

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Registration Form

32-2828

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations of eligibility for individual properties or districts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. If an item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, styles, materials, and areas of significance, enter only the categories and subcategories listed in the Instructions. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

1 Name of Property

historic name Sears, Roebuck Department Store  
other names/site number Comstock Library

2 Location

street & number W 902 Main Ave  not for publication  
city, town Spokane  vicinity  
state Washington code WA county Spokane code 063 zip code 99201

3. Classification

Ownership of Property	Category of Property	Number of Resources within Property	
<input type="checkbox"/> private	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> building(s)	Contributing	Noncontributing
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> public-local	<input type="checkbox"/> district	<u>1</u>	— buildings
<input type="checkbox"/> public-State	<input type="checkbox"/> site	—	— sites
<input type="checkbox"/> public-Federal	<input type="checkbox"/> structure	—	— structures
	<input type="checkbox"/> object	—	— objects
		<u>1</u>	— Total

Name of related multiple property listing N/A  
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

4 State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, 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.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of certifying official [Signature] Date 3/28/91  
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation  
State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property  meets  does not meet the National Register criteria.  See continuation sheet.

Signature of commenting or other official \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
State or Federal agency and bureau \_\_\_\_\_

5 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) \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

---

**6 Function or Use**

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Historic Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Commerce department store

Current Functions (enter categories from instructions)

Education library

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**7 Description**

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Architectural Classification  
(enter categories from instructions)Art Deco

Materials (enter categories from instructions)

foundation concrete  
walls brickroof built-up tar  
other

Describe present and historic physical appearance .

The Sears, Roebuck Department Store is a square three-story Art Deco style building with a five-story tower projecting from the main facade. The building, completed in 1930, boasts a structural system of reinforced concrete. The foundation is supported by 940 cedar pilings driven to depths of 15 to 30 feet.

The exterior of the building is clad with blonde brick, while pre-cast Art Deco detailing embellishes the facade, including the roof line, window and door surrounds, and other accent points. A multiple Deco stringcourse enhances the roof line, pilasters embellish the door and display window openings. The east side street-level is the most altered facade on the building. Although the south side entrance has been altered by the inclusion of automatic doors, the north side entrance retains its original wooden doors. Light panels in and above these entry doors are also still intact. Pre-cast diamonds in relief are spaced just above and outside the corners of the display windows. Due to interior alterations, the transom panels above the display windows have been painted over, however, the original window configuration is intact.

The windows on the second and third floors are the original, metal sash, one-over-one double-hung units. The east and west side windows are in rows of 16 across, while the windows on each floor are set within vertical recessed panels. Window surrounds are pre-cast concrete, the slip sills are brick, and the third floor window header is a pre-cast Deco stringcourse which wraps around the entire building and extends to the roof line. Windows on the front (south) facade share the same treatment, except there are 12 pairs--six on each side of the tower.

The central tower which dominates the south side is the most striking feature of the building. Its vertical lines are accentuated by pre-cast pilasters which border both the main doors and display windows. Four double-hung windows run, in a recessed vertical strip, up the center of the tower and are bordered with decorative brickwork. Pre-cast diamond patterns embellish the panels of the vertical strip of windows. The tower is capped with geometric Art Deco detailing, which is even more elaborate than the details found on the rest of the building.

Like other "A" stores across the country, when this Sears "A" store was first constructed in Spokane under the supervision of the architectural firm of Nimmons, Carr and Wright, its primary function was to display merchandise. To accomplish this goal, the building's interior floor plan consisted primarily of open retail space, with limited interruption to the eye. Massive round pillars supported ceilings and floors to eliminate the need for load-bearing walls. Even the basement was used for retail space and shared the same floor plan. Offices were confined to the northwest corner of the building on the third floor.

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The interior of the building has since been altered to some degree in order to accommodate the library. Storage and archives rooms have been incorporated into the floor plan through the use of partition walls on all floors. Additional interior alterations include dropped ceilings on all levels, which have reduced the original window height. The transom panels on the first floor south wall are also hidden. Although the library conveys an open feeling, the existing open space represents a slight reduction in comparison to the original Sears floor plan.

## 8. Statement of Significance

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties

nationally  statewide  locally

Applicable National Register Criteria  A  B  C  D

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions)  A  B  C  D  E  F  G

Areas of Significance (enter categories from instructions)

Architecture

Period of Significance

1930

Significant Dates

N/A

Cultural Affiliation

N/A

Significant Person

N/A

Architect/Builder

Nimmons, Carl & Wright

State significance of property, and justify criteria, criteria considerations, and areas and periods of significance noted above

Although Spokane has retained an impressive array of Art Deco buildings within its city center, the original Sears building retains a higher degree of architectural integrity than comparable retail buildings from the period. A prime example of Sears' top-of-the-line retail chain stores, this facility offered affordable merchandise to a diverse clientele for over 30 years. As one of the world's largest retail and catalog store chains, the merchandising efforts of Sears, Roebuck and Company have ranged from selling discount watches at the turn of the century to selling pre-fabricated homes by catalog. The Spokane store retains sufficient integrity to convey its significant character as an example of a large-scale department store from the period, and an impressive example of the Art Deco style in Spokane. It is the best preserved example of an Art Deco Sears store in Washington State and, as such, is an important example of a nationally promulgated design.

Historical Background Richard W. Sears began the company which bears his name in 1886. As a young railroad agent in Redwood, Minnesota, Sears came across a shipment of watches a jeweler refused to accept. Knowing the demand for watches among railroad workers, Sears contacted the watch company and obtained the watches at a considerable discount. He then proceeded to write his fellow workers describing the watches and offering them at an exceptional price. Sears soon sold out of his stock, realizing a good profit. In hopes of continued success, Sears quit his job as a railroad agent and started selling watches by catalog.

