

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: Winona Athletic Club

Other names/site number: _____

Name of related multiple property listing: _____

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

2. Location

Street & number: 773 E. Fifth Street

City or town: Winona State: Minnesota County: Winona

Not For Publication: Vicinity:

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

Signature of certifying official/Title:

Date

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property ___ meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official:

Date

Title :

State or Federal agency/bureau
or Tribal Government

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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:) _____

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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

1

Noncontributing

buildings

sites

structures

objects

Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register None

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL/meeting hall

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

Current Functions

(Enter categories from instructions.)

SOCIAL/meeting hall

RECREATION AND CULTURE/auditorium

RECREATION AND CULTURE/sports facility

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7. Description

Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

Art Deco

Other: Late Gothic Revival

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)

Principal exterior materials of the property: Brick and Limestone

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.)

Summary Paragraph

In 1931 the Winona Athletic Club, a fraternal organization begun by young Polish American men, built a clubhouse in their East End neighborhood of Winona, Minnesota. The building is a two-story rectangular brick structure trimmed with limestone. It fronts on Fifth Street and its eastern façade runs along Mankato Avenue, the main commercial street on the East Side. The structure has two stories and a full basement. The first floor holds meeting rooms and a bar. The second floor contains a kitchen and an auditorium covered by a barrel-vaulted roof. There is a full basement which houses a six-lane bowling alley, a shower room, and the heating plant. Although the building generally reflects the Classical Moderne version of Art Deco style which was soon to become popular with New Deal buildings, the limestone entrance tower on Fifth Street has Gothic Revival elements. The design, workmanship and materials of the exterior are unchanged, except that the original double hung windows have been mostly replaced by glass block. The changes to the interior of the building are minor, including the installation of more advanced pin setting machines in the basement. Overall, the Winona Athletic Club retains a high level of historic integrity.

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Narrative Description

The Winona Athletic Club is a rectangular, red brick building trimmed in limestone. It has two stories and a full basement. A brick parapet topped by a stone coping surrounds the roof, which is barrel vaulted in the center two-thirds (over the second-floor auditorium) and flat roofed on either end. The main entrance is on the north façade which extends for about 47 feet along the edge of the sidewalk on Fifth Street.¹ The other primary façade extends for about 140 feet along the east side of the building. This façade is set back about six feet from the sidewalk along Mankato Avenue, a main thoroughfare on Winona's East End. The rear façade, on the south, is unadorned and abuts the alley. The west façade also has no ornamentation. It is adjoined by a narrow parking lot.

Exterior

The front façade is divided into three bays, the two easterly of which are identical (Photo #1). The westerly bay holds a massive square corner tower made of limestone which projects out about a foot from both the front and the west facades and rises about five feet above the level of the parapet surrounding the flat roof.² This tower contains the main entrance on the ground floor level, reached by two steps from the sidewalk. A pilaster on each side of the entranceway, constructed of limestone blocks in a random ashlar pattern, rises to the top of the tower. The building is entered through double bronze doors the upper halves of which hold glass panes. Above the doors is a transom in the shape of an isosceles trapezoid filled with glass ornamented with grillwork. Above the transom is a smooth limestone panel at the center of which the letters "Winona Athletic Clvb" [sic], bordered by curved flourishes, are carved. Above that is a group of three narrow window openings, each about one foot wide and five feet high, separated by narrow stone pilasters. Each opening holds five one-foot square panes of glass. This pattern is repeated two more times to reach the top of the tower.

The two easterly bays are framed by three wide brick pilasters, one on the corner, one next to the entrance tower, and one separating the two bays. The brick on this façade is laid in English bond, with alternating header and stretcher courses. These pilasters, which are about four feet wide, sit on stone plinths and divide into two narrower pilasters as they reach the level of the second floor, with a two-foot gap between them. As they reach the roof line, they are adorned with narrow stone curved strips running vertically. Each of the two bays contains paired rectangular window openings with stone sills on both the first and second floor levels. The openings are about two feet wide and six feet high. They are separated by brick pilasters in the form of flat buttresses. Historic photos indicate that these openings were originally filled with

¹ The street grid of the central and eastern sections of Winona is not aligned with the cardinal points of the compass. This is because the streets follow the Mississippi River which flows in a southeast direction as it passes Winona. The north façade is therefore more accurately described as northeast. This nomination form follows local custom by referring to the front façade which faces the river as north.

² The stone used in the building is Minnesota dolomite limestone mined at the Biesanz Stone quarry in Winona. It is sometimes called "Winona travertine."

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six-over-six double-hung windows. Today they are filled with glass block. There are small windows on the basement level, also now filled with glass block. On the second floor, the area above the window openings is filled with a smooth stone panel upon which geometric forms are carved. The parapet is capped with a rounded stone coping.

The other primary façade, along the east side of the building, is divided into eight bays (Photo #2). These bays are framed by four-foot wide brick pilasters which, like those on the front façade, sit on stone plinths and divide into two narrower pilasters as they reach the level of the second floor, with a two-foot gap between them. As on the front façade, the pilasters are adorned with narrow curved stone strips running vertically.

