

**United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service**

**National Register of Historic Places Registration Form**

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*. If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

**1. Name of Property**

Historic name: Ely Community Center  
 Other names/site number: Ely Community Building  
 Name of related multiple property listing:  
"Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941"

**2. Location**

Street & number: 30 S. First Avenue East  
 City or town: Ely State: Minnesota County: St. Louis  
 Not For Publication:  N/A Vicinity:  N/A

**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 at the following level(s) of significance:

national  statewide  local  
 Applicable National Register Criteria:  
 A  B  C  D

<p>_____  <b>Signature of certifying official/Title:</b></p> <p>_____  <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p>
<p>In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.</p>	
<p>_____  <b>Signature of commenting official:</b></p> <p>_____  <b>Title :</b></p>	<p>_____  <b>Date</b></p> <p>_____  <b>State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government</b></p>

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**4. National Park Service Certification**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register
- determined eligible for the National Register
- determined not eligible for the National Register
- removed from the National Register
- other (explain:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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**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

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**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
<u>1</u>	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
<u>1</u>	_____	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register N/A

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**6. Function or Use**

**Historic Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

\_\_\_\_\_

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium, dance hall, banquet hall

EDUCATION/library

SOCIAL/civic, clubhouse, meeting hall

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Current Functions**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

VACANT/NOT IN USE

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

MODERN MOVEMENT/Art Deco

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**Materials:** (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: stone, glass

### Narrative Description

(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with a **summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

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### Summary Paragraph

The Ely Community Center is a three-story, rectangular, flat-roofed building clad in Mankato Grey limestone at the corner of First Avenue East and Harvey Street. The structure was built by the city of Ely with the assistance of the Public Works Administration in 1938. The main entry is centered on the west façade which faces First Avenue. There is a secondary entrance on the south façade facing Harvey. On all sides there are tall rectangular window openings filled with glass block. The main entrance leads into a lobby with marble-clad walls and a gold leaf ceiling. The lobby provides access to the main stairway, as well as to the areas that formerly housed the library, offices, and public meeting rooms. On the second floor there is a large, two-story auditorium/dance hall with a stage, green room, restrooms and several offices. The basement contains a large cafeteria, kitchens, public toilet and shower rooms, and more space for meetings and offices. The building's architectural detailing reflects the PWA Moderne style of the Art Deco period, especially in the strictly symmetrical front façade, the smooth stone surfaces, the extensive use of glass block, and the low relief sculptural panels with stylized figures of working men which decorate the primary facades. Although some of the glass block has been replaced by conventional windows, and a few interior walls reconfigured, most of the distinguishing architectural characteristics of the exterior are intact and most of the internal detailing of the key public spaces like the lobby, library, and the auditorium are unchanged.

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## Narrative Description

### *Exterior*

The Ely Community Center is a three-story, flat-roofed building with full basement at the corner of 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue East and Harvey Street built in 1938 by the city of Ely with the assistance of the Public Works Administration. In scale and style it stands apart from all the surrounding structures, a permanent reminder of its origins as an Art Deco artifact of the New Deal.

Except for a projecting entrance bay, the footprint of the building is a rectangle with the two longest façades running north and south for 125 feet from the property line along the sidewalk on Harvey Street to the property line at the alley on the north side of the building. The east and west facades extend for about 78 feet and are set back about 10 feet from the east and west property lines.

The first floor, second floor, and basement levels fill the entire footprint. The third floor level, which contains the higher elevations of the auditorium, the fly space of the stage, a fan room, and the projection room, has a smaller footprint as it is set back twenty feet along the west façade and also at the northeast and southeast corners. The taller eastern section housing the auditorium has poured concrete structural elements except that the roof is supported by steel trusses. The lower section along the western façade has poured concrete roofs and floors with walls composed of structural clay tile reinforced with brick. All exterior facades are covered in 4 inch thick Mankato Grey limestone cut in large square panels.

The main entry is centered on the west façade which faces First Avenue East. This elevation is about 33 feet high and is symmetrical in plan. The façade is divided into seven bays and the most important visual feature of the building is the central projecting bay which contains the main entrance (Photo #1). To both the left and the right of the central bay are three identical bays, each of which contains a very large rectangular metal-framed window opening filled with Corning Glass blocks, 11 ¾ inch square, laid in a stack bond eight across and 21 high blocks high.<sup>1</sup> The blocks are deteriorating and many are cracked, broken, or have missing grout. In addition, some have been replaced by small rectangular metal sliding windows in wood frames at the bottom of each opening. Each bay also has a small rectangular basement window opening, also filled with glass block, eight across and three blocks high, just above the sidewalk. In between the two windows on each of the six bays is a low relief sculpture carved into the limestone panel. Each represents a male figure from Ely's history, including, for example, a trapper, a miner, a lumberman, a soldier, and a Boy Scout (Photo # 6).

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<sup>1</sup> In the specifications which architect William Ingemann issued in conjunction with the December 1, 1936 request for bids, he specified that "all exterior window openings, transoms, etc." be filled with the "Pyrex" product from the Corning Glass Works (p. 32). The City of Ely retains a copy of the specifications.

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The central projecting bay rises to the full height of this façade (Photo #2). It is a rectangle about 19 feet wide and 10 feet deep, except that instead of exterior corners there are concave limestone panels. Alternate panels are decorated with a limestone medallion.<sup>2</sup> One of the undecorated panels on each side has the word “LIBRARY” in aluminum letters. The central section of the bay originally contained wood double doors with glass panels, but they have been replaced by metal-framed doors. Above the door, the words “COMMUNITY CENTER” appears in aluminum letters. Above that are three metal, rectangular panels, each with a medallion in the center. Directly above these panels is a large, rectangular window opening similar to the six other bays, except that here the glass block runs eight across and only 17 blocks high. The front façade is also decorated by two aluminum sconces, one on each side of the main entrance doors, which hold vertical fluorescent tubes.

The south façade facing Harvey Street continues the same architectural themes but is less symmetrical. It is broken into three bays (Photo #3). The central bay rises about twelve feet above the height of the front façade to enclose the third floor. Four large window openings with glass blocks fill the lower three-fourths of this bay. Three are five blocks wide and 21 blocks high. The fourth is also five blocks wide, but rises only 17 blocks high because it is above the secondary entrance, a single metal and glass replacement door with a sidelight, above which is written the word “AUDITORIUM” in aluminum letters. The upper one-fourth of the central bay has four small rectangular window openings filled with eight glass blocks. The bay to the left (west) of the central bay has one low relief sculptural panel on the lower one-fourth and a large window opening with the same dimensions as the openings on the front façade in the upper three-fourths. The bay to the right (east) of the central bay has one low relief sculptural panel on the lower one-fourth and two narrower window openings, only three blocks wide, but also 21 blocks high, in the upper three-fourths.