By 1887 Sears' growing business required that he hire a watch repairman. He placed an ad in a local Minnesota newspaper and eventually hired Alvah Curtis Roebuck. Roebuck later became a partner in the firm, and by the turn of the century, Sears, Roebuck and Company had expanded its catalog selection to include everything from watches and clothing, to furniture and farm equipment. Sears catered in particular to the needs of rural populations.

In 1924 Robert Wood, an ex-army general, was hired by Sears to develop the company's retail chain stores. These were classified into three types of stores. The "A" Store, the grandest of all the Sears buildings, contained almost all of the items featured in the catalog.

The next class was the "B" Store. During the late 1920s and early 30s, Sears was in fierce competition with Montgomery Ward and J. C. Penney's for strategic locations for their stores. Sears would often rent a building for a "B" store and later construct a larger building. Although the "B" store offered a large selection of catalog items, the reduced store size somewhat limited the amount of merchandise in stock.

See continuation sheet

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The "C" store, in turn, featured only hardware and household items, neglecting clothes and furniture. The "C" stores were usually located out in the suburbs or in small towns.

Situated in the midst of a vast rural/agricultural area, Spokane proved an ideal location for a Sears venture of some magnitude. The Sears store erected on February 27, 1930 in Spokane was a class "A" store. The cost of construction was \$500,000, an additional \$250,000 was invested in merchandise for the facility. The Spokane Sears store was the 72nd class "A" store constructed in the United States. Located on the corner of Main and Lincoln, it stood only a block away from Montgomery Ward's new building, completed in 1929.

This was, in fact, a period of fierce competition among department stores, shop owners and other merchants for retail dollars in Spokane. From the 1900s to the 1950s, most Spokane merchants located their businesses downtown, and shoppers fulfilled their needs within the confines of the city center.

Local businesses like Davenport's and Haddad's specialized in merchandise and apparel aimed at an upper-end market. The locally owned Crescent and Palace department stores concentrated on upscale clothing and home furnishings. In contrast, the Sears and Montgomery Ward chain stores offered a wide range of affordable merchandise which appealed to a broad clientele and satisfied many needs.

Of the locally-owned department store type operations, the original site of the Crescent has been demolished, and the Palace now houses Nordstrom. The latter building was constructed in 1909 and does not retain the same degree of integrity as the Sears Building, having been substantially updated by Nordstrom. The second Crescent store, located at Wall and Riverside, was erected in 1919. The architect was L. L. Rand, who designed an impressive Neoclassical building elegantly clad with terra cotta detail. Now the site of Frederick and Nelson's, the 1919 Crescent store retains much of its original integrity of design. When compared to the Sears facility, the decade which separates these two buildings in time--and the differences in their audiences--becomes immediately apparent. Again, it is Montgomery Ward which most closely approximates Sears in design and intent.

Nevertheless, despite the obvious similarities between the Sears Building and that of its chief competitor, the facility at Main and Lincoln has maintained the greater degree of architectural integrity. While the Montgomery Ward Building has been marred by the addition of a third floor skywalk into the primary facade and the replacement of its original windows, the Sears building has experienced a fairly smooth transition to a new use.

Despite minor alterations the Sears building remains today a fine example of the Art Deco style, and an integral part of Spokane's impressive collection of Art Deco buildings. Other Art Deco contemporaries

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in Spokane include the City Ramp, the Rookery Building and the Fox Theater, as well as the Montgomery Ward Building, "home" of Sears' major competitor

The City Ramp, completed in 1927, was the City's first parking garage. The reinforced concrete structure has an ornate exterior, embellished with stucco piers extending to the roof line and culminating in decorated finials. The spandrels are clad with textured brick, accented with polychrome tile and terra cotta.

The Montgomery Ward Building, now City Hall, was completed in 1929. Rising seven stories in height and constructed of reinforced concrete, this building is greatly enhanced by Art Deco designs in a stylized floral motif. Like the Sears Building, Montgomery Ward's cannot rival the elegance of design and styling evident in the City Ramp garage. Nevertheless, both these buildings have utilized modest versions of a fashionable style of the 1920s and 1930s to attract a specific element of the Spokane market. The Montgomery Ward Building was listed in the State Register of Historic Places in 1980. Despite a monochromatic color scheme which fails to enhance its Deco details, the Sears Building certainly rivals the Montgomery Ward Building in integrity of design, and architectural quality. Indeed, the Sears chain helped popularize the Art Deco style nationally, the Spokane store is the finest extant example of the company's designs in the state of Washington.

In 1961, Sears decided to relocate to the Northtown Shopping Mall. Sears sold the downtown building to the Comstock Foundation to be used as Spokane's new library. A \$300,000 bond issue was approved for refurbishing the Sears store, and converting it into the new library.

By July of 1962, architect Carl W. Vantyne had been commissioned to oversee the remodeling of the library. As many as fifteen bids were submitted for the project, and on October 4, 1962, the Gus J. Burton Construction Company was selected to undertake the job. On Saturday, April 21, 1963, the new library opened its doors.

Since 1963, the Comstock Library has operated in this location, expanding its collection of books and research materials, but never expanding the floor plan. Deemed inadequate to serve present needs, the original Sears Building is currently scheduled for replacement with a new library facility on the same site. A local bond issue approved by Spokane voters in 1990 will finance the construction project.