The eight bays are not uniform. Working from south to north, the first two and the last two are identical to the two easterly bays on the front facade, that is, they have paired rectangular window openings separated by brick pilasters in the form of flat buttresses on both the first and second floor levels. These bays are topped with flat stone panels with geometric carving, as on the front bay. The middle four bays, on the other hand, have sets of three rectangular windows separated by brick pilasters in the form of flat buttresses on the first and second floor levels. The third and the sixth bay also feature an extra pilaster, about three feet wide. This pilaster is on the south edge of the third bay and the north edge of the sixth bay. Each of the eight bays also has a basement window. Just as on the front façade, the original double hung windows have been replaced by glass block, except that there are occasional awning windows and ventilation vents.

The rear façade is mostly an undifferentiated brick wall (Photo #3). It has the same red brick, but unlike the primary facades, laid in common bond, with a course of headers between every five courses of stretchers. There are three windows on the second-floor level. These are metal casement windows which appear to be original. There are two small window openings on the first-floor level, and four on the basement level, all filled with either plywood or non-original panes. There are no doors. On the upper level there are large aluminum letters spelling out "Winona Athletic Club."

The west façade is also an unadorned brick wall in common bond with a few windows, all of which are filled with glass block (Photo #4). The southern half of this façade has two adjacent wood-framed shed additions attached to the first floor. They are both about six feet wide and sit on concrete block foundations about five feet high. The northern most shed, which houses the club's liquor store room, is sheathed in corrugated metal and has a delivery door above the concrete blocks.³ The southern shed, which until recently housed the kitchen of a pizza company, is sheathed in wood and has an entrance with a stairway into the main building.

³ As noted in Section 8, the club always had a lounge serving beverages and food. However, when the building opened in 1930, the Eighteenth Amendment was in force and the beverages were "near beer" and soft drinks. After Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the club developed a full-service bar and built this addition to securely house its liquor inventory.

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Interior

Inside the front entrance there is a vestibule with a door to a stairway down to the basement on the right and a short set of three stairs to a landing on the left. The landing accesses the stairway to the second floor on the right and a hallway on the left leading to the first-floor rooms. The vestibule and hallway floors and the stairs are made of terrazzo. The hallway has a door on its northern side to the "Embassy Room," a large, carpeted meeting room in the north east corner of the first floor. A door on the south side of the hallway leads first into a billiard and game room. Along the west side of this area is the club office.

South of the game room is the lounge which has an elaborate curved bar along its western side (Photo #5). The bar has a stained wood top and carved wood trim on the customer side. Above the bar, and echoing its curve, are soffits decorated with the same wood carving as the side of the bar. The area around the bar has tile flooring, and the rest of the room is carpeted. At the end of the lounge, on its southern side, are men's and women's restrooms. In the southwest corner of the lounge is a back stairway leading both to the second floor and the basement. A door on the south end of the bar leads to a small kitchen. A door on the north end of the bar leads to the liquor storage room. The kitchen and the storage room are in the one-story wood frame additions on the western façade of the building.

The stairway off the entrance hallway leads to the second floor where it opens to a central hallway running north and south. The hallway has hardwood floors and a suspended acoustical ceiling. On the west side of this hallway are windows for a ticket booth, and then for a coat check (Photo #6). Beyond that on the west is a door to the women's restroom. On the east side of this hallway is a door that leads to an area which was originally divided into a kitchen and a dining room, but is now one kitchen space which fills the northeast corner of the second floor. The restroom, kitchen and storage area floors are covered with linoleum.

At the far end of the hallway, on the south, are double doors which lead into the auditorium. This room is about 42 by 76 feet and has a proscenium stage at the south end which is about 16 feet deep (Photo #7). The auditorium has a hardwood floor and a suspended acoustical tile ceiling. The suspended ceiling hangs about 4 feet below an earlier ceiling covered with white acoustic tiles. This earlier ceiling is flat, although as noted above, the roof above the auditorium is a shallow barrel vault. Ductwork and electrical wiring occupy the space between the two ceilings. There are two large air conditioning units on the west wall. The east wall is a continuous series of windows. There is a door on the east side of the proscenium which leads to a storage area behind the stage and also to the men's restroom. At the southeast corner of the storage area is a door that leads to the back stairway. A door on the west side of the proscenium leads to a storage room which was recently created by adding a sheetrock wall separating the western part of the backstage area. On the north end of the auditorium, east of the entrance doors, are double doors that lead to the kitchen.

The stairway in the first-floor vestibule leads down to the basement. Except for its far southern end, the basement was built to house a bowling center, and perhaps for this reason has unusually high ceilings. Along the northern wall is a service counter where patrons could rent shoes and

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pay for their bowling. The bulk of the basement is taken up by six modern bowling lanes with the typical hardwood floors and rubber gutters (Photo #8). At the end of each lane is a Brunswick automatic pinsetter. Along the west side of the basement is a hallway which is separated from the nearest lane by a partition sheathed in wood. This partition has a continuous band of windows which allowed an audience to observe the games from chairs set up along the hallway. At the southern end of this hallway is a door that leads to the area which holds the massive machinery of the six automatic pinsetters. Beyond that, along the south end of the basement, is a shower room, a boiler room, and the back stairway.

