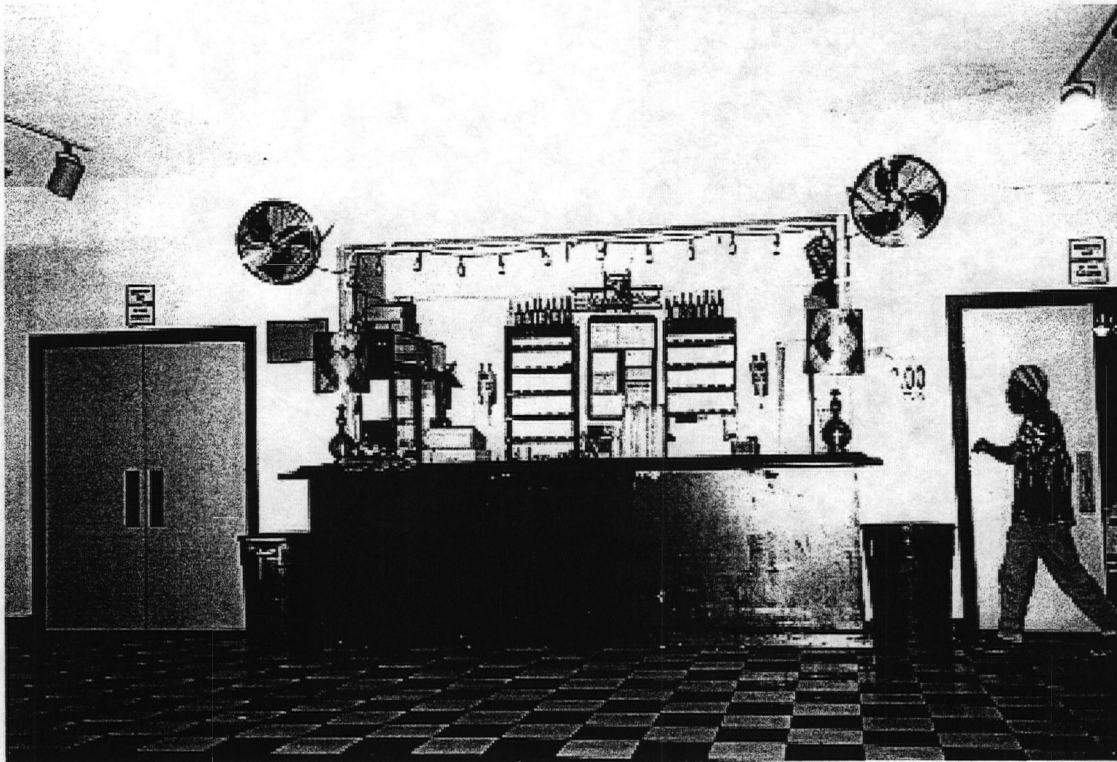
## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 15

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet Parkhurst  
DATE: April 15, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-1-1A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #4: Interior view of auditorium foyer showing refreshment bar built by Paramount and auditorium entrances on either side; looking south.



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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 16

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet Parkhurst  
DATE: April 15, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-1-10A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #5: Interior view of auditorium showing the ground floor seating and balcony; looking NE



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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 17

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER: Janet Parkhurst  
DATE: April 15, 2002  
NEGATIVE NUMBER: DTT-1-7A  
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES: Arizona Architectural Archives  
College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture  
P.O. Box 210075  
The University of Arizona  
Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #6: Detail of interior mural (currently being restored) on auditorium wall added during Paramount/Publix renovation of 1930.



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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number PHOTOS Page 18

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

PHOTOGRAPHER:	Janet Parkhurst
DATE:	April 15, 2002
NEGATIVE NUMBER:	DTT-1-9A
LOCATION OF ORIGINAL NEGATIVES:	Arizona Architectural Archives College of Architecture Planning and Landscape Architecture P.O. Box 210075 The University of Arizona Tucson, Arizona 85721-0075

PHOTO #7: Detail view of original proscenium arch decoration showing Art Nouveau-inspired floral and fruit motifs.