9. Major Bibliographical References

The Spokesman-Review, February 27, 1930
Hyslop, Robert Spokane's Building Blocks Standard Blueprint Co , August 1983
Polk's Spokane City Directories--1929, 1930.
Department of Public Works, City of Spokane
Telephone interview with Ron Smith, Brand master, Sears, Roebuck & Co

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 #

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional data

- State historic preservation office
Other State agency
Federal agency
Local government
University
Other

Specify repository

10 Geographical Data

Acreage of property less than one

UTM References

A 11 468140 5278330
Zone Easting Northing
C Zone Easting Northing

B Zone Easting Northing
D Zone Easting Northing

See continuation sheet

Verbal Boundary Description

Beginning at the intersection of the North line of Main Avenue with the West line of Lincoln Street, thence northerly along the West line of Lincoln Street a distance of 300 feet, thence due west along the extended southerly line of Trent Avenue a distance of 81 feet, thence south 66° 23' west a distance of 26 feet, thence south 43° 37' west a distance of 115 feet, thence south 73° 23½' west a distance of 68 64 feet, thence south 86° 36' west a distance of 76 25 feet, more or less, to a point on the East line of Monroe

See continuation sheet

Boundary Justification

The nominated property includes the entire parcel historically associated with the Sears building

See continuation sheet

11. Form Prepared By

Name/title
organization Spokane City/County Hist Pres Office
street & number W 808 Spokane Falls Blvd
city or town Spokane

date February 1991
telephone (509) 456-4340
state Washington zip code 99201

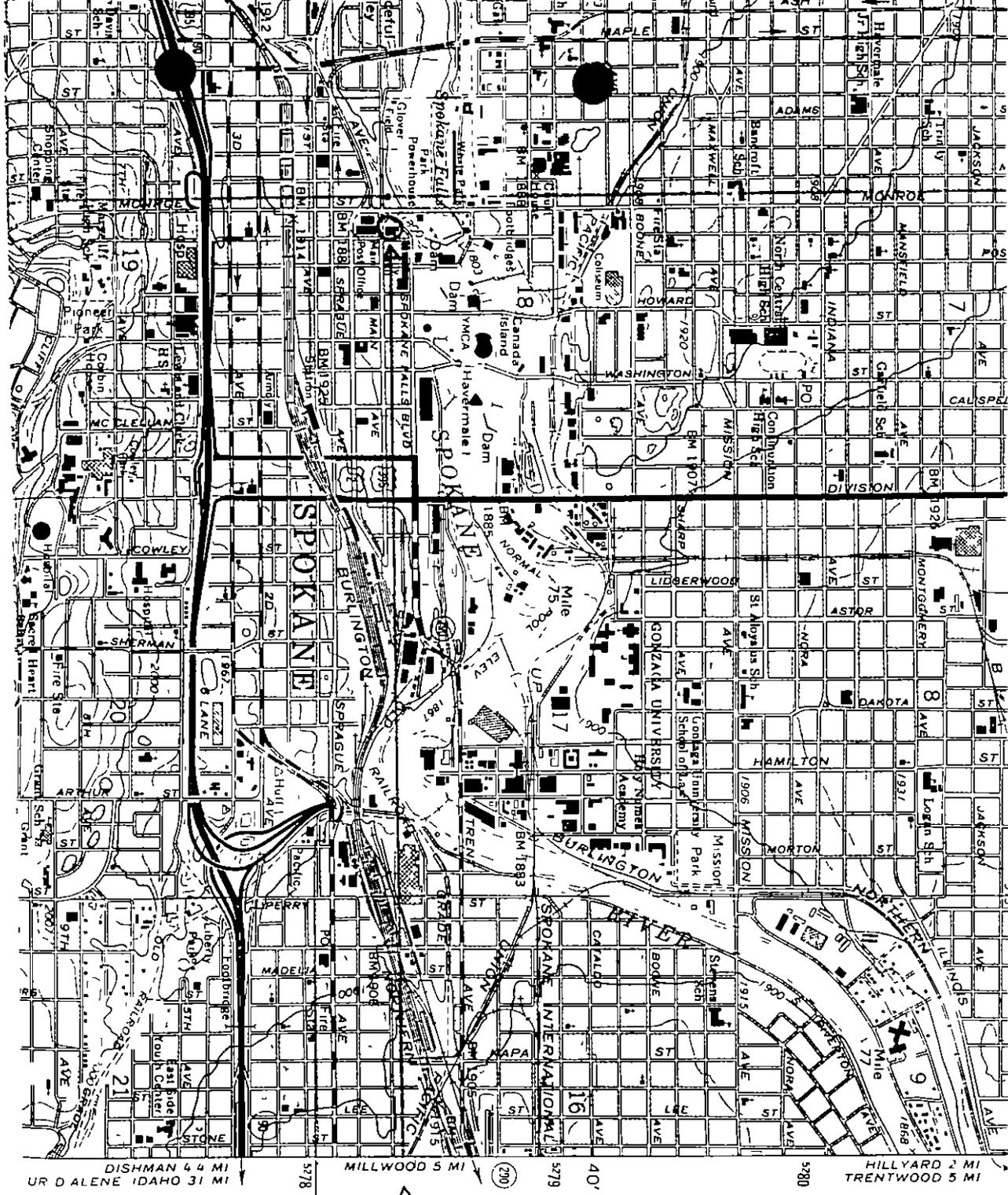
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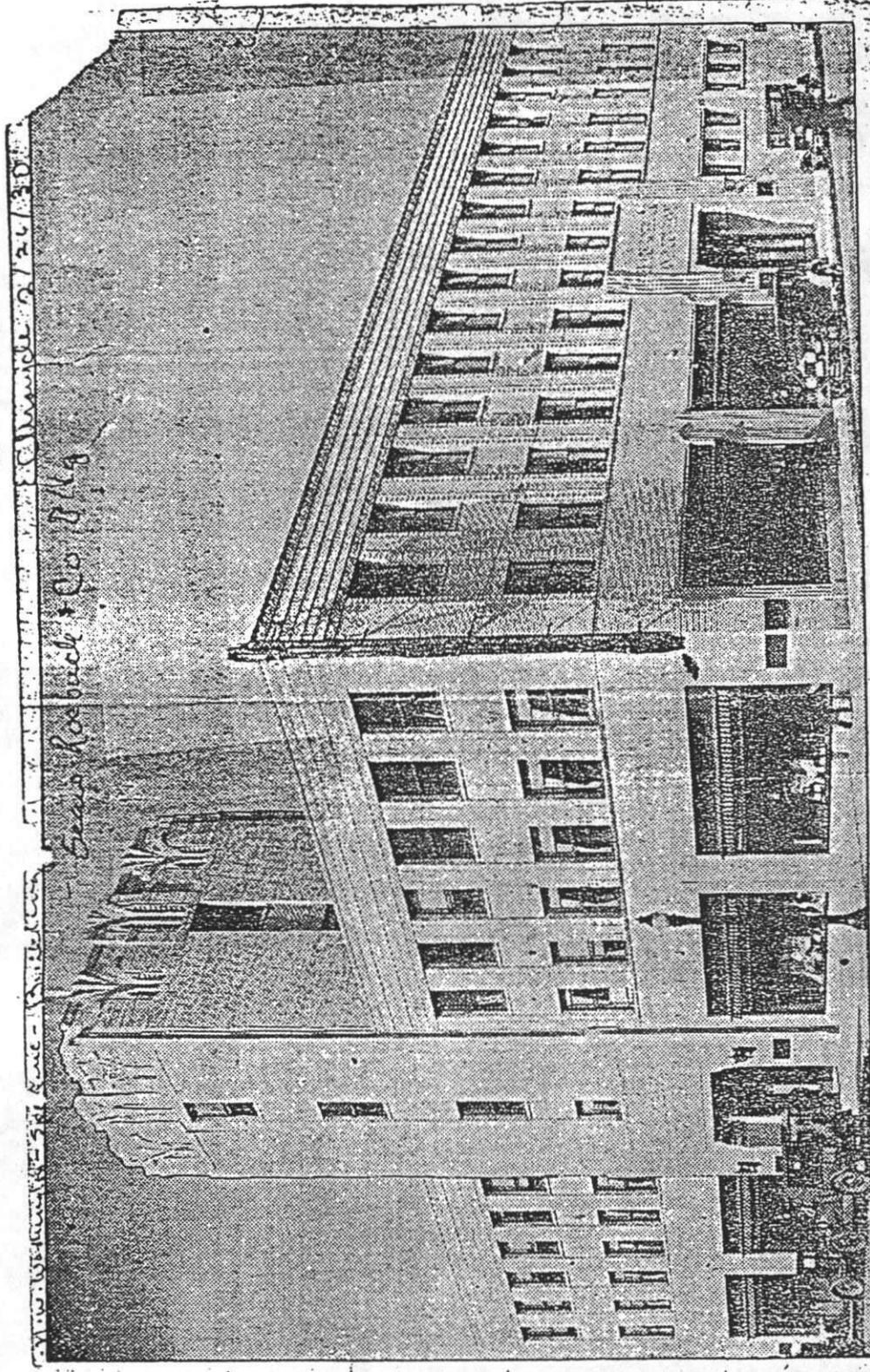
Street which is 182 feet north of the North line of Main Avenue, thence southerly along the East line of Monroe Street a distance of 67 15 feet, thence easterly at right angles to the East line of Monroe Street a distance of 141 75 feet, thence southerly parallel with the East line of Monroe Street a distance of 114 85 feet to the North line of Main Avenue, thence easterly along the North line of Main Avenue a distance of 183 48 feet, more or less, to the point of beginning