The east façade is a flat, unadorned wall of limestone panels except that there are four window openings filled with glass block allowing natural light to illuminate rooms on the first floor (Photo #4). Some of the glass block in each of these openings has been replaced by a rectangular metal sliding window with a wood frame. Like the south façade, the north façade has three bays, and the central bay rises 12 feet above the front façade (Photo #5). The only window on the central bay is a rectangular opening filled with glass block on the first floor level (with some of the blocks replaced by two small rectangular windows with wood trim). There is also a single service door on this bay. The bay to the left (east) contains one large window opening filled with glass blocks, five across and 14 high. The bay on the right (west) mirrors the westerly bay on the south façade. Like that bay, it has one low relief sculptural panel on the lower one-fourth and a large window opening with the same dimensions as the openings on the front façade (that is, eight blocks wide and 21 blocks high) in the upper three-fourths.

The building’s architectural detailing reflects the PWA Moderne style of the Art Deco period, especially in the strictly symmetrical front façade, the smooth stone surfaces, extensive use of

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<sup>2</sup> The lowest medallion on the concave surface south of the door is missing.

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glass block in the window openings, and the low relief sculptural panels with stylized figures of working men which decorate the primary facades.

### *Interior*

#### **First Floor**

The split-level main entrance on First Avenue East is at grade and about halfway between the basement and first floor levels. Beyond the metal exterior doors are wood, double doors with glass panels and aluminum hardware which open to a stairwell with a center stairway leading to the first floor and two side stairways leading to the basement (Photo #7). At the top of the stairway on the first floor is a small lobby (Figure #7). There is a door to the right that leads into a three room suite which originally housed the administration of the building and later the tourist bureau. The first room features a wall mural by Carl Gawboy, an artist and educator who grew up in Ely and now lives in Duluth.<sup>3</sup>

The lobby opens on its north side to the grand hall, an impressive space in the center of the first floor which has marble-clad walls and a gold leaf ceiling (Photo #8). According to the architect's specifications, the marble is Montana Travertine Dark Rose Tan.<sup>4</sup> Embedded in the walls of the grand hall are six display cases trimmed in brass. There is fluorescent lighting in brass fixtures at the top of the marble walls. The floors in all the corridors and lobbies of the building, including the grand hall, are terrazzo with brass divisions strips.

In the northwest corner of the grand hall are oak double doors with full glass panels which provide access to the library which originally occupied the entire northwest quadrant of the first floor and later expanded into most of the rooms east of the grand hall. Although the library has moved to a new building, still in place are the quarter-sawn, white oak paneling, shelving, and circulation desk which were its original furnishings, as well as a fireplace of Kasota limestone.

In the northeast corner of the grand hall there is a single door on the east wall opening to a corridor from which is accessed a kitchen and an office before opening into a large meeting room.<sup>5</sup> Also at the northeast corner is a door opening to a corridor running north from the grand hall which provides access to a meeting room, a toilet, a small office, and finally the service door on the alley and a small stairwell in the northeast corner of the building which allowed deliveries to be made to all floors. At the southeast corner of the grand hall is a door on the east wall which opens into a large meeting room. Also at this corner of the grand hall is a door on the south wall opening to a corridor which leads to a large meeting room west of the corridor and finally to a stairs down to the vestibule and the Harvey Street door. To the east of this vestibule is a stairwell which leads up to the second floor and down to the basement.

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<sup>3</sup> Next to his name on the mural is the date 1960, which would mean that he was 18 years old when he painted it. Gawboy, a member of the Bois Forte Band of Ojibwe, is well-known in Minnesota as a painter, especially of murals, and as an interpreter of Ojibwe heritage.

<sup>4</sup> Specifications, 60.

<sup>5</sup> This area, including the kitchen, was originally intended for the American Legion post and its auxiliary.

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### **Second and third floor**

The stairway at the main entrance on First Avenue East leads up to the second floor landing where there is a corridor running north and south (Figure #8). This stairway, as others in the building, has black marble steps, white marble risers, marble wainscoting which matches the marble in the grand hall, and brass railings (Photo #9). This stairway was originally illuminated by natural light coming through the large glass block window on the central entrance bay. However, sheet rock has been applied to the interior of this window opening leaving only a glass block window three blocks high and four blocks wide.

The corridor to the north leads first to a large men's restroom and second to a large meeting room in the northwest corner of the building. The corridor south leads to the women's restroom, a small serving kitchen, and a meeting room in the southwest corner. The large window openings in these two meeting rooms have been partially covered with sheetrock leaving the same size glass block windows as in the stairway.

Directly opposite the main stairway are double doors which lead into the two-story high, 5,000 sq ft. auditorium/dance hall which was designed to seat 600 people (Photo #10). There is five-foot high maple wainscoting on all walls and a parquet floor of white oak. The ceiling has acoustic paneling between the plastered beams. At the north end of the auditorium there is a proscenium stage with its original maple flooring, hanging stage lights, footlights, and curtains. West of the stage is a green room; east of the stage are a small office and the narrow stairway providing access to the service door on the alley.

At the south end of the auditorium there are double doors which open onto a vestibule. To the east is a stairwell which allows egress to the Harvey Street entrance, and to the west, a store room with a steep stairway to the third floor which houses the film projection booth.

### **Basement**

The stairway at the main entrance on First Avenue East also leads down to the lower level lobby where there is a corridor running north and south (Figure #9). To the north, the corridor leads first to a large women's restroom with an attached shower room and second to a large meeting room in the northwest corner of the building. The corridor south leads first to the men's toilet with attached shower room and second to a meeting room in the southwest corner. According to the architect's specifications, the toilet and shower stalls in these rooms are of Napoleon Grey marble.<sup>6</sup>

Directly opposite the main stairway are wood, double doors which lead into the cafeteria which has roughly the same footprint as the auditorium upstairs (Photo #11). The cafeteria ceiling is supported by three square pillars in a line running north and south through the middle of the

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<sup>6</sup> Specifications, 61. The meeting rooms were originally intended for the Girl and Boy Scouts. The toilets and shower rooms were open to the general public



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room. There are terrazzo floors, but whereas the terrazzo elsewhere has a black coloring, these have a pinkish tone. The ceilings have acoustical tile. At the north end there is a serving line with stainless steel and glass counters and steam tables, and to the left of that, swinging doors that allow entrance and exit from the kitchens. Behind the serving area is the boiler room and former coal room. In the far southeast corner there is a small storeroom with shelving that holds a large collection of dishware most of which are imprinted with "ECB" in calligraphy.<sup>7</sup> At the south end of the cafeteria is the stairway which allows access to the Harvey Street entrance.