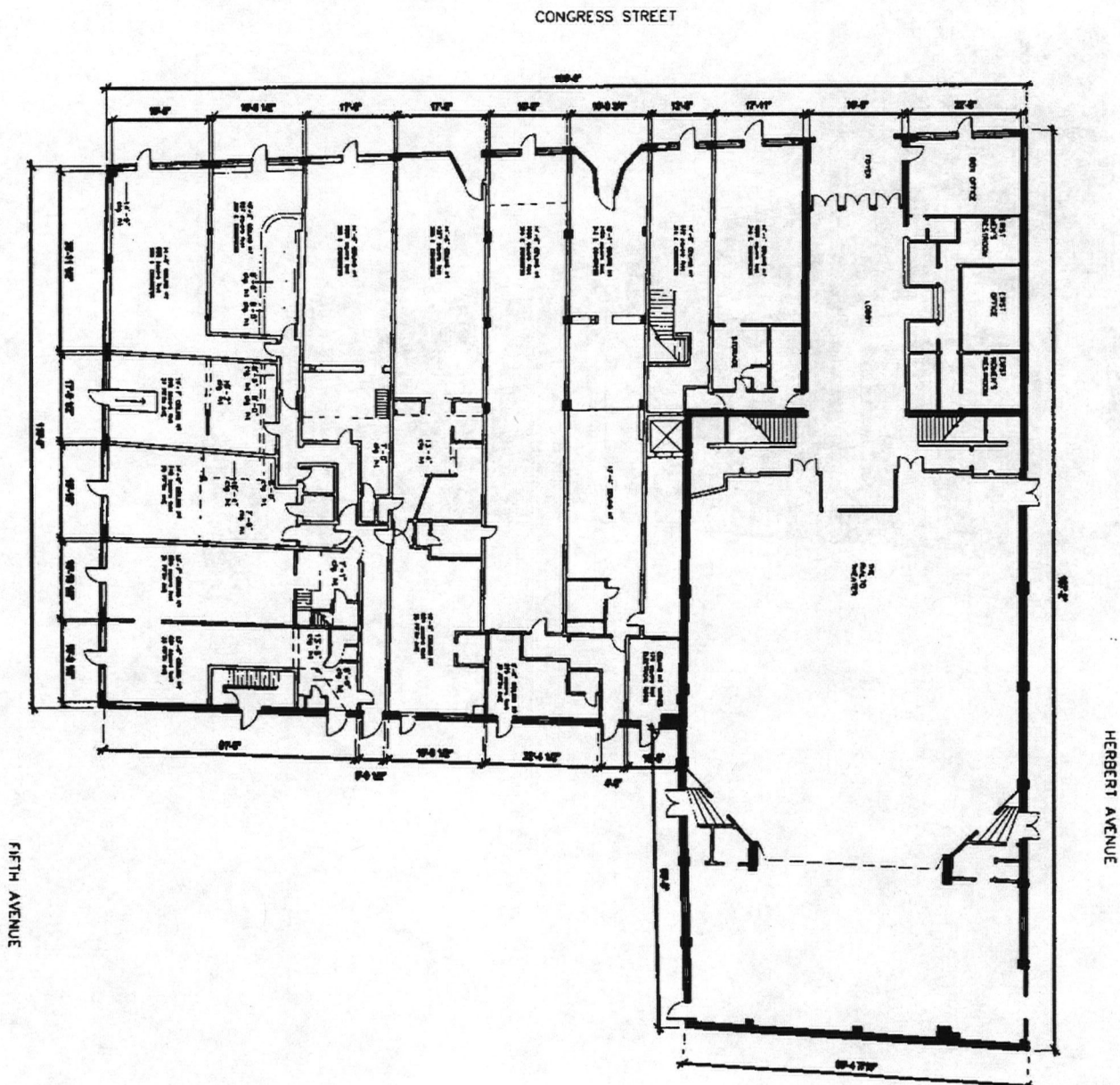
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# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 19

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

DRAWING #1: First floor plan showing commercial and theater components plus apartment lobby; north is up (as-built drawing by Natasha Winnick, July 22, 2002).