Sears, Roebuck Department Store  
 Spokane, Spokane Co, WA  
 UTM Reference  
 11468701, 215330

SPOKANE - Buildings - Sears

ATTACHMENT A



More than \$100,000 was paid to Spokane labor in the erection of the new \$500,000 Sears, Roebuck & Co. retail department store at Main and Lincoln, which will be formally opened at 9 a. m. tomorrow. Eighty per cent of the cost of building and fixtures was spent in Spokane. The new store, with its tower, is typical of the architecture of all of Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s class A department stores. The exterior was made attractive by laying the brick in patterns to break the monotony of the walls.

## THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Spokane Chronicle

William H. Cowles, 3rd, Publisher

Christopher Peck, Managing Editor

G. Douglas Floyd, Editorial Page Editor

Shaun Higgins, Marketing Director

Robert D. Fairchild, Business Manager

### EDITORIALS

## Library would make hysterical landmark

Members of Spokane's Historic Landmarks Commission said they wanted to send a message when they nominated the city library's downtown building to the National Register of Historic Places.

The nomination sends a message, all right — a message about the commission's judgment.

To call that faded, sagging, leaky, ugly old bunker a historic and architectural treasure makes a mockery of the commission's important calling.

Spokane does boast some structures with a historic past as well as some handsome architectural specimens. The library building isn't one of them. If it were, the commission could have nominated it months or years ago when talk of library improvements began; but it didn't. Neither did the City Council, which declined last week to give the building a historic designation.

And no wonder. The boxy edifice with its squat tower and feeble attempts at art deco gingerbread opened in 1930 as a Sears & Roebuck store, patterned according to a utilitarian, cookie-cutter design the chain planted along main streets from one end of the country to the other.

If the building's commercial past gives it historicity, the commission also ought to start nominating the vacant, outdated supermarket buildings whose kitschy, boarded-up false fronts line forgotten strips of the city's secondary arterials.

If the building's past as a library makes

it a monument, then it would suffice to save one of its bricks and call it a monument to mediocrity. Spokane has neglected its libraries for long enough. If the voters get their way, and they ought to get their way, libraries in this town have occupied recycled department stores and other second-hand, jury-rigged quarters for the last time.