Integrity

The Winona Athletic Club retains a high level of historic integrity. Its setting and location are unchanged. The design, material and workmanship of the exterior have not been altered, except that the original six-over-six windows in the two primary facades have been replaced by glass block. It is not clear when the glass blocks were added, but it may have been after the October 1954 fire.⁴ Glass block was popular in the 1930s, especially in buildings of this type, and it would not have been surprising if they had been included in the original construction.⁵ In any case, the window openings have not been changed, and installing windows similar to the originals is possible. At some point, two one-story, wood-framed, shed-roofed additions were added to the west façade. These are not visible when viewing the primary facades. In general, the exterior of the building looks very much like it did in 1930 and conveys a feeling and association for the decade when it was built.

There have been minor changes to the interior over the years, although most of them have occurred within the period of significance. Some changes resulted from the 1954 fire. Because a hole was burned in the auditorium's dance floor on the second floor, the entire hard wood floor was replaced with new hard wood at that time. At some point, a suspended acoustical ceiling was added with recessed fluorescent light fixtures. The fire also resulted in removing the original cloak room on the first floor where the fire started. The bar had been remodeled in 1947 and was not significantly damaged by the fire.

The major change to the basement involved the installation of the six automatic pin setters by the Brunswick Corporation sometime in the mid-1960s. This did not substantially alter the alleys themselves, but did change the area behind the alleys. Today this area houses the massive machinery whereas in the past there would have been simpler machinery overseen by "pin boys."

Overall, visitors to the interior of the Winona Athletic Club enter a milieu very much rooted in the 1930s and 1940s, with a few changes which date to the 1950s and 1960s. It strongly conveys its association with the decades when the Winona Athletic Club was the social center of the East End.

⁴ As noted in Section 8, a fire which began on the first floor burned a hole in the auditorium floor in 1954.

⁵ 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): p. 6.

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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.)

ETHNIC HERITAGE/EUROPEAN

ENTERTAINMENT/RECREATION

Period of Significance

1931-1960

Significant Dates

1931

Significant Person

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder

Boyum, Schubert, and Sorenson, architects

Leo J. Ritter, general contractor

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Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph

The Winona Athletic Club is eligible for the National Register under Criterion A as locally significant in the areas of European Ethnic Heritage and Entertainment/Recreation. Immigrants from the Kashubian region of Poland, then under Prussian rule, formed a cohesive community on the East End of Winona in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. Establishing their own Polish speaking Catholic parish was their first priority. In 1898, young second generation Polish American men formed the Winona Athletic Club. Over the course of the 20th Century, the club they founded was second only to the church in its importance to the community. Their desire to organize their own club reflected the modern trend toward sex-segregated fraternal organizations and also the emerging phenomenon of sports as a chief form of leisure. The club prospered and grew, and eventually was able to finance and build an impressive building which played a central role in the social life of the East End immigrant community into at least the 1990s and to a lesser degree continues to play a role today. The period of significance begins with the opening of the building in 1931 and concludes in 1960, when the membership of the club's benefit association peaked and began its slow decline. Although the club prospered for several decades after this, the height of its significance had begun to wane.

Narrative Statement of Significance

Winona's East End Immigrant Community

European-Americans first settled the sandbar on the Mississippi River that became the city of Winona in 1851 shortly before the U.S. government and the Mdewakanton Dakota signed the Treaty of Mendota, which opened up the west bank of the river for settlement. Incorporated as a city in 1857, the small settlement quickly grew into a commercial center for the upper Midwest, thanks to lumber, grain, steamboats and railroads.⁶

Shipping and milling wheat was the city's original economic motor, and by 1875, thirteen grain mills operated in Winona County. By the late 1880s, the wheat industry surrounding Winona had declined. Timber processing, however, had begun its rise, and in the final analysis, was the most important factor in Winona's commercial development.⁷ The first sawmill went into operation in 1855 and eventually four lumbering companies dominated Winona's riverfront, the largest of which was the Laird Norton Co. Those mills processed timber cut in the great white pine forests of the "St. Croix Triangle" formed by the St. Croix and Chippewa rivers. Local lumbermen benefited greatly from Winona's strategic location just thirty miles downstream from where the Chippewa joins the Mississippi. By 1870, Winona was one of the nation's top lumber processing and marketing centers.

⁶ *River Town Winona: Its History and Architecture*, 2nd edition (Winona: Winona County Historical Society, 2006), p. 1-5.

⁷ William Crozier, "A Social History of Winona, Minnesota 1865-1895" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Nebraska, 1975), 38.

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The earliest settlers and entrepreneurs of Winona were almost exclusively “old stock Americans,” primarily of English and Scot ancestry, who migrated to the Mississippi River Valley from states like Pennsylvania and New York seeking new economic opportunities. After the Civil War, the newcomers to Winona tended to be European-born immigrants who identified as German, Irish, Norwegian, Polish, or Bohemian. They came seeking jobs in the grain milling, lumber, and railroad industries. In particular, the booming lumber firms attracted German, Polish and Bohemian immigrants.⁸