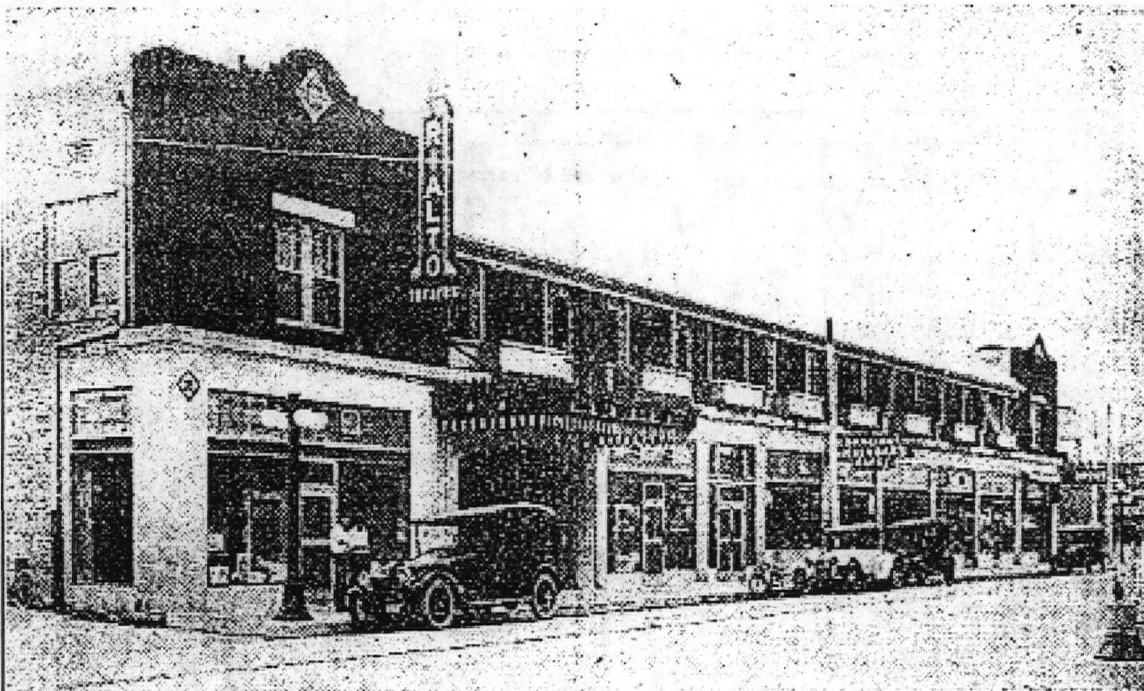
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD. INFO. Page 20

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #1: Rialto Building and Theatre entry, 1920; Note ornamental marquee and vertical sign (from Tucson Citizen, August 29, 1920)



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National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 21

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #2: Theater entrance, 1930; Ticket booth is an addition by Paramount/Publix (photo courtesy of Rialto Theatre Façade Project).