When the voters approved a \$28.9 million bond issue by a resounding, record-setting margin last fall, they paid tribute to a well-crafted plan to put updated library materials in a set of brand-new buildings designed from scratch to function as libraries, not as department stores.

During the last few weeks the library has been urged to take the public's money, now that the money is in hand, and spend it differently than the public expected. The proposals would serve assorted development interests that have nothing to do with quality libraries.

The preservationists had their chance months ago when the library's New York consulting firm — which has designed libraries in restored buildings elsewhere around the country — studied the old Sears building, concluded it wasn't worth rehabilitating and recommended its demolition.

Library officials ought to stick with their mandate from the voters. The landmarks commission ought to limit its sentimental protectionism to buildings that clearly deserve it.

# OPINION

SUNDAY, FEB 3, 1991

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## THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW Spokane Chronicle

William H. Cowles, 3rd, Publisher

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### EDITORIALS

## City voters have right to library they chose

Last fall, Spokane voters embraced a \$28.9 million program to improve Spokane libraries. The 65 percent approval margin was the largest in state history for a library bond issue.

Plainly, the voters liked the proposal.

But that, alas, has not prevented Johnny-come-lately proposals to go back and change the program, a tactic guaranteed to afflict long-awaited library upgrades with the delays and studies and indecision in which too many other local civic initiatives have bogged down.

Banker Paul Kennedy wants to hitch the so-far successful library project to his untested notions for revising a couple of less successful projects: a new arena and a transit center. He suggests combining all three in a massive complex south of the Opera House.

Bill Gray, dean of Washington State University's Spokane branch, suggests the new city library be located in or close to Riverpoint where it somehow might enhance the library services of higher education facilities that someday will rise there.

Architect Ron Wells, Spokane County Treasurer Skip Chilberg and other fans of historic structures argue the library should preserve its main building instead of replacing it.

Taking the proposals in reverse order, the building may be old but that doesn't make it architecturally attractive, or historic, or capable of meeting the library's long-term needs. Having studied and ruled out other available downtown sites, library planners considered, and rejected, the current building's suitability for renovation.

Library officials also studied and rejected the notion Gray revived. Certainly, the higher education park at Riverpoint ranks among the city's top priorities but the sort of library it will require differs markedly from the sort of library every healthy community needs in its downtown core. University research, graduate studies and upper-division classes require specialized library service with links to the curriculum; university libraries are a job for universities. Gonzaga University already

plans a high-tech laboratory that promises to meet at least some of the higher education park's needs.

Further, a library close enough to Riverpoint to do it any good would be too far from the core to deliver the services the general public and the downtown business community have come to expect there. During its planning, the library board concluded that if it built a facility at Riverpoint it still would need another facility in the downtown core, meaning higher capital costs and much higher long-term operating costs.

Kennedy's proposal contains too many unknowns and improbabilities. The transit center still may be constructed at a site purchased for that purpose at Riverside and Wall, and the planning behind that location should not be thrown out the window for something more speculative. The arena project likewise has undergone exhaustive planning in which site questions received much attention. The chosen arena site is superior to the one Kennedy proposes, for several reasons including both an arena's and the Opera House's need for ample, low-cost parking.

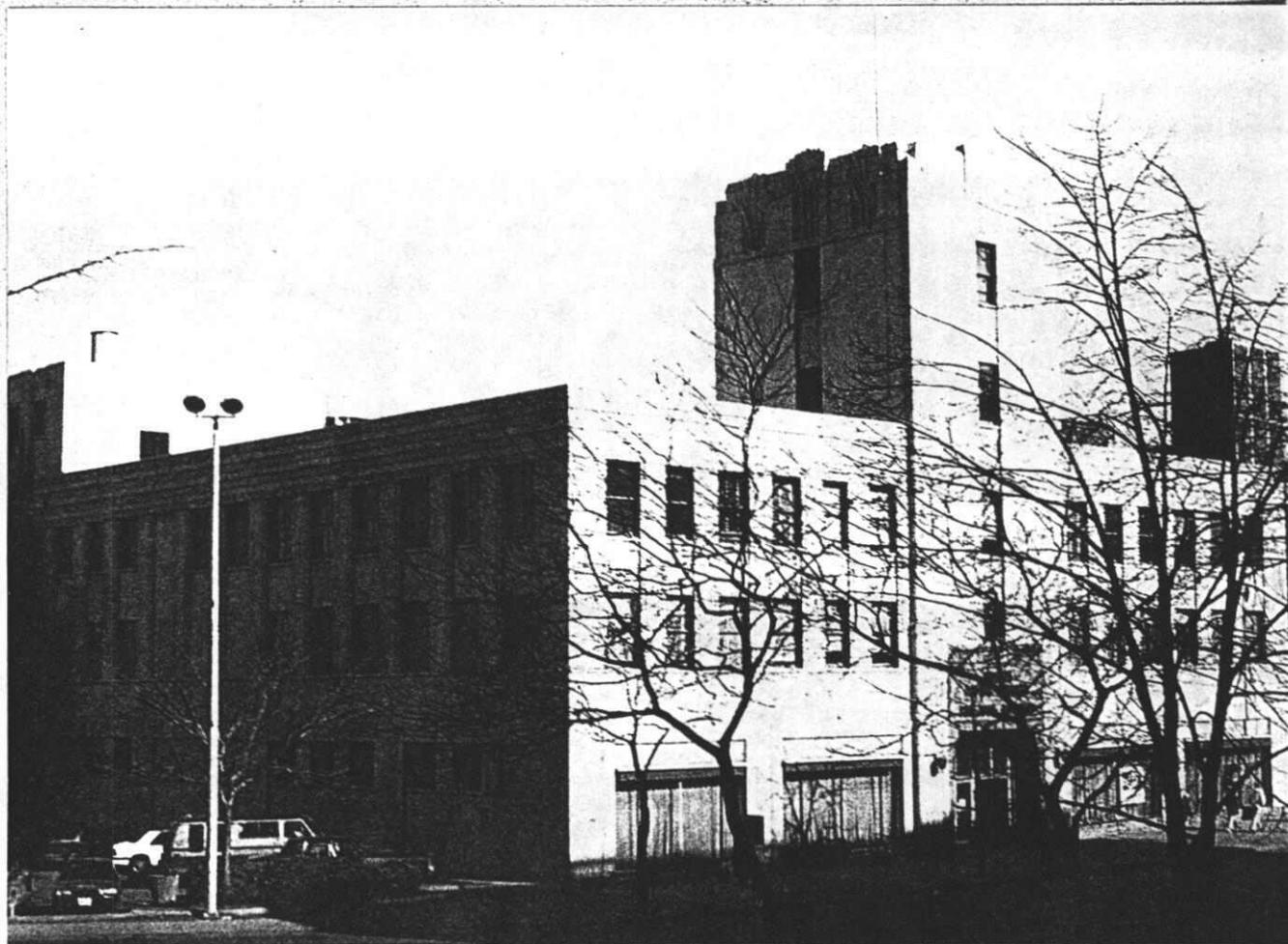
As with Riverpoint, the area south of the Opera House was evaluated by city library planners, who concluded it would not fit the library's needs, particularly its limited budget.