### *Integrity*

The Ely Community Center retains a very high level of integrity because it exhibits the essential physical features that convey its historic identity, including design, materials, and workmanship. The Mankato Grey limestone facades are unchanged, including the very large glass-block filled window openings, except that many of the glass blocks are deteriorating and a portion of the large glass block windows have been replaced with small wood framed metal sliding windows.

The wood paneling, doorways, and millwork are largely intact throughout. The marble stairways with brass railings and terrazzo floors on all levels are worn but unchanged. The interior oak doors retain their original aluminum hardware. The showplace of the building, the great hall on the first floor, is unchanged, and its marble walls, terrazzo floors, gold leaf ceiling, and brass framed display cabinets are still a memorable sight. The oak paneling, shelving, and circulation desk of the library, as well as its limestone fireplace, are all unchanged. Some partitions between former meeting rooms were removed when the library expanded into the northwest corner of the first floor.

The auditorium/dance hall is little changed. It still has its original parquet floor and its stage outfitted with original equipment and curtains. The kitchen and cafeteria equipment in the basement is original, as are the marble fixtures in the men's and women's restrooms and shower rooms. Even the large collection of monogrammed dishware is still on site and stored where it has been since the 1930s. Currently, the cafeteria itself is being used for the storage of the city's unused wooden furniture, including the oak benches from the recently remodeled city council chambers in City Hall.

Although a small percentage of the glass block has been replaced by conventional windows, and a few interior walls reconfigured, most of the distinguishing architectural characteristics of the exterior are intact and most of the internal detailing of the key public spaces like the lobby and the auditorium are unchanged. Overall, the building's Art Deco features are still powerfully present and clearly associate the property with the PWA and the era of the New Deal.

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<sup>7</sup> "ECB" stands for "Ely Community Building." From the very beginning, the names Ely Community Center and Ely Community Building were used interchangeably both officially and by the public.

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## 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.)

- A. Owned by a religious institution or used for religious purposes
- B. Removed from its original location
- C. A birthplace or grave
- D. A cemetery
- E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure
- F. A commemorative property
- G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

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**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

POLITICS/GOVERNMENT  
ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION  
ARCHITECTURE

**Period of Significance**

1938-1965

**Significant Dates**

1938

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

N/A

**Cultural Affiliation**

N/A

**Architect/Builder**

Ingemann, William (St. Paul)  
Ingemann, Dorothy (St. Paul)  
Olsen, P. M. (Duluth)  
Lenci, Lenci & Englund (Virginia, MN)

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**Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph** (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Ely Community Center is locally significant under **Criterion A** in the area of Politics/Government and Entertainment/Recreation as a distinctive example of a local partnership with the Public Works Administration to provide a modern multi-use public building to meet a small town's need for a library, auditorium, cafeteria, meeting rooms, offices, and public showers. The construction of the building not only delivered short term unemployment relief during the Depression, but also provided the community with a civic center which has served as the focus of its social life. The Ely Community Center is also locally significant under **Criterion C** in the area of Architecture as a distinctive local example of the Art Deco style as applied to a multi-use municipal building during the New Deal. Like many PWA projects, the Art Deco features forcefully proclaim the building's association with the period. The period of significance begins in 1938 with the construction of the Ely Community Center. Because the building continued to serve as a hub of the social life until recently, the period of significance ends in 1965, as the passage of fifty years is the minimum threshold for considering the eligibility of a property for the National Register. This property is related to the statewide historic contexts of "Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941.

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

*Ely and the Vermilion Range*

Ely traces its origins back to the discovery of massive iron ore deposits near Lake Superior in the Nineteenth Century. The development of mining in this region began in the upper peninsula of Michigan with the Marquette Iron Range prior to the Civil War and the Gogebic Range in the 1880s. Across the lake in the Arrowhead Region of northern Minnesota, prospectors discovered ore on the Vermilion Range in the 1880s, the much larger Mesabi Range in the 1890s, and finally the Cuyuna Range to the south in 1911. These three ranges are known collectively in Minnesota as "the Iron Range." Ely marks the eastern end of the Vermilion Range and is the gateway into what is now the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.<sup>8</sup>

This region was Dakota land until the mid-Eighteenth Century when the Ojibwe began to move into the area as a result of European incursions into their ancestral lands to the east. At that time, French were the only Europeans in the Arrowhead and they were interested in the fur trade. After statehood, unfounded rumors led to a brief gold rush to Lake Vermilion which resulted in a wagon road being opened to Duluth. This set the stage for the discovery of iron ore on the Vermilion Range.

<sup>8</sup> Arnold R. Alanen, "Years of Change on the Iron Range" in Clifford E. Clark, Ed. *Minnesota in a Century of Change* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1989), 155-156.

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In 1882 an enterprise founded by Charlemagne Tower started the Soudan Mine on the south side of Vermilion Lake. He also bought the charter to the Duluth and Iron Range Rail Road and built a seventy-mile rail line through the forest to Lake Superior where the port of Two Harbors was created. The first ore was shipped from the Soudan Mine to Two Harbors in 1884. Two years later, more ore deposits were found to the east of Lake Vermilion at Ely leading to the development of the Chandler and Pioneer mines. In 1888, a branch line of the Duluth and Iron Range Rail Road reached Ely and began to ship ore from the Chandler mine to Two Harbors.<sup>9</sup> The following year, the Pioneer mine was opened at Ely, and it was followed by the Zenith in 1892 and the Savoy and the Sibley in 1899.

With four underground mines shipping ore from the area, the small mining settlement of Ely began to develop into a prosperous town.<sup>10</sup> Ely was platted in 1887 and incorporated as a village in 1888. However, Ely's tax base was limited since all the mines were outside the village limits. In 1891, village leaders successfully petitioned the legislature to recognize Ely as a city and to expand its borders to include the Chandler, Pioneer, and Zenith mines.<sup>11</sup>

The growth of iron mining led to the rapid growth of population on the Iron Range. Although some early settlements did not survive, eventually about fifteen established towns grew to a combined population of 23,490 by 1900 and 100,385 in 1920.<sup>12</sup> Ely was on the eastern end of the Vermilion Range and the most remote of all Iron Range towns from major urban areas. Nevertheless, the city grew quickly; it was already about 900 in the 1890 census, and by the 1900 census it had grown to 3,717.<sup>13</sup> Population peaked at 6,156 in the 1930 census after which it slowly declined to the present figure of just under 3,500.