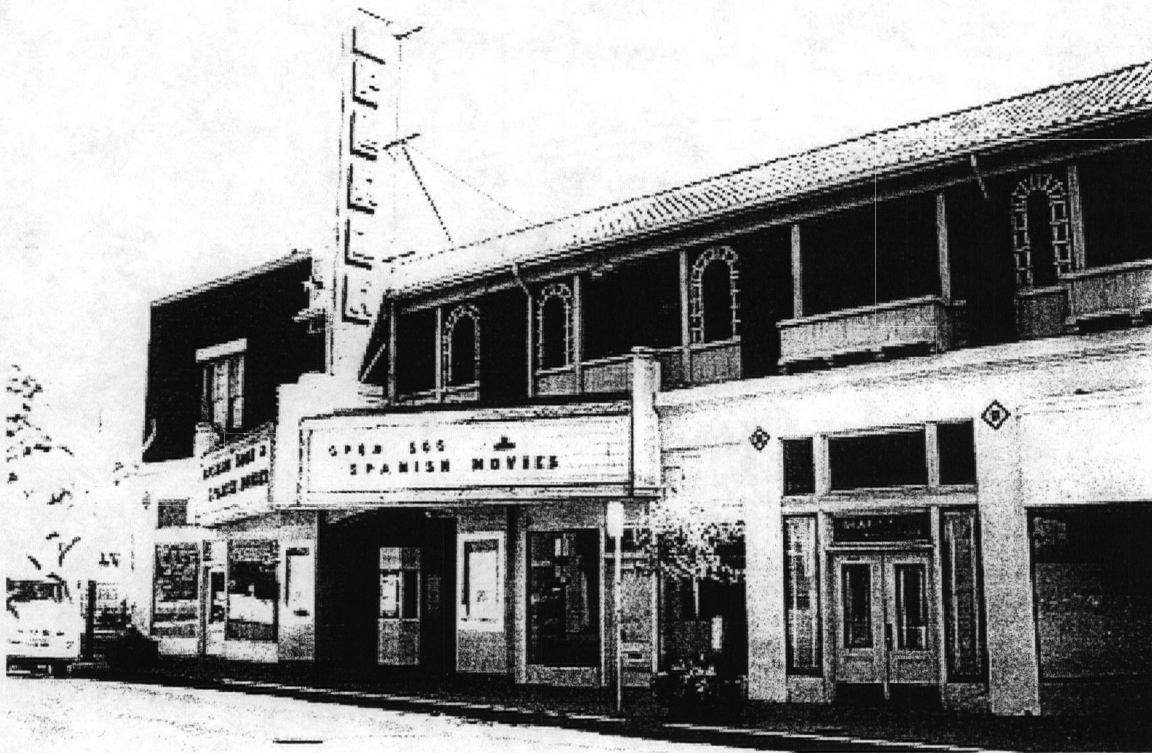
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 22

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO # 3: Theater entrance during Cine Plaza era, c. 1970; Note wide triangular marquee and vertical sign (photo courtesy of Rialto Theatre Façade Project).