Poles were not the largest immigrant group in the city, but they were the most cohesive and unified because of their common religion and customs. Most came from the Kashubian region of Poland that borders the Baltic Sea. They spoke a distinct dialect that was related to, but different from the Polish spoken elsewhere. During the nineteenth century, the Kashubian region of Poland was under Prussian control. The government outlawed the use of Kashubian in the schools, and generally sought to “Germanify” the Poles. As a result, some Poles in the region adopted German names, and even identified themselves as “Prussian” when they arrived in the United States. In general, however, the suppression of Polish culture was a factor encouraging Kashubians to leave Prussia, along with the fact that their economic opportunities there were severely curtailed. In the United States, Kashubians settled in a handful of communities, one of which was Winona.⁹

Poles from the Kashubian region soon became the predominant ethnic group in Winona’s East End, a residential neighborhood adjacent to the saw mills of the Laird Norton Co and the Empire Lumber Company along the river front. They quickly established their own institutions. The early immigrants joined a German-language Catholic parish, but by 1873 they had prevailed on Bishop John Ireland in St. Paul to authorize a new Polish parish on the East End to be known as St. Stanislaus Kostka. They built a church and in 1888 they added a school where classes were taught in English and Polish. In 1894, the East End Poles replaced their original church with a massive basilica, also called St. Stanislaus, which could hold 1,800 worshippers.¹⁰ By 1913, the parish school had 815 students studying in 17 classrooms under the tutelage of the Sisters of Notre Dame.

The Polish population of Winona grew rapidly during this period, from 1,148 in 1880 to 4,072 in 1905, by which time the Poles constituted about 20% of the total population of 20,821. Unlike

⁸ Fred W. Kohlmeyer, *Timber Roots: The Laird Norton Story 1855-1905* (Winona: Winona County Historical Society, 1972), p. 238-244.

⁹ William L. Crozier, “A People Apart: A Census Analysis of the Polish Community of Winona, Minnesota, 1880-1905,” *Polish-American Studies* 38, No. 1 (Spring, 1981): p. 5-7; Frank Renkiewicz, “The Poles,” in June Drenning Holmquist, *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State’s Ethnic Groups* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), p. 362-363; John Radzilowski, *Poles in Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2005), p. 6-9; Polish Cultural Institute, *The Kashubian Polish Community of Southeastern Minnesota* (Chicago: Arcadia Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Alan K. Lathrop, *Churches of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 232-234. St. Stanislaus, which is at 625 E. 4th Street, was added to the National Register in 1984. They petitioned Bishop Ireland in St. Paul because the Diocese of Winona was not created until 1889.

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Winonans of German ancestry, who were spread more or less equally over the city's four wards, 85% of the city's Poles lived together in the 4th Ward, the political designation for Winona's East End.¹¹ Winona's Polish population was primarily composed of workers, with fewer Poles becoming professionals or proprietors than the other ethnic groups in the city. Even by 1905, about 75% of Winona's Poles were listed as unskilled workers, although the number of skilled workers and proprietors had begun to grow. Although their incomes were meager, the Polish community highly valued home ownership. In the 1880s and 1890s the Poles built many "shotgun" houses on the East End which had very narrow front façades which allowed them to fit on lots which had been divided in half. As a result, home ownership among Poles significantly increased, although most held property valued at \$1,000 or less.¹²

The Kashubian Poles were not the only Slavic immigrants living on Winona's East End. Starting in the 1850s, Czechs began migrating to Minnesota. Commonly referred to at the time as Bohemians, they mostly settled in farm communities in southern Minnesota. However, by 1880, there were 441 Bohemians living in the city of Winona, which was only about one third of the Polish population but exceeded the number of Norwegians at that time. Most of them lived on the East End, and eventually, prevailed upon Bishop John Ireland to create a Bohemian parish. It was named for St. John Nepomucene, the patron saint of Bohemia, and also included an elementary school.¹³

Generally speaking, there was little overt discrimination against Poles or Bohemians in Winona, but clearly Winona's established middle class viewed "Polander town," as they sometimes called the East End, as a somewhat foreign place, perhaps a place to be avoided, and the Poles and Bohemians as people who perhaps drank too much and about whose names one could joke.¹⁴ Be that as it may, the Poles built their own somewhat autonomous world there. After the church the most important cultural institution was the *Wiarus*, the Winona-based newspaper which became one of the most widely circulated Polish weeklies in the United States.¹⁵ The community also generated a large number of organizations which structured East Side social life. Many of these were based in Catholic parish life. A history of Winona written in 1913 listed fourteen societies connected with St. Stanislaus parish, including clubs focused on women, young people, choral

¹¹ Crozier (1981), p. 10-11. There was also a smaller "satellite" Polish community on the west end (the 1st ward). Those Poles eventually formed their own parish, St. Casimir, and opened a west side church and school in 1905.

¹² Jeffrey Hess and Heather Maginniss, *Final Report: Historic Resources of the Eastern Portion of the City of Winona* (September 1993); Crozier (1981), p. 20-21.

¹³ C. Winston Chrislock, "The Czechs," p 335-351 in Holmquist; Crozier (1981), p. 9. The church, located at 560 E. Broadway, still operates but is now part of the St. Stanislaus parish. The Bohemians petitioned Bishop Ireland in St. Paul because the Diocese of Winona was not created until 1889.

¹⁴ Crozier (1981), p. 7-8.

¹⁵ Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Winona County, Minnesota* (Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr. and Co., 1913), p. 1098-1100.