Because the Vermilion Range mines were mostly underground (as opposed to the open pit mines of the Mesabi), the developers recruited experienced Cornish and Scandinavian miners from Wisconsin and Michigan. Soon they were joined by new immigrants from Finland, Sweden, and the Balkan regions of the Hapsburg Empire, among them Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. The percentage of foreign born residents was below 50% in 1910, but the Finns and Slovenians were strong and cohesive communities. Ely became the center of Slovenian culture in the region, and the South Slavic Catholic Union maintained its national headquarters there.

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<sup>9</sup> David A. Walker, *Iron Frontier: the Discovery and Early Development of Minnesota's Three Ranges* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1979), 69-70; Andrew Schmidt et al., "Railroads in Minnesota, 1862-1956," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 2007, 80 (Available at the Minnesota Historic Preservation Office).

<sup>10</sup> William Lass, *Minnesota: A History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Norton, 1998), 187-188.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Van Brunt, *Duluth and St Louis County, Minnesota: Their Story and People*. 3 Vols. (Chicago: American Historical Society, 1921), 381-383.

<sup>12</sup> Alanen, 159.

<sup>13</sup> Van Brunt, 390.

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When mining began on the Vermillion Range, the Minnesota legislature imposed a tax of only one cent per ton of iron ore mined and shipped. In 1897, the tonnage tax expired and was replaced by an *ad valorem* tax which allowed cities to tax companies for the unmined ore still in the ground. As a result, Iron Range cities controlled tax revenues much larger than most towns and cities of the same size and developed a tradition of providing well-endowed public facilities to their citizens. In the 1920s, Iron Range cities built water and sewage systems, municipal utilities, city halls, libraries, public restrooms and baths, community centers, recreation facilities, and parks. The Iron Range also had some of the largest and best equipped elementary and high schools in the state, exemplified by the high school which the city of Hibbing built for \$4 million in the early 1920s (NRHP, 1980). By 1937 six Iron Range school districts had also established junior colleges. Ely built its Memorial High School at a cost of \$1 million in 1924, and two years earlier had established Ely Junior College, which continues today as Vermillion Community College.<sup>14</sup>

### *The Great Depression comes to the Range*

The booming iron ore production of the 1920s came to a crashing halt with the onset of the Great Depression. Ore production fell from 47 million tons in 1929 to less than 2 million in 1932, the year in which production across the three Minnesota ranges came to a virtual standstill. Mines closed, thousands were laid off, retail sales slumped, tax collection shrunk, and government services were cut back. A “Hooverville” appeared on the outskirts of Virginia, a prosperous Mesabi Range city.<sup>15</sup>

In March 1933, Franklin D. Roosevelt took office and quickly began the New Deal, a series of federal interventions intended to blunt the impact of the Depression and revitalize the economy. In the first “hundred days,” a series of initiatives were passed, including the Federal Emergency Relief Act to support the states, the National Industrial Recovery Act to stabilize prices, and the Agricultural Adjustment Act to bolster farms and farm prices.

The New Deal also created a number of job-creation programs geared to the development of public works projects in cooperation with the states and local communities, and all of these programs had an impact on the Iron Range. The first of these to make a difference was the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) which put young unemployed men to work on reforestation, soil conservation, and park improvements. Already by the summer of 1933, the CCC’s military like camps were employing 275,000 men, and by 1935, a half of million were in the camps.

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<sup>14</sup> Lass, 188, 256; Alanen, 165; Pamela Brunfelt, “Political Culture in Microcosm: Minnesota’s Iron Range,” in Steven M Hoffman, Angela High-Pippert, and Kay Wolsborn, *Perspectives on Minnesota Government and Politics*, 6th ed. (Boston: Pearson, 2007), 26-27; Paul Landis, *Three Iron Mining Towns* (Ann Arbor, Edwards Brothers, 1938), 72-78.

<sup>15</sup> Marvin Lamppa, *Minnesota’s Iron Country* (Duluth: Lake Superior Port Cities, 2004), 220.

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The Public Works Administration was also created by executive order during the “hundred days” in 1933, but it took longer to get its projects in motion.<sup>16</sup> The PWA did not directly employ workers, but gave grants and loans to federal agencies and states and their subdivisions to fund major projects built by private contractors. Nation-wide, it eventually funded 34,500 public works projects, including city halls, schools, sewage treatment plants, dams, bridges, and the like. In Minnesota, the PWA funded 666 federal and non-federal projects, including such major works as the Minneapolis Armory and Dam 5-A on the Mississippi near Winona.<sup>17</sup>

In 1935, President Roosevelt created the Works Progress Administration, an agency designed to provide massive unemployment relief by directly hiring the unemployed to build public works or work in service projects in such fields as adult education, recreation, and public art. The WPA acted as general contractor of building projects and put a high priority on employing as many unemployed workers as possible. As a result, WPA projects tended to be smaller and less complex than PWA projects which were completed by established construction firms. Like the PWA, the WPA required that a local governmental unit share the cost of the project. By the time it ended in 1943, the WPA had helped build 1,324 new public buildings in Minnesota, as well as many bridges, roads, culverts, sidewalks, swimming pools, stadiums, sewage and water treatment plants, three new airports, among many other things.<sup>18</sup>

Neither the PWA nor the WPA dictated architectural style. Instead, they gave the local government which sponsored the project responsibility for supplying the architectural drawings and specifications. Both agencies reviewed the plans for structural soundness and feasibility of construction, and the WPA in particular would sometimes ask the sponsors to eliminate complex structural or ornamental approaches so that projects could be completed by the available unemployed workers. As a result, PWA and WPA projects often were designed either in Art Deco style because the construction methods were straightforward and ornamentation minimal or in traditional styles familiar to local builders.<sup>19</sup>

Iron ore mining in Minnesota would rebound strongly when World War II led to a massive increase in demand for steel. During the Depression however, the tax supported public building campaigns of the Iron Range towns ground to a halt. The various New Deal programs filled the vacuum and allowed for the continued expansion of public infrastructure and services.

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<sup>16</sup> Rolf T. Anderson, “Federal Relief Construction in Minnesota, 1933-1941,” National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 1991, E1 (Available at the Minnesota Historic Preservation Office).

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, E10.