Spokane's Main Library ought to remain in the downtown core, as the voters expected and intended.

Downtown's future is at a critical juncture, and the library program voters approved can play an important role. The planned facility would preserve foot traffic significant to downtown vitality.

The library board agreed to wait 60 days for the latecomers to submit plans. However, there is no reason for them to expect a more favorable outcome now than their concepts received previously.

The voters, on the other hand, have a right to expect that after the 60 days have passed, the library system they voted for will be the one they get. Anything else would be a double-cross.

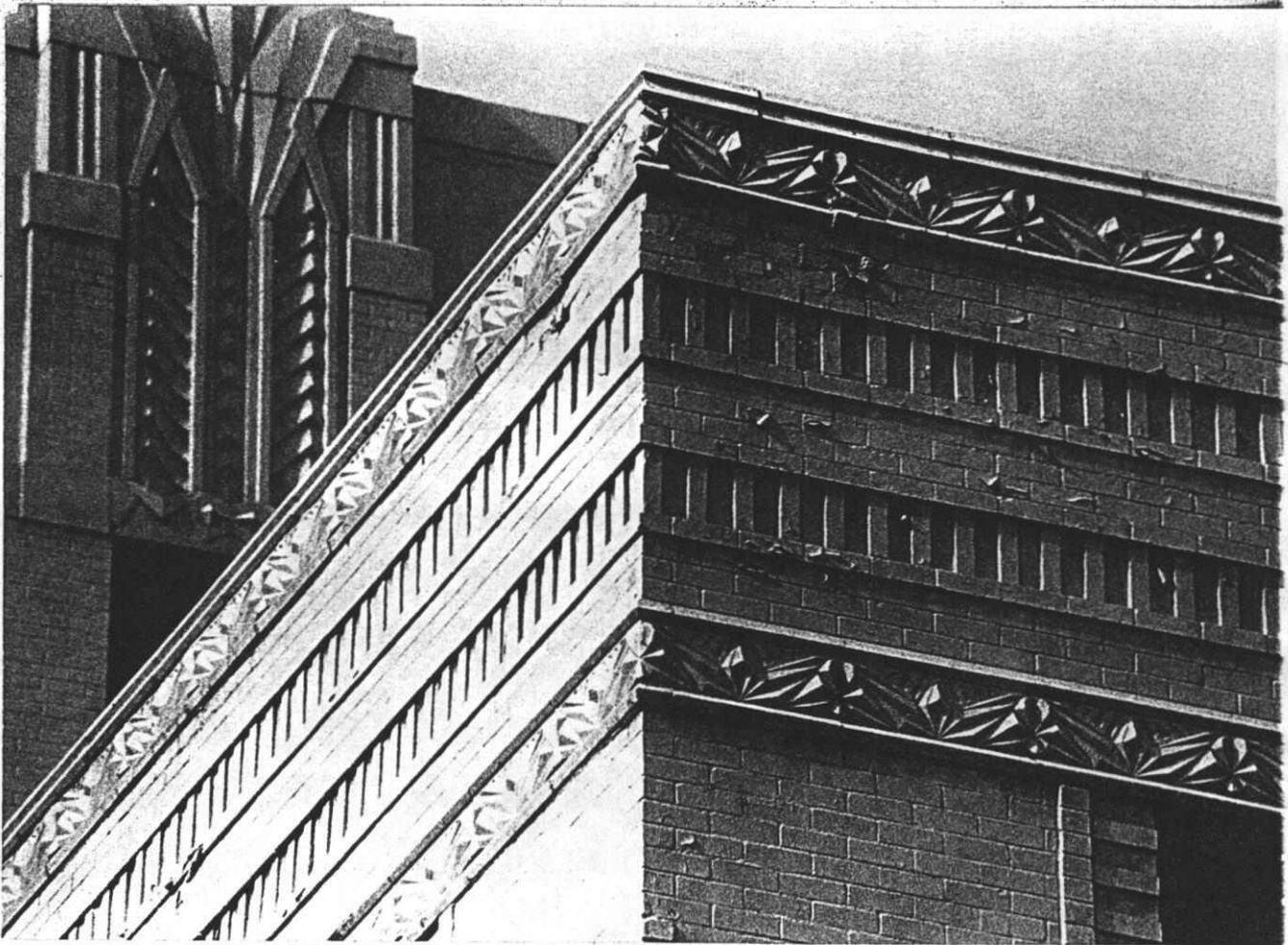


Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co., WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg  
Neg. at Spokane H.P.O.