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singing, and amateur theater.¹⁶ Other organizations expressed the divergent ways in which Polish Americans related to questions of Polish national consciousness. The Polish Roman Catholic Union of America defined Polish identity in purely religious terms, while the Polish National Alliance took a broader, more pluralistic approach to Polish identity. The Polish Union of America, a third group, steered a middle course. All these groups also functioned as fraternal organizations which provided some sort of insurance to their members.¹⁷

The early days of the Winona Athletic Club

Around 1898 a group of young men on the East End formed a different kind of organization which they called the “4th Ward Athletic Club” and later the “Winona Athletic Club.”¹⁸ According to a paper prepared by a club member many years later, eight young men formed an athletic club which met in a “summer kitchen” in someone’s home. They seemed to be interested in a place where they could socialize in a male environment focused on athletics and other games. They were perhaps motivated by a desire to create a club that did not have its agenda set by the local priest, as was the case with the parish societies, or by a national organization concerned primarily with Polish national identity. Like almost all the early members of the Winona Athletic Club, they were “second generation” Polish Americans, meaning that they had been born in the United States, in fact mostly on the East End, to parents who had been born in Poland, usually in the Prussian controlled province of Kashubia.

The young men created their club completely on their own, but at the same time they were participating in two major trends in American popular culture around the turn of the century. First, this was the golden age of fraternalism, and every city and town had dozens of fraternal organizations, almost always strictly sex segregated, around which most people built their social lives. The biggest fraternal organizations nationally were the Masons and the Odd Fellows, but there were many more with significant followings.¹⁹ In the early twentieth century, most of the major fraternal organizations were represented in Winona, starting with the Masons who built a large temple in downtown Winona in 1909. There was also the Odd Fellows, the Elks, the Knights of Pythias, the Eagles, the United Order of Druids, the Macabbees, the Modern Woodmen, the Red Men, the Ancient Order of Modern Workmen, and the Independent Order of Foresters, among others. Many of these organizations had women’s auxiliaries. The business

¹⁶ Curtiss-Wedge, p. 1100-1101.

¹⁷ Renkiewicz, p. 372. It is important to keep in mind that there was no Polish state during this period. In three separate “partitions,” Russia, Austria and Prussia had divided Poland. After the last partition in 1795, the Polish state ceased to exist. For Poles, including those in emigration, reconstituting a Polish state was an urgent priority.

¹⁸ Several record books of the club survive and are preserved in the archives of the Winona County Historical Society. The club’s record book for the period covering 1908 and 1909 is labeled “Secretary Book, 4th Ward Athletic Club, Dec 1907 to Dec 1909.” Subsequent books use the name Winona Athletic Club.

¹⁹ Alvin Schmidt, *Fraternal Organizations* (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1980). In the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan reemerged as a major fraternal organization in the northern states. Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the Ku Klux Klan* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2017).

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community also maintained a traditional downtown meeting place called the Arlington Club.²⁰ Secondly, this was the era when sports became a dominant form of leisure activity, and millions of Americans began to enthusiastically play sports or watch sporting events. Baseball, basketball, bowling, and billiards emerged as popular activities across the cities and towns of the Midwest. As elsewhere, East End Winonans became both players and spectators of the new sports, and these activities became central to the social life of the city, especially among young men.²¹

Many of the fraternal societies in Winona were dominated by the “old stock” Americans who lived in the central and western neighborhoods of Winona. This was not a social milieu in which working class men of Polish ancestry would be welcome, and in any case, the Catholic Church had long warned the faithful to steer clear of Freemasonry. There were Catholic fraternal organizations active in Winona, including the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic Knights of America, but there was no organization quite like the Winona Athletic Club. With its secular orientation and athletic focus it met a need and grew steadily.

At the beginning, the club only admitted members who were “single men of good character.” This rule was dropped when it became evident that it required the expulsion of its founding members as they married. By 1900, the club had grown to where it could afford to rent a “club house” in Radecky Hall on the East End just a few blocks from where the Winona Athletic Club building would eventually be established. A framed display dated 1911 which hangs in the entrance hallway of the current club features individual photos of 32 members. There were 41 members in 1913, and judging from its monthly meetings, social activities seemed to be more important to the young men than sports. The minutes routinely report how much beer and cigars were bought and sold in the clubhouse, and how much was taken in at its dances, some open to the public and some just for club members, and at its moonlight cruises on the Mississippi. The moonlight cruises were popular, attracting, for example, 1,300 to an excursion on the steamer Capitol in June 1924.²² World War I seemed to have little impact on the club, perhaps because most of the members were too old to be drafted. The club did make donations to the Red Cross and held a dance to benefit the Polish Army.

After the war there were changes. The beginning of Prohibition in 1920 meant that the “beer committee” began reporting sales of “near beer” and “pop.” The club also grew by merging with other neighborhood groups. In the spring of 1919, baseball enthusiasts organized the East End

²⁰ Curtiss-Wedge, p. 1017-1045.

²¹ Steven A. Reiss, *City Games: The Evolution of American Urban Society and the Rise of Sports* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 76-81; Robert B. Weaver, *Amusements and Sports in American Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), p. 168-171; William J. Galush, *For More Than Bread: Community and Identity in American Polonia, 1880-1940* (Boulder Co: East European Monographs, 2006), p. 205-206.