<sup>18</sup> Linus Glotzbach, *WPA Accomplishments: Minnesota 1935-1939* (St. Paul, Minn.: Minnesota Works Progress Administration, 1939). This work is unpaginated.

<sup>19</sup> Anderson, E59.

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### *A chance to build a new community center*

In about 1920, the local school district left the two story wood frame building at the corner of First Avenue East and Harvey Street (Figure #1). A small school house built in 1889 was expanded in 1893 to become Central School. The city of Ely took over the vacant building and repurposed it as a community center which offered meeting space for a wide variety of groups and a public hall for events of all kinds. The community center was also the home of the library. Although there had been a volunteer library earlier, the city council created a tax supported public library in 1924 and located it in the community center.<sup>20</sup> By 1935, the library served nearly 3,000 registered borrowers and loaned its books almost 44,000 times.<sup>21</sup> The Ely Public Library also took responsibility for providing rural library service to neighboring areas under a 1937 plan funded by St. Louis County.<sup>22</sup>

In 1935, growing dissatisfaction with this building's limitations provoked a community meeting where representatives of many local lodges and clubs led by the American Legion Post expressed strong interest in a new building. The Ely City Council responded by investigating federal funding for a new community center. By this time, various local projects funded by the PWA, WPA, and CCC were either under construction or in the planning stage.<sup>23</sup> The city entered into negotiations with the PWA, and in preparation, hired St. Paul architect William Ingemann to prepare preliminary plans for a community building. By August, the city had a plan to raze the existing community center and build a new one on the same site.

William Ingemann (1897-1980) grew up in St. Paul, the son of a building contractor. After serving in World War I, he earned a degree in architecture from the University of Minnesota.<sup>24</sup> While still a student, he took a year off and worked as a draftsman for Cass Gilbert in New York. In the mid-1920s he set up a private practice in St. Paul, and one of his first commissions was a hotel that later became the Lowell Inn in Stillwater. In 1926 he married Dorothy Brink, a "draftsman" in his office, and together they collaborated in many projects. She was known for

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<sup>20</sup> Clara Baldwin, "The Public Library Movement in Minnesota, 1900-1936," *Minnesota Libraries*. December 1945, 384-398. In 1906, Hibbing became the first Iron Range city to create a public library. On the Vermillion Range, only Ely created and maintained a public library.

<sup>21</sup> "Public Library Service in Minnesota, 1935," Minnesota Library Commission Files, Minnesota Historical Society.

<sup>22</sup> "Rural Library Service from Here in 1937," *The Ely Miner*, January 21, 1937, 1.

<sup>23</sup> The CCC built several camps near Ely as well as a truck headquarters to serve the camps. The WPA was involved in improvements to Ely's streets and also to Whiteside Park. The city was negotiating with the PWA for a water plant. In addition, the federal government built a new post office and federal building in Ely which opened in 1938. This building contains murals by Elsa Jemne commissioned by the Department of the Treasury through a New Deal program which was similar to the WPA's Federal Arts Project.

<sup>24</sup> Alan Lathrop, *Minnesota Architects: A Biographical Dictionary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 109.



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the quality of her renderings, and it is possible that many of the perspectives created for his projects, including the Ely Community Center, are her work (Figures #3, 4).<sup>25</sup>

Over his long career, Ingemann designed many public schools, college buildings, hospitals, churches and other public buildings, as well as private residences, in a variety of styles. During the 1930s, he proved adept at designing in the Art Deco style, either for private clients or for federally funded public projects. His largest New Deal project was the Willmar Auditorium, a distinctive Art Deco structure completed in 1937.<sup>26</sup> After the Ely project, he designed the Tower Municipal Building in Streamline Moderne style in 1939. At about the same time as he was designing the Ely building he was building the Minnesota Department of Health Building at the University of Minnesota. This five-story building also made extensive use of glass block, although only on its two upper floors.<sup>27</sup>

Ingemann's proposed design was very much in the Art Deco tradition. Very likely the city leaders hired him with the expectation that he would create just such a building. In 1930 the city built a new city hall in a style which might be described as PWA Moderne except that it predated the New Deal (Figure #2). The building was designed by Elwin Berg, an Eveleth, Minnesota architect, and was well received. *The Ely Miner* thought that it represented "the new and modern American style of architecture," which, it assured its readers, was "not fad but here to remain." The paper thought that the Ely City Hall was the "handsomest, inside and outside, of any we have had the pleasure to see," and the paper took pride in this because "the construction of public buildings has become a matter of contest in the range towns."<sup>28</sup> In Ely, the City Hall set the standard for how a "modern" building should look.

Consistent with PWA regulations which limited its grants to 45% of the total project cost, the city council made a formal application to the PWA for an \$82,000 grant and simultaneously voted to put a \$100,000 bond issue before the voters at a September 3, 1935 referendum.<sup>29</sup> In late August, the *Ely Miner* published Ingemann's sketch of the proposed new building and made clear its support for the project by featuring on its front page an editorial advocating a "Yes" vote written by the board of the existing community center and endorsed by a committee formed to campaign for a new building (Figure #3).<sup>30</sup> The piece argued that the PWA offered Ely a unique opportunity to greatly improve services of the local community center and to attract conventions to Ely. Moreover, the razing of the old building and the construction of the new would employ

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<sup>25</sup> Lathrop, 108. Ingemann associated with Duluth architect P. M. Olsen on the Ely project.

<sup>26</sup> Rolf T. Anderson, "National Register Nomination Form for the Willmar Auditorium," October 8, 1990. The building was listed in 1991.

<sup>27</sup> Photographs of this building are in the Ingemann papers at the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota.

<sup>28</sup> "Dedication of New City Hall Building Tomorrow," *The Ely Miner*, December 12, 1930, 1.

<sup>29</sup> "Ely Voters to Pass on Bond Issue Sept. 3<sup>rd</sup>," *The Ely Miner*, August 22, 1935, 1.

<sup>30</sup> "Why You Should Vote for the Bonds for the New Community Building," *The Ely Miner*, August 29, 1935, 1.

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local labor when available. The article described the features of the proposed building, including the large auditorium/dance hall, the cafeteria seating 400, a library three times the size of the existing one, the many meeting rooms, the shower facilities, even the dumb waiter to move food from the basement kitchens to the second floor hall.

On September 3, 1935, Ely's voters approved the bond issue by a vote of 908 to 707 in what the newspaper described as a "light vote."<sup>31</sup> However, this did not mean the project could begin. Ingemann sent plans to the PWA for approval, and in early November Mayor Banovetz and several other city officials travelled to St. Paul to meet with PWA leaders about the water plant and the community center. All issues were resolved on the water plant, but the city was told that the community center was a Class B project which was fifth in line after Class A projects were funded.