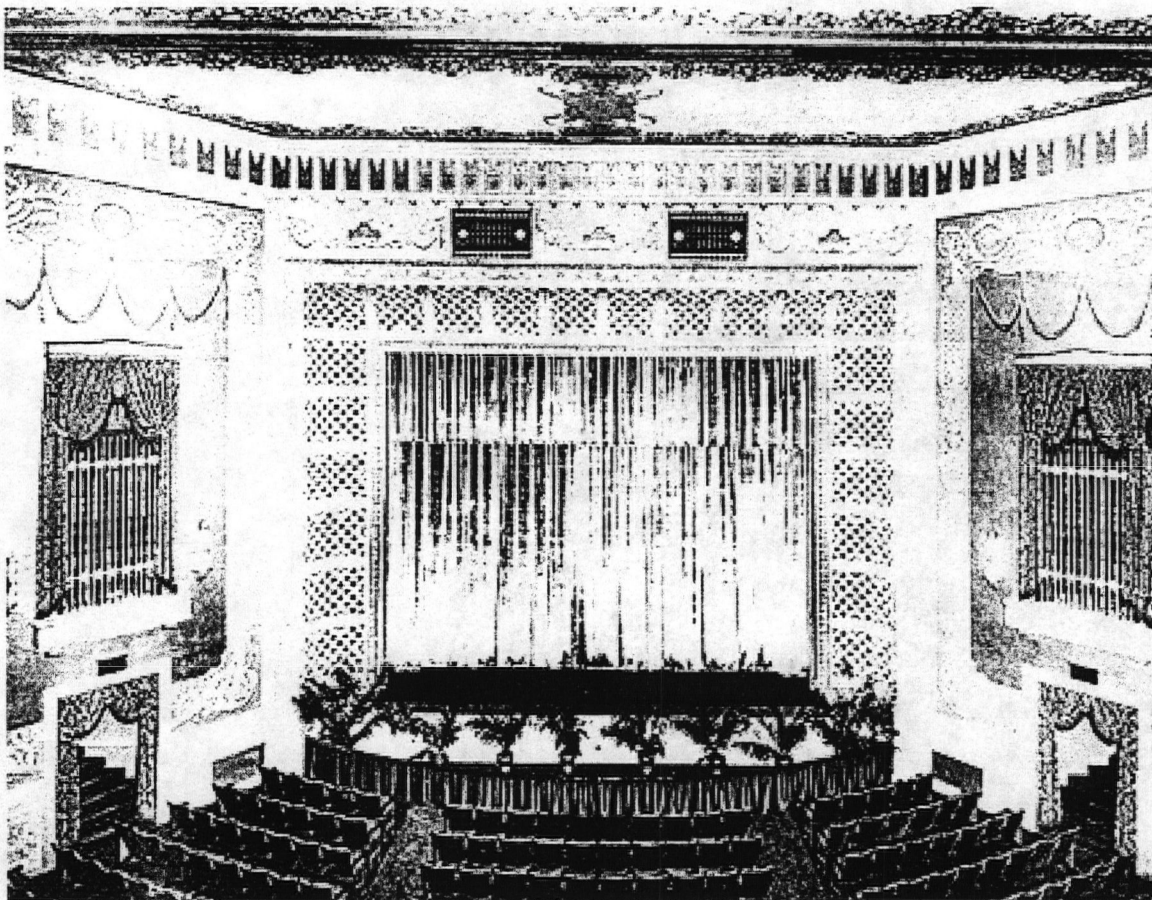
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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 23

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #4: Interior view from balcony of auditorium, stage and organ chambers after refurbishment by Paramount/Publix, 1930 (from Rialto Theatre Project Information brochure, n.d.).



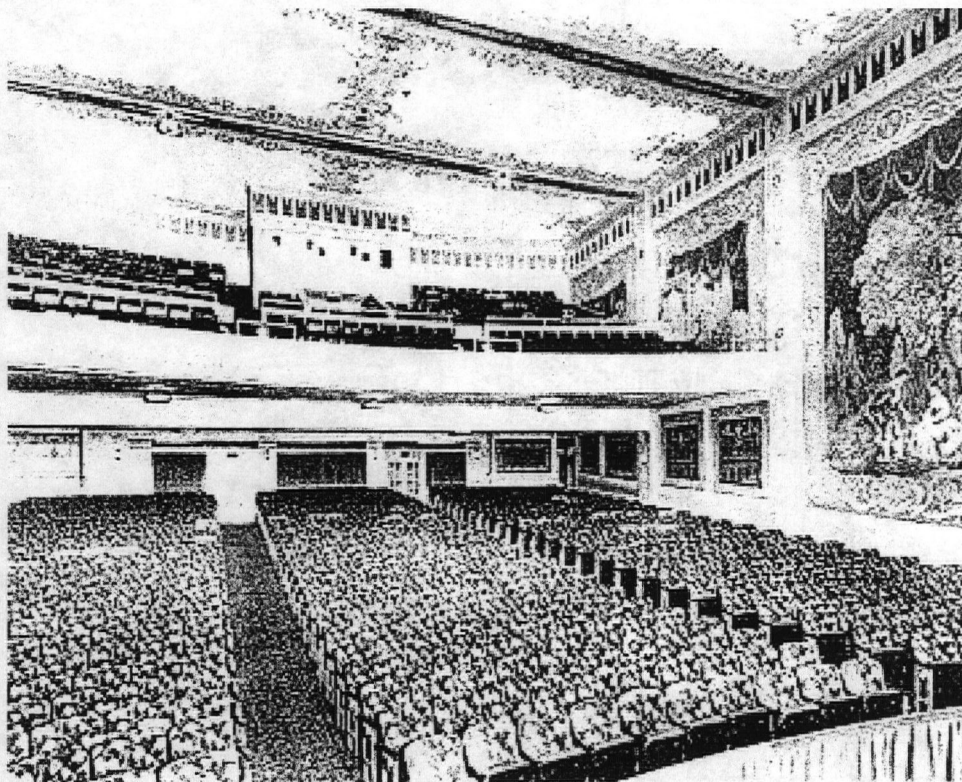
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section Number ADD.INFO. Page 24