²² “Moonlight Excursion Attended by 1,300,” *Winona Republican-Herald*, June 27, 1924. This was the third annual cruise. The minutes contain little discussion of sports. The priority the club placed on socializing is perhaps reflected by the fact that the club had five officers: president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, and “beer treasurer.”

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Athletic Association which fielded a team called the Pirates which had a successful season. At its annual meeting in December of that year, the Winona Athletic Club agreed to merge with this new association, which added 31 members and sponsorship of the baseball team. This expansion apparently encouraged the club to formally incorporate as the Winona Athletic Club, Inc. in 1920.²³ In 1922, the club merged with the Married Men's Club, another neighborhood group, which added 22 more members. The growth in membership seemed to spark a renewed interest in sports and games. The club sponsored a semi-professional baseball team called the Athletics in a Minnesota-Iowa league, and another that played "kittenball" (also called "diamond ball") in a town league.²⁴ The clubhouse also featured billiards and a steady schedule of schafkopf and skat tournaments, two card games of German origin that the Kashubian Poles apparently brought with them from Europe.²⁵ Some of the members posed for a formal photograph at their clubhouse with bowling pins, dumbbells and boxing gloves (Figure #1).

With the membership now over 100, the club moved several times in search of larger accommodations, first to Strehlow's Hall on east 5th Street, and then to a house at 759 East Broadway. In 1922, the club purchased the property to the east of this house and built a one-story brick structure to house a four-lane bowling alley.²⁶ The new building cost over \$6,000, an amount financed partly by loans from the membership and partly by a bank loan. The board had wagered that the new bowling alley would significantly increase membership, and in fact 43 new members were admitted at a single meeting in 1923.²⁷ The club sponsored a successful bowling tournament with 125 teams during that year, and also began sponsoring a band and holding occasional fundraisers to equip the musicians. Commercial radio broadcasting was just beginning in 1922, and the club spent \$200 to buy an early radio for the club room. At the end of 1923, the club had 253 members and was generating funds not only from dues but also from the moonlight cruise, a club raffle, and the bowling alley.²⁸ In 1925, a member who was a professional photographer offered to take the picture of each club member for free.²⁹ These photos were mounted on a large framed display which still hangs in the club today (Figure #2).

²³ "Two Winona Athletic Clubs Form One Body," *WRH*, December 23, 1919, p. 10.

²⁴ "Athletics Name Edel Manager, Sign Players," *WRH*, April 26, 1924, p. 14; "Hargesheimers, Athletic Club, Choate, Winona Milk, Fibre Co Win at K-Ball," *WRH*, July 27, 1922, p. 10. Kittenball and diamond ball were early names for what today is called softball. The idea was to create a variant of baseball which could be played in smaller areas or even inside.

²⁵ Schafkopf is a German four-handed trick-taking card game dating from the 18th Century. It is especially popular in Bavaria, but was played throughout German-speaking lands. Skat is a three-handed trick-taking card game from the early 19th Century which is the most popular card game in Germany. Both are related to an American version called Sheepshead (the English translation of Schafkopf). See David Parlett, *Oxford Dictionary of Card Games* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁶ "Athletic Club to Install Four Modern Alleys," *WRH*, February 8, 1922, p. 10; "Winona Athletic Club Awards Contract for Addition to Building," *WRH*, July 1, 1922, p. 8.

²⁷ Minutes of the Winona Athletic Club, Inc (1923-1942), October 5, 1923.

²⁸ Minutes, December 4, 1923.

²⁹ Minutes, January 6, 1925. The photographer hoped to sell additional copies to individual club members.

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Growth leads to a new building

East Enders continued to join the Winona Athletic Club during the mid-1920s, and as was the case with other fraternal organizations, membership was not guaranteed. Applicants needed a sponsor and had to be approved by a vote of the entire membership at the monthly meeting (Figure #3). Most were admitted but not everyone.³⁰ The club carefully guarded its exclusive nature, occasionally reminding members about the rules limiting the admission of guests, called “outsiders” or “strangers” in the board minutes, to club functions. In the minutes, the secretary often referred to members as “brothers.”

Although the club had been founded by young men of Polish ancestry it never explicitly defined itself as Polish. Given the fact that almost all the members were Polish, with a few members of Czech ancestry, the Polish character of the club was more or less taken for granted. Occasionally the minutes report, for example, a donation to the Count Pulaski Sesquicentennial Celebration, or that a Catholic mass would be celebrated at the Winona Bandshell. Dr. Aurelius H. Maze, a dentist who served on the board for many years and was eventually president, implored members to buy a new Count Pulaski postal stamp. He was quoted in the minutes as saying that this would “show that there are a lot of Polish people here and that you are interested in the Pulaski stamp.”³¹ On the other hand, when the board was asked to donate to the school milk fund, they gave equal amounts to the public and Catholic schools. Meanwhile, a few applicants who were neither Polish nor Czech were accepted for membership. In the mid-1920s, men named Duffy, O’Brien and McConnell were admitted. Another man of Irish ancestry admitted was Leo F. Murphy, a young lawyer, who would later become a leader of the club and its legal advisor.³²

The club added over 100 new members in 1927, and for the first time, the board began to seriously discuss the building or purchasing of larger quarters.³³ President Leon Bronk told the annual meeting in December that he hoped that the club would be able to build a new clubhouse in the coming year. Although the board had been diverting revenue to a building fund it cautiously put off committing the organization to a large construction project during 1928. In June 1929, an opportunity arose. The estate of Peter Bub, founder of Winona’s most successful brewery, put the property at the corner of 5th and Mankato Avenue on the market. This was an ideal location since Mankato Avenue is the “main street” of the East End. The board closed the deal for \$4,100, and set up a committee to oversee the building of a new clubhouse.