As it happened, the city had to wait until October 1936 for PWA approval. On December 1, 1936, the city asked for bids and advised contractors to contact Ingemann's office in St. Paul for a copy of the plans and specifications. During the long wait for PWA approval he had reconceived the design. The original rendering published in August 1935 depicts a simple Art Deco building with conventional windows (Figure #3). A later rendering, never published in the newspaper, depicts a larger building with concave corners on the entrance bay and all window openings filled with glass block (Figure #4).<sup>32</sup> The specifications state that "all exterior window openings... shall be constructed of glass brick."<sup>33</sup>

Just before the holidays, the city chose the Virginia, MN firm of Lenci, Lenci & Englund to be the general contractor for the project. Around the first of the year, the old building was razed with the assistance of WPA supplied labor and the general contractors began excavating the basement of the new structure. On January 11, 1937, newly elected Mayor Jack Peschel shoveled the first ground symbolizing the start of the project in the presence of various dignitaries, including Col. John Stewart from the PWA office in St. Paul.<sup>34</sup>

As the contractor was putting the final touches on the building at the end of 1937, the city opened bids for equipment and furnishings, including kitchen appliances, rugs, chinaware, glassware, silverware, draperies, blinds, stage equipment, pianos, chairs, and tables. Just before Christmas, a local citizen sued the city and obtained a temporary restraining order which stopped the city from finalizing contracts with vendors. The plaintiff argued that the bidding process was

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<sup>31</sup> "Local Voters approve \$100,000 bond issue for Community Center," *The Ely Miner*, September 5, 1935, 1. The newspaper noted that the total vote of 1,619 was about 1,000 less than in ordinary elections.

<sup>32</sup> This rendering is contained in the William Ingemann papers at the Northwest Architectural Archives at the University of Minnesota. It is possible that Dorothy Ingemann produced both perspectives.

<sup>33</sup> Specifications, 32.

<sup>34</sup> "Mayor Peschel Moves First Earth for New Community Building," *The Ely Miner*, January 14, 1937, 1.

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illegal because the city council had not formally approved the changes which the architect had made to his specifications during the construction period. He also argued that the bids should not in any case include movie projection equipment because the city should not interfere with the business of the local movie theaters.<sup>35</sup> A judge in Virginia set the trial for January 3, 1938.

For reasons unknown the suit was dismissed on the motion of the plaintiff on the day of trial. Meanwhile, however, two new aldermen were elected to the city council, and perhaps for that reason the council split into two factions on the equipment issue. Under heavy criticism by some alderman that the city was overspending, the majority agreed to cancel the bidding process and start it over.<sup>36</sup> This seemed to settle the issue, but in March another citizen sued the city, this time in an effort to stop the contracts for kitchen equipment.<sup>37</sup> Finally in April, a judge denied the injunction, and the plans for the dedication of the community center went forward.<sup>38</sup>

A dedication committee was appointed to organize an inaugural celebration on May 29, 1938. The entire city of Ely was invited, and in addition, the committee sent out 1,000 invitations to people outside the city.<sup>39</sup> On May 19, 1938, the *Ely Miner* ran a large headline announcing the opening of the community building and posted the program for the event on its first page. It also gave its readers a detailed review of the history of the project and a tour of the building, highlighting how the spacious building would meet many needs. The first floor would provide a much larger and more comfortable space for the library as well as office and meeting rooms for the tourist bureau, the Commercial Club, and the American Legion Post and its auxiliary (complete with their own kitchen). The first floor also had several general purpose meeting rooms and a large public lounge for adults. The newspaper estimated that the auditorium on the second floor could sit 1,000 for a performance on the stage, and noted that the chairs could be stored away under the stage for a dance. The basement cafeteria could sit 600 for a meal. Also noted were the Boy and Girl Scout meeting rooms in the basement, along with the public shower rooms with marble and terrazzo floors. The newspaper was also taken with the heating and air conditioning plant, "automatically controlled" and the Sirocco fans that would ventilate the building.<sup>40</sup>

The newspaper reported that the final cost of the building was about \$230,000, that is, \$48,000 more than originally planned, and that the much debated furnishings cost an additional

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<sup>35</sup> "Council Blocked in Equipment Purchase by Restraining Order," *The Ely Miner*, December 23, 1935,

1.

<sup>36</sup> "Two Council Groups Wrangle Over Buy of Furniture, Equipment," *The Ely Miner*, January 13, 1938.

<sup>37</sup> "Ely Taxpayer Obtains Court Order to Halt City Equipment Buy," *The Ely Miner*, March 17, 1938, 1.

<sup>38</sup> "Judge Hughes Refuses Temporary Injunction on City Furniture Buy," *The Ely Miner*, April 21, 1938,

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<sup>39</sup> "Dedication Committee Announce Program for Civic Center Opening," *The Ely Miner*, May 12, 1938,

1.

<sup>40</sup> "Ely Opens Civic Center: Gala Program Arranged to Honor Event," *The Ely Miner*, May 19, 1938, 1.

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\$40,000.<sup>41</sup> The newspaper left its readers with no doubt that the building was worth it. The structure, it wrote, “is by far one of the handsomest and most modern of any in the northwest.” This was echoed by the city which placed a large advertisement in the same issue urging the public to inspect the new building which it called a “strikingly beautiful addition to the city’s civic structures,” and a modern and efficient building that “exemplified ‘the last word.’”

The dedication was an all-day Saturday affair which began in the morning with an open house intended primarily for children.<sup>42</sup> The open house for adults was all afternoon. The formal dedication program was at 2:30. After the crowd gathered in the new auditorium had sung “America” and heard the invocation, PWA administrator W.S. Cockcroft presented the building to the city, and then Mayor Jack Peschel presented it in turn to two Ely High School students chosen to represent the “future citizens” of the city. The main speaker was O. L. Larson, former member of congress from the area, who gave an address that “oozed patriotism from every word.” In the evening, there was a banquet in the cafeteria featuring roast turkey with all the trimmings and angel food cake with strawberries. For entertainment, the city provided classical music, including excerpts from an opera, and another address, this time by the district court judge. The newspaper made clear that that the building was the subject of great pride within the city. The open house was attended by approximately 6,000, and the newspaper was especially impressed by the large number of guests that attended the event from outside of Ely.

