

Opera Houses, Armories, & New Deal Gyms

Historic Sites in Iowa Basketball

One would expect that it would be the rare basketball gymnasium that has seen few changes since it was built. But a state-wide survey in 2003 found that a number of basketball gyms, particularly at smaller high schools, were very nearly completely intact. More than two dozen still impart a strong sense of time and place. The gyms presented here represent all areas in the state and date from 1911 to 1936.

The survey was funded by the State Historical Society of Iowa and conducted by Tallgrass Historians L.C. Its purpose was to identify historically significant properties built prior to 1960 and that were associated with basketball in Iowa—one of the state's most popular team sports.

—Adapted from text by Clare L. Kernek and Leah D. Rogers, Tallgrass Historians L.C.



The Westgate Opera House, built in 1911, was intended for public entertainment. Like many small-town opera houses, it was also used for community and athletic events, such as roller skating, wrestling events, and basketball games. The original ticket window remains in the lobby, and the basketball goal still hangs over the entry doors. Decorative pressed tin covers the walls and ceiling. The exterior pressed metal siding mimics rusticated block or brick. Owned by the city of Westgate since 1939, it is managed by Westgate Community Club and used as a community center for meetings, suppers, musicals, parties, and similar events.

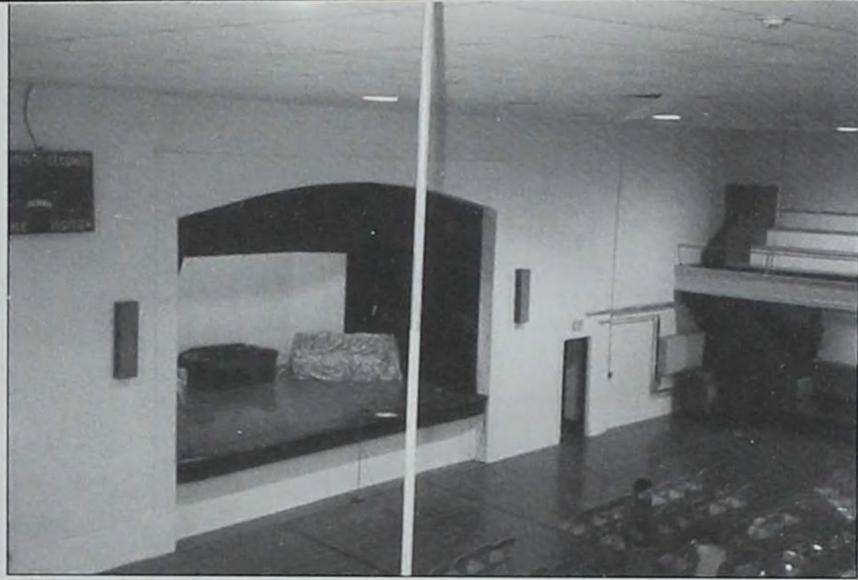
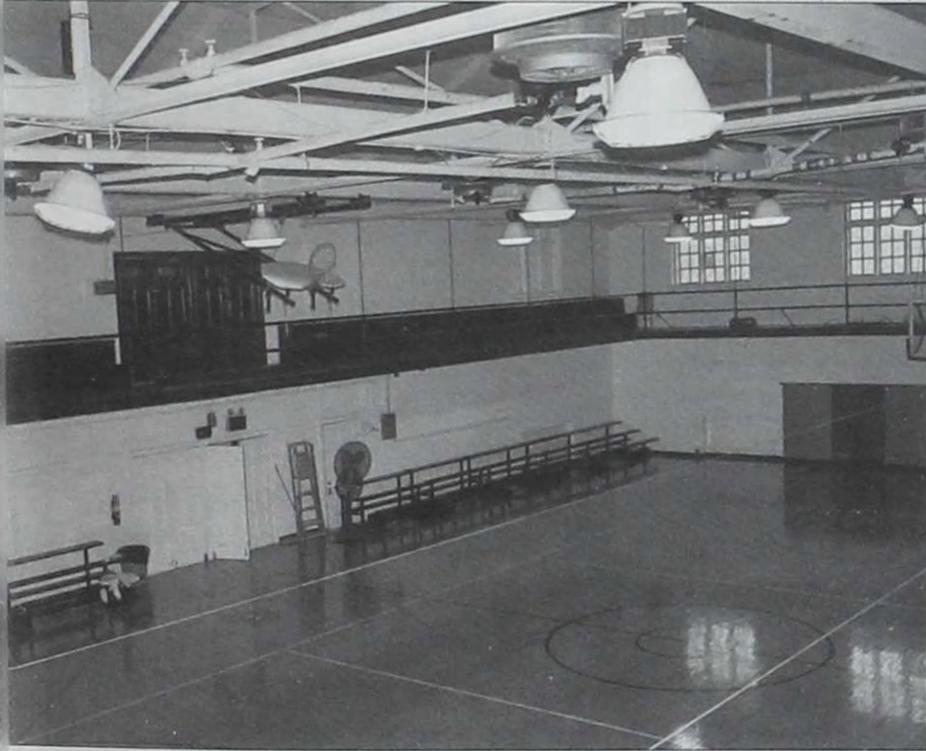