³⁰ For example, of the 67 men applied for membership in 1923, 62 were accepted and 5 were rejected. Although the names of the rejected candidates are often listed, the reasons for the rejection are not. That year, 22 members were suspended for non-payment of dues. Minutes, December 4, 1923.

³¹ Minutes, February 3, 1931. On Dr. Maze see *Who’s Who in Polish America*, 3rd edition (New York: Harbinger House, 1943), p. 292. After serving in the Marines during World War I, he earned a dental degree at the University of Minnesota in 1920. His dental office was in the Choate Building in downtown Winona, and unlike most members of the Athletic Club, lived in central Winona.

³² Minutes, June 3, 1925.

³³ Minutes, February 1, 1927 and March 1, 1927.

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The membership of this key committee provides a snapshot of the social background of the second-generation Polish Americans who led the Winona Athletic Club in the late 1920s. Unlike their fathers, who were mostly unskilled laborers, they tended to own businesses or have jobs requiring specialized skills. The committee was chaired by Leo J. Ritter, a building contractor, and included Edmund Edel, a barber who had just been elected president, Leon Bronk, a coal dealer and immediate past president, A. B. Grabowski, a civil engineer for the city and the board's secretary, Theodore Bambenek, the proprietor of an East Side grocery store, and John Bambenek, the elected Winona County Treasurer.³⁴

The plan was to finance the building largely with loans from the membership augmented with bank loans as needed. The board hesitated while it carefully surveyed the membership to establish how much could be generated internally.³⁵ Eventually, the board was satisfied and the building committee hired an architect to prepare plans. The club chose Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson to design the building, and in early January 1930, the firm presented the board with a perspective drawing of the proposed building and some floor plans (Figure #4). Over the next several months the board considered how they could fulfill their vision of the ideal clubhouse given the amount of money they felt they could raise.

Over three decades, Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson designed many commercial and public buildings in Winona, but in 1930 the firm was just getting started. The three partners came together in 1928 and opened offices in Winona and La Crosse. Benjamin O. Boyum (1884-1954), who was born in the small southern Minnesota town of Peterson and earned a civil engineering degree at the University of Minnesota, worked out of the Winona office. After graduating in 1910, Boyum worked as a draftsman and then an architect in Minneapolis at Long and Long, and then Long, Lamoreaux, Long, before starting a private practice.³⁶ Carl M. Schubert and Roy E. Sorenson were natives of La Crosse and maintained the office there.

In 1929, Boyum and his partners won the contract to design St. Martin's Lutheran School on Winona's East End, a building similar in size and amenities to the Winona Athletic Club.³⁷ At about the same time the firm took on the Winona Athletic Club building, they were also awarded the contract to design the new Central School in Winona. This led to three more school projects, the Madison school on the west side in 1933, an East End public school, appropriately named Washington-Kosciusko, in 1935, and Jefferson School, a public school on the west side in 1936. The last two were financed in part by the Public Works Administration. In 1937, they designed

³⁴ According to census data, Bronk later owned a company that built culverts, and after 1935, he was the postmaster. This appointment probably resulted from his political affiliations, as most Poles in the 1st Ward tended to vote Democratic in this period.

³⁵ Minutes, March 28, 1929. While the board was deliberating, the New York stock market crashed, heralding the start of the Great Depression.

³⁶ *Who's Who in Engineering: A Biographical Dictionary of the Engineering Profession 1941* 5th ed. (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co, 1941), p. 199.

³⁷ "Contracts Let for New \$76,000 St. Martin's Lutheran School," *WRH*, July 15, 1930, p. 3.

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the library at Winona Teachers College, and in 1938, the PWA-financed Winona City Hall.³⁸ Meanwhile, the firm designed many buildings, especially schools and hospitals, in La Crosse and other Wisconsin cities. The Winona side of the practice ended with Boyum's death in 1954, after which Schubert and Sorenson continued their Wisconsin practice until 1960.³⁹

For the Winona Athletic Club, the firm designed a building which is an early version of the Classical Moderne style that a few years later became popular especially in buildings financed by the New Deal agencies. Classical Moderne was one of three related design trends which are part of Art Deco, 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. With respect to architecture, historians distinguish three branches, 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). 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.⁴⁰ During the Depression, "a conservative variant of Art Deco" known as Classical Moderne emerged, a style which combined "a simplified modernistic neo-classicism with an austere form of geometric and stylized relief sculpture, murals and other ornaments."⁴¹ It blended, in other words, "the decorative qualities of Art Deco with a restrained formalism reminiscent of the Classical."⁴² Buildings in this style typically have symmetrical facades, smooth stone or concrete exteriors, low relief sculptural panels, terrazzo floors, glass block, and bronze, aluminum, and stainless-steel fixtures. Although

³⁸ The Winona City Hall was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1999 both for its association with politics and government (Criterion A) and as a distinctive example of Classical Moderne architecture (Criterion C). The four Winona schools were added to the National Register of Historic Places in 2012 for their association with education (Criterion A).