### *A distinctive monument to New Deal style*

The building that Ely dedicated was an example of Art Deco style as applied to a New Deal project, specifically to a multi-use community center funded by the PWA for a small town. Art Deco is an expansive term which refers most generally to a decorative style which emerged from Europe in the late 1920s. It quickly became popular among American graphic artists, interior designers, and architects.<sup>43</sup> With respect to architecture, most historians distinguish two phases,

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<sup>41</sup> In a book documenting selected projects, the PWA gave the total costs at \$209,416 with \$208,748 of that being construction costs. C. W. Short and R. Stanley-Brown, *Public Buildings: A Survey of Architecture of Projects Constructed by Federal and Other Governmental Bodies between the Years 1933 and 1939 with the Assistance of the Public Works Administration* (Washington, D.C.: Public Works Administration, 1939), 100.

<sup>42</sup> “Ely Entertains 6,000 at Dedication of New Community Building,” *The Ely Miner*, May 26, 1938, 1. According to the program, William Ingemann was scheduled to present the building to the city, but he did not attend. See Figure #6.

<sup>43</sup> This analysis of Art Deco architecture and its relation to the New Deal which follows relies on Charles Nelson, “Tech Talk: Minnesota Architecture, Part V--Styles of the Modern Era: Prairie School, Bungalow, Art Deco, International & Revivals,” *Minnesota History Interpreter* (January 2000): 5-6. Eva Weber presents a very similar categorization in her *Art Deco in America* (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), 46-79. She distinguishes Zigzag Moderne, Streamline Modern and Classical Moderne (by which she means the style associated with the New Deal). Marcus Whiffin refers to two separate styles--Art Deco style (referring to Zigzag Moderne) and Streamline Moderne. *American Architecture since 1780*, Rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 235-246. John Blumenson also refers to two separate styles: Art Deco and Art Moderne (referring to Streamline Moderne). *Identifying American Architecture*,

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the first of which, often called “Zigzag Moderne,” emphasized geometric, angular forms. This style was put to impressive use in New York City in buildings like the Rockefeller Center (NHL 1987) and in Minnesota with the St. Paul City Hall/Ramsey County Courthouse (NRHP 1983). In the mid-1930s, a second phase emerged, usually called “Streamline Moderne,” which emphasized curvilinear forms. Frank Lloyd Wright’s Johnson Wax Administration Building in Racine, Wisconsin is a notable example. In Minnesota, the Greyhound Bus Station in Minneapolis (now First Avenue Nightclub) exemplifies the style.<sup>44</sup>

The two phases of Art Deco architecture peaked during the Depression years and became associated with the public buildings of the PWA and WPA. Generally these buildings “combine the decorative qualities of Art Deco with a restrained formalism reminiscent of the Classical.”<sup>45</sup> They are characterized by symmetrical facades, smooth stone or concrete exteriors, fluted columns, low relief sculptural panels, terrazzo floors, glass block, and bronze, aluminum, and stainless steel fixtures. This style, sometimes referred to as “PWA Moderne,” can be seen in dozens of Minnesota public buildings, as well as some notable private buildings, built in the 1930s.<sup>46</sup> For example, in addition to New Deal projects like the Willmar Auditorium, William Ingemann also designed a “PWA Moderne” building for a private insurance company in Red Wing.<sup>47</sup>

In the Ely Community Building, Ingemann adapted the repertoire of the PWA Moderne style to create a unique building. The symmetrical primary façade with its central projecting bay displays the stripped down Classicism associated with PWA Moderne style. The exterior features a smooth stone surface with little decoration save for the low relief sculptural panels. Like New Deal art elsewhere, they depict local themes, in this case, the men who provided the labor for the nearby mines, timberlands and farms. The interiors feature the marble walls and terrazzo floors favored by this style. Window and door frames, light fixtures, door hardware, and lettering are fashioned from stainless steel, bronze, and aluminum, the last of which was especially innovative at the time. The most distinctive design element was the use of glass

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Rev. ed. (Nashville: American Association of State and Local History, 1981), 76-79. In his *National Trust Guide to Art Deco in America* (New York: Wiley, 1996), David Gebhard distinguishes between Art Deco and Streamline Moderne and characterizes PWA Moderne as a subset of Art Deco (4-13).

<sup>44</sup> Larry Millett, *AIA Guide to Downtown Minneapolis* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011), 54-55.

<sup>45</sup> Nelson, 6. Some historians have referred to New Deal style as “Starved Classicism” or “Stripped Classicism.” Lois Craig, *The Federal Presence: Architecture, Politics, and Symbols in United States Government Buildings* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1978), 283. Craig credits Paul Philippe Cret with setting the standard for “starved classicism” with such buildings as the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington (284-295).

<sup>46</sup> David Gebhard and Tom Martinson, *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 420.

<sup>47</sup> The Citizens Fund Mutual Aid Fire Insurance Building, 426 West Avenue, is part of the Red Wing Mall Historic District (NRHP, 1980). Although this building looks very much like a New Deal project, Ingemann designed it in 1930. Gebhard characterized it as “PWA Moderne” but incorrectly dated the building from 1938 (308).

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block, which was just coming on the market as a mass produced building material in the 1930s.<sup>48</sup> Taking advantage of the air conditioning and cooling system, Ingemann made the radical decision to fill every window opening with glass block. Although glass block is recognized as a typical feature of Art Deco design, few buildings feature it so completely. His particular blending of Art Deco elements created a PWA Moderne building that not only stands apart from its neighboring structures in Ely, but also from other similar projects of the period.

### *The community's gathering place*

Throughout the period of significance (1938-1965), the Community Center served as the hub of economic, social and cultural life in Ely. To begin with, this was the home of the Ely Public Library which served several thousand borrowers and hosted a steady calendar of programs. Many government agencies and non-profit organizations had permanent offices in the building over the years, including the American Legion, the Commercial Club, and later, its successor, the Chamber of Commerce, the Boy and Girl Scouts, the Northern Lakes Arts Association, the Minnesota State Job Service, and the Ely Area Economic Development Association.<sup>49</sup> The tourist bureau for Ely also had offices on the first floor.

These and other organizations also used the community center for meetings, from large scale conventions involving the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Fraternal Union, to local meetings involving the Parent-Teachers Association and Alcohol Anonymous groups. Many high school class reunions were held there. Families reserved rooms for birthday parties, wedding showers, and card parties.

The community center also offered space for less structured group activities. For many years prior to the founding of a separate Senior Citizens' Center, the community center served as the de facto gathering place for retired citizens to play cards, visit, and stay connected with old friends. The center also offered game rooms for both boys and girls. Over the years, many community education classes were held in the building, from water colors to dog training to exercise classes. During the Cold War, the basement served as the Civil Defense shelter.