Southwest Elevation, looking n.e.  
Photo # 3 of 8

Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co., WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg;  
Neg. at Spokane H.P.O.

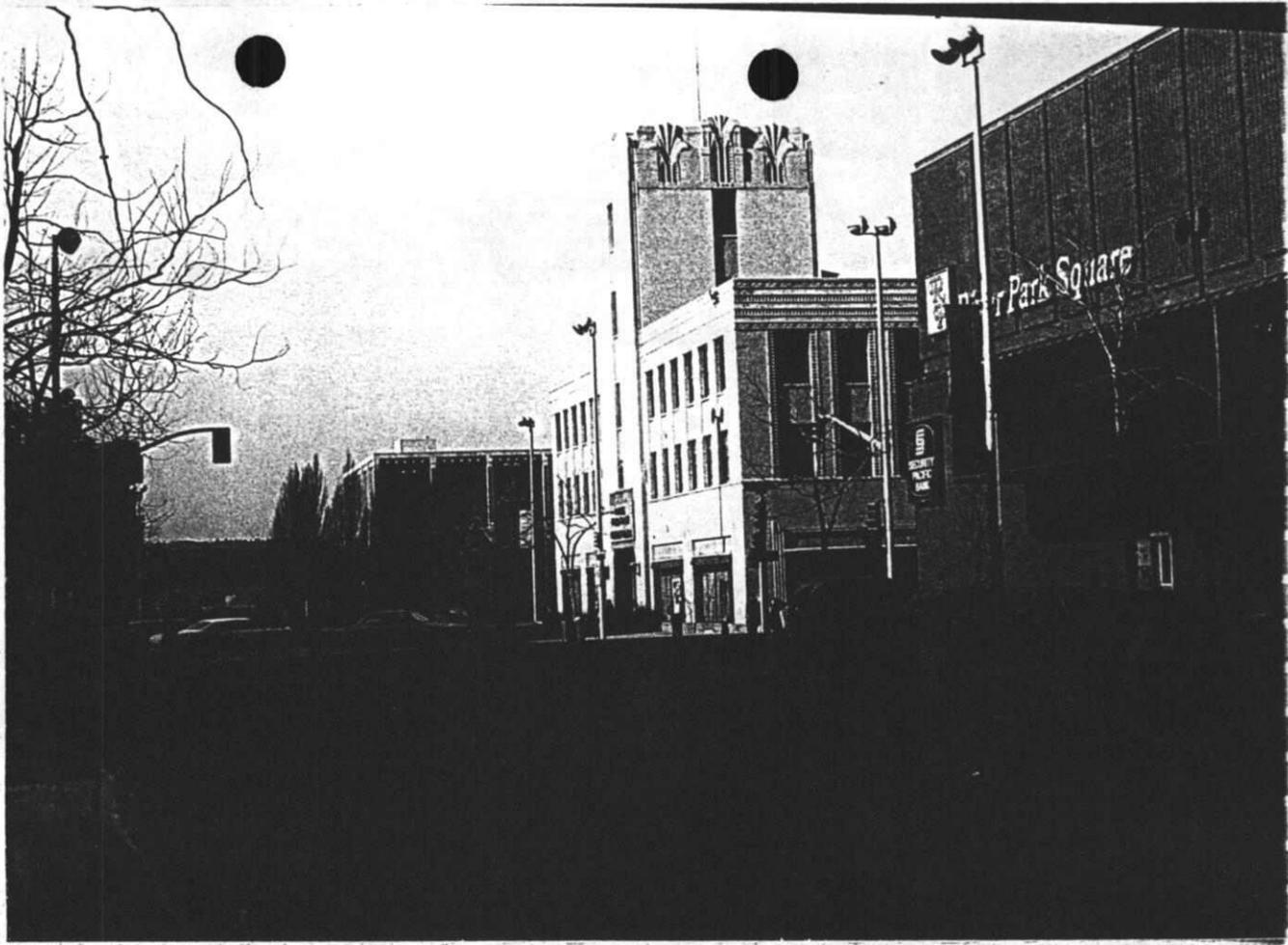
View of s.w. elevation, looking n.e.  
Photo # 4 of 8



Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co., WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg. Negative at Spokane H.P.O.  
View of NE elevation, looking SW  
Photo # 5 of 8