Dating to 1912, the Villisca Armory represents one of many Iowa armories originally built with basketball facilities to be used by the local community. It has changed little since 1912 and retains the original basketball court, with balcony seating and pressed tin ceiling. The Villisca High School played all of its basketball games there until 1959, when a new facility was built. In recent years, the National Guard turned the armory over to the local school district, and the gym is once again used for school athletics.



Nicknamed "the Dungeon," the gymnasium of Sioux City Central High School was the site of powerhouse basketball teams in northwestern Iowa. This was one of the early high school gyms built in Iowa specifically for basketball and was regarded as an outstanding design for the time. Built in 1913 and designed by F. E. Colby, the gym was an addition to the 1892/93 high school. Closed in 1972, the high school itself is listed on the National Register as an outstanding example of the Romanesque style of architecture. The school is under renovation for adaptive reuse.

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Completed in 1927, the Diagonal High School gymnasium still imparts the feel of a high school gym crowded to the rafters during basketball games. A stage is inset in one end, and balconies on three sides are suspended by metal rods from the roof. Diagonal High School was a small-town powerhouse in boys' basketball. The team was in 11 state tournaments in the 1930s and '40s, as well as in 1989 and 1991.

Although women students at Iowa Wesleyan College in Mount Pleasant had played basketball as early as 1902, this gymnasium was constructed in 1921/22, at the start of a two-decade, nationwide building boom for athletic facilities. Designed by Henry C. Ekland, it still has the feel of an old-time college gymnasium. In the 1940s, under Coach Olan G. Ruble, Iowa Wesleyan became "the first liberal arts college in the country to consistently offer intercollegiate basketball for women," writes sports historian Janice Beran, holding "clinics and tournaments for players, coaches, and officials. . . . It was the first four-year college to compete in American Athletic Union tournaments."



The New Providence school gymnasium is one of Iowa's few round gyms. The two-story building is constructed of hollow tile blocks with a brick exterior. The diameter is 85 feet. At its highest point, the low-pitched dome roof is 35 feet high and requires no supporting pillars because of the steel beam construction

(see right). The gym seated 300 in the balcony and on the bleachers, which came right to the edge of the court. The stage was originally equipped with footlights and colored border lights. Boys' and girls' locker rooms, a music room, lunch room, and kitchen filled the basement. The building is basically the same as it was in 1935/36, when it was constructed under the New Deal's Public Works Administration (PWA). Between 1933 and 1939, the PWA constructed 70 percent of all educational buildings in the nation. Designed by Keffer & Jones, a Des Moines architecture firm that specialized in PWA school buildings, it shows the excellent workmanship of that time. Unlike the other gymnasiums pictured here, the New Providence gym is already on the National Register of Historic Places.



The Seymour School Gymnasium was the home of the Seymour girls' basketball dynasty (including the seven Cole sisters), which went to the finals 15 times, 1936–1960s, and won the state title in 1938. It was built in 1935, as a construction project through the New Deal's Federal Emergency Relief Administration.