Rialto Theatre  
Pima County, Arizona

HISTORIC PHOTO #5: Interior view from stage of orchestra seating and balcony after refurbishment by Paramount/Publix, 1930 (from Rialto Theatre Project Information brochure, n.d.).



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National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

**SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD**

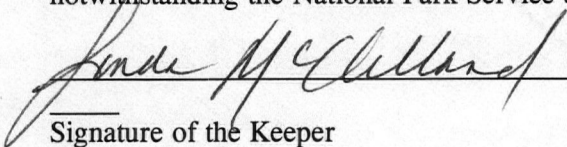
NRIS Reference Number: 03000909

Property Name: Rialto Theater

County: Pima State: Arizona

\_\_\_\_\_  
Multiple Name

-----  
This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.



September 15, 2003

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the Keeper

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Action

-----  
Amended Items in Nomination:

Section 8: Significance

The Period of Significance is hereby revised as "1919 to 1953" for consistency with the National Register policy calling for closing dates of individual properties to correspond with the fifty-year guideline unless exceptional importance is demonstrated.

-----  
The Arizona State Historic Preservation Office was notified of this amendment.

**DISTRIBUTION:**

- National Register property file**
- Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)**

# The RIALTO

PHUNK JUNKEEZ 4-5

DEVIL DOLL 4-6

MOTORHEAD 4-8

LEFTOVER SALMON 4-18

WB ON TOUR

JAMIE KENNEDY

4-3

JAMIE KENNEDY APR 3

311 APR 13

DARK STAR

ORCHESTRA APR 19

Budweiser

RIALTO

UPCOMING SHOWS

CHE

Rialto Theater

Downtown Tucson MPDF

Pima County, Arizona

Photo #1

0120151-13



VISIT -  
The Wonderful  
MOUNTAIN  
CONDENSES  
&  
TUCSON

PARKING  
IN REAR

THE GREAT MOUNTAIN  
CONDENSED MILK CO.  
TUCSON, ARIZONA

ONE WAY  
ENTER

Rialto Theater

Downtown Tucson MPDF

Pima County, Arizona

Photo #2

10015141



 **GREYHOUND**

Rialto Theater  
Downtown Tucson MPDF  
Pima County, Arizona  
Photo #3

110151-01



SMOKING  
NOT  
PERMITTED  
IN THE  
THEATRE

3.00  
BOTTLES

SMOKING  
NOT  
PERMITTED  
IN THE  
THEATRE

Rialto Theater  
Downtown Tucson, MPDF  
Pima County, Arizona  
Photo #4

1990151-00



Rialto Theater  
Downtown Tucson MPDF  
Pima County, Arizona  
Photo # 5

103 0151 -3 1



Rialto Theater  
Downtown Tucson MPDF  
Pima County, Arizona  
Photo #6

198012-10



Rialto Theater  
Downtown Tucson MPDF  
Pima County, Arizona  
Photo # 7

2030151-3 9

Please refer to the map in the  
Multiple Property Cover Sheet  
for this property

Multiple Property Cover Sheet Reference Number: 64500860



review. If you have any questions, please contact Linda McClelland of the National Register staff at 202-354-2258.

Sincerely,

**Carol D. Shull**

Carol D. Shull  
Keeper of the National Register  
of Historic Places

cc: Sharon Park, PAD

bcc: 2200  
2250

Basic File Retained In 2280

FNPLMcClelland:OP:11/09/04:F:/nr/Rialtoletter.doc