Because of its size, the auditorium/dance hall was the preferred venue for wedding dances. A variety of other community dances were held there, including New Year's Eve Balls, Easter Monday Balls, "polka nites," and high school dances. The auditorium was also a performance space for local dance and music recitals and in the 1950s and 1960s, concerts by local rock bands.

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<sup>48</sup> David Gebhard, *The National Trust Guide to Art Deco*, 11

<sup>49</sup> Nick Wognum, "The Community Center Building: Should it Be Renovated, Razed, or Sold?" *The Ely Echo*, June 3, 1991, 1. Information on activities in the community center comes from this article as well as the recollections of community members collated by the Ely-Winton Historical Society.

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The cafeteria was the scene of countless community meals, from fundraising pancake breakfasts to more formal banquets at which local organizations came together to celebrate their work. For example, the Chamber of Commerce held its 37<sup>th</sup> annual banquet in the cafeteria on January 27, 1952. Over a beef roast dinner, the new officers were introduced, awards were given, and an officer of the Minnesota Retail Federation gave a speech.<sup>50</sup>

Sometimes banquets honored visiting guests, such as the governor or a congressman. Political events such as that could be controversial. For example, the Chamber hosted a luncheon in the cafeteria on July 24, 1965, for Lynda Bird Johnson, the 21-year old daughter of the sitting president. Congressman John Blatnik gave a speech and introduced “the honored guest.” She was traveling with Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman to promote the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. Although the Chamber welcomed her as a visiting dignitary, a group protesting Freeman’s policies of extending restrictions against logging and motorized transport in the BWCA held a “multi-use” parade in downtown Ely as she was giving a press conference.<sup>51</sup>

The Ely Community Center continued to serve as a community hub until recently. Into the 1980s, the Ely Senior Center and the Chamber of Commerce were located there. Into the 1990s, a number of community groups had offices there, including the Arrowhead Economic Opportunity Center, the Ely Area Economic Development Association, and Mothers Against Drunken Driving.<sup>52</sup> The auditorium continued to host wedding dances and the cafeteria functioned as the site of pancake breakfast fundraisers. The largest and most important tenant, the Ely Public Library, continued to make the community center its home until 2014 when the city built a new library building at 224 E. Chapman near City Hall.

In 1991, the city council began to question whether it made sense to spend money to upgrade the heating system, make the building handicapped accessible (which would require an elevator), and insulate the glass block windows to save on heating costs, among other things. The city held a public forum but made no decisions. A task force was formed to raise funds for the building, and in 1998 this group held a 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday party for the building.<sup>53</sup> In 2014, a reuse study was completed and an Ely Community Center Foundation was formed. The city continues to own the building, but the last remaining tenants have left and the building stands vacant.

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<sup>50</sup> Program for the event at the Ely-Winton Historical Society archives.

<sup>51</sup> Al McConagha, “Freeman Boundary Area Policy Protested in Ely,” *Minneapolis Tribune*, July 25, 1965, 1A. The Ely-Winton Historical Society archives hold a copy of the luncheon program.

<sup>52</sup> Nick Wognum, “The Community Center Building: Should it be renovated, razed, or sold?” *The Ely Echo*, June 9, 1991, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Tom Coombe, “Community Center memories come to life at 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration,” *The Ely Echo*, October 5, 1998, 1. One of the fundraising efforts was a cookbook: *Ely Cooks—Ely, Minnesota* (Audubon, Iowa: Jumbo Jack’s Cookbook, 1996).

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### *Conclusion*

The Multiple Property Documentation Form for New Deal architecture in Minnesota suggests that a community center built with PWA assistance is eligible under **Criterion A** if it represented a major contribution to the community.<sup>54</sup> In 1938, Ely's new community center provided space for the public library, the tourist bureau, the offices and meeting rooms of various organizations, a cafeteria and kitchens, a large auditorium/dance hall, and lounges. For more than fifty years the building served as the center of social life in the area. Accordingly it is locally significant in the area of Politics/Government and Entertainment/Recreation as a distinctive example of a local partnership with the PWA to provide a modern multi-use public building.

The Multiple Property Documentation Form for New Deal architecture in Minnesota also suggests that a government building associated with the New Deal is eligible under **Criterion C** if it was built in a distinctive style associated with a program such as the PWA.<sup>55</sup> The Ely Community Center exemplified the PWA Moderne variant of Art Deco style. As was true of many similar PWA projects, the building's styling gave it an appearance which distinguished it from neighboring buildings and permanently marked it as a New Deal creation. It is locally significant in the area of Architecture as a distinctive example of PWA Moderne style in the city of Ely.

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<sup>54</sup> Anderson, F5.

<sup>55</sup> Anderson, F6.



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**Previous documentation on file (NPS):**

\_\_\_ preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested

\_\_\_ previously listed in the National Register

\_\_\_ previously determined eligible by the National Register

\_\_\_ designated a National Historic Landmark

\_\_\_ recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # \_\_\_\_\_



Ely Community Center

Name of Property

St. Louis County, Minn.

County and State

### **Additional Documentation**

- **Maps:** A USGS map indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map**
- **Photo Log**

Name of Property: Ely Community Center

City or Vicinity: Ely County: St. Louis State: Minnesota

Photographer: Greg Gaut Date Photographed: June, 2015

Photo #1: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0001)

Ely Community Center, west façade, camera facing east.

Photo #2: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0002)

Ely Community Center, detail of central bay on west façade, camera facing east.

Photo #3: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0003)

Ely Community Center, south façade, camera facing northwest.

Photo #4: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0004)

Ely Community Center, east façade, camera facing northwest.

Photo #5: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0005)

Ely Community Center, north façade, camera facing southwest.

Photo #6: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0006)

Ely Community Center, west façade, carving of miner, camera facing east.

Photo #7: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0007)

Ely Community Center, detail of interior doors at main entrance on west façade, camera facing east.

Photo #8: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0008)

Ely Community Center, grand hall on 1<sup>st</sup> floor with display case and library doors, camera facing northwest.

Photo #9: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0009)

Ely Community Center, stairway between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2nd floors, camera on 2nd floor landing facing northwest.

Photo #10: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0010)

Ely Community Center, auditorium/hall with stage on 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, camera facing north.

Photo #11: (MN\_St. Louis Co.\_Ely Community Center\_0011)

Ely Community Center, cafeteria in basement, camera facing southeast.