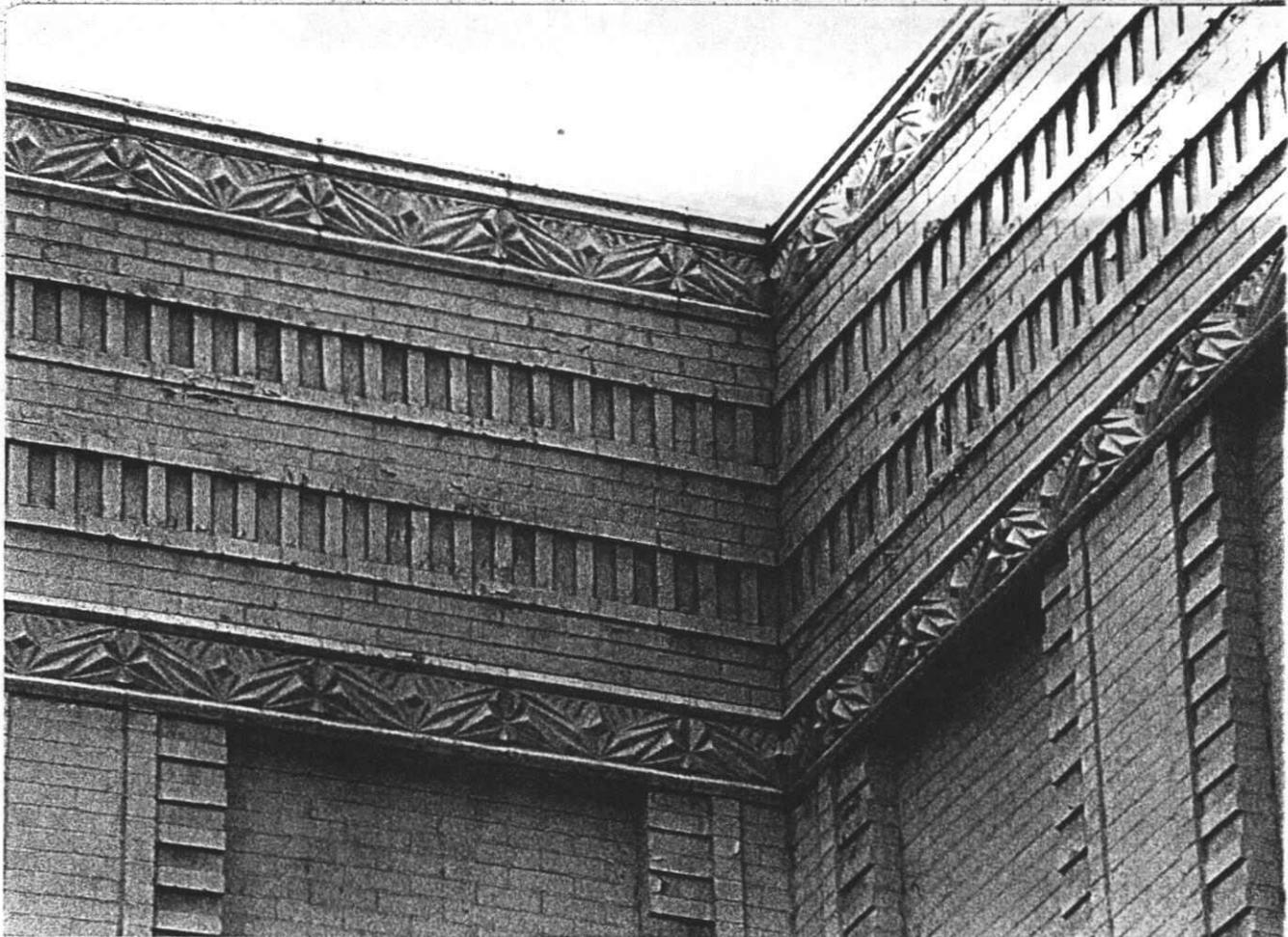
Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co., WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg. Neg at Spokane H.P.O.

Cornice detail, S.E. corner  
Photo # 6 of 8



Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co, WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg  
Neg at Spokane H.P.O  
View of s. elevation, looking w.  
Photo # 1 of 8

Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co, WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg  
Neg. at Spokane H.P.O  
Southwest elevation, looking N.W  
Photo # 2 of 8

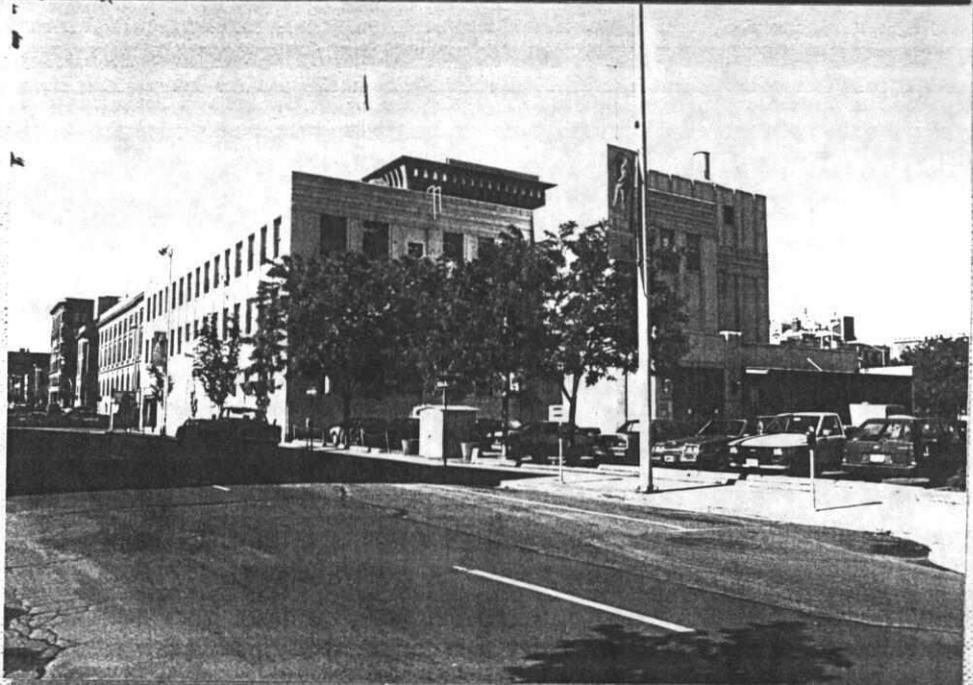


Sears, Roebuck Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co, WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg  
Neg. at Spokane H.P.O.

Rear Entrance Detail, N. facade  
Photo # 8 of 8

Sears, Roebuck Store Building  
Spokane, Spokane Co, WA  
Photo by Ellis, Gregg  
Neg. at Spokane H.P.O.

Cornice detail, n.w. facade  
Photo # 7 of 8



Comstock Library

E. Facade 5/90

Comstock Library

N. Facade 5/90

~~Comstock~~

COMSTOCK LIBRARY

S.E. facade

5/90