³⁹ "Ben O. Boyum, 69, Architect, Dies; Funeral Monday," *Winona Republican Herald*, March 31, 1954, p. 9. The Winona County Historical Society owns a large cache of plans from the firm, but unfortunately, not the plans for the Winona Athletic Club.

⁴⁰ Eva Weber, *Art Deco in America* (New York: Exeter Books, 1985), p. 46-79. Her approach is very similar to the categorization in 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. 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 (p. 4-13).

⁴¹ Eva Weber, *American Art Deco* (London: Bison Books, 1992), p. 8.

⁴² Nelson, p. 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), p. 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). Eva Weber (1992), p. 19, also mentions Cret as the "leading architect of this style."

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sometimes referred to as “PWA Moderne,” the style was used in private buildings in the early 1930s even before the advent of the PWA.⁴³

The design of the Winona Athletic Club displays some of the elements of Classical Moderne, but blended with some of the Gothic Revival style that the firm was simultaneously employing at the Central School in Winona. The facades are symmetrical and starkly geometrical, except for the fact that the entrance bay is at the west edge of the front façade. However, the placement of the entrance tower reflected a long-range plan, never realized, to add a second wing on the east side of the building.⁴⁴ If this had been built, the entrance tower would have been on the center of the north façade. Various details reflect an Art Deco sensibility, including the trapezoidal transom over the front door, the flat stone panels with their stylized engravings, the use of aluminum letters for the club’s name on the southern façade, and the terrazzo floors. On the other hand, the rusticated stone work of the entrance tower looks much like the entrance bay of the Central School. Overall, the primary facades do not have the smooth finish of most Classical Moderne buildings, the result of the extensive use of brick pilasters and flat buttresses.⁴⁵

With a design for the building in hand, the club decided to hire Leo J. Ritter as the general contractor for the building on a cost-plus basis, and to choose subcontractors only from local firms which employed at least one member of the club prior to the bidding.⁴⁶ According to the project’s detailed account book, the building cost just over \$69,000, and of that Ritter was paid about \$44,000 and Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson \$1,680, with the rest going to the subcontractors and material suppliers. In addition, the club spent \$12,716 on furnishings, which included items such as billiard tables, and most importantly, the six bowling alleys in the basement.⁴⁷

Even though the Depression had begun, the club was able to collect over \$25,000 in loans from the membership. This was supplemented by several loans from the First National Bank which totaled \$18,500. The rest of the money came from the accrued building fund and operating revenue. The members who lent the club money received certificates of indebtedness prepared by attorney Leo Murphy. They provided for payment within 10 years at 5% interest per annum.

⁴³ David Gebhard and Tom Martinson, *A Guide to the Architecture of Minnesota* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), p. 420. For example, see William Ingemann’s Citizens Fund Mutual Aid Fire Insurance Building, 426 West Avenue, Red Wing, Minnesota. Although this building looks like a New Deal project, Ingemann designed it in 1930. Gebhard characterized it as “PWA Moderne” but incorrectly dated the building from 1938 (308).

⁴⁴ “Structure to Provide Complete Recreation Facilities for 425 Members,” *WRH*, July 10, 1930, p. 3. The projected addition was intended to house a gymnasium. The surviving minutes of the club after 1930, which cover through the end of 1942, make no mention of this plan.

⁴⁵ Because of the eclectic nature of the design, the property would not be eligible under Criterion C because the architecture does not “embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction...”

⁴⁶ Minutes, June 3, 1930.

⁴⁷ All the accounts for the building project (income and expenses) are in a small store-bought journal labeled “Cash Book” on the cover, which is preserved at the Winona County Historical Society archives.

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The board passed a resolution that no mortgage would be placed on the property until all the certificates were paid in full.⁴⁸ In fact, the club succeeded in retiring all debt from the construction project by the end of 1938.

On April 6, 1931 the club held an open house to show off the building which was complete except for the bowling alleys. The newspaper gave a detailed description of the building, praising its amenities and the quality of the materials.⁴⁹ The “palatial” and “ultramodern” building was of red brick finished in travertine limestone from the Biesanz Stone Quarry in Winona (Figures #5 and 6). The entrance hallway and stairs were of terrazzo with wrought iron railings. The interior trim was in red oak furnished by the Botsford Lumber Company, one of the spin-offs of the Laird Norton Company which earlier had employed many of the East End Poles. The first floor featured a lounge, a billiard room, a grill room, a card playing room, as well as offices and a meeting room for the board. The second floor had a large auditorium, a kitchen, and a private dining room. The reporter noted that the six bowling alleys would soon be installed in the basement, along with audience seating, lockers, a shower room, and the boiler. The newspaper’s only criticism was that the 16-foot ceiling in the auditorium might be a bit low for basketball and volleyball.⁵⁰ An editorial in the same issue congratulated the Winona Athletic Club, observing that the new building “makes Winona a better place to live.”⁵¹

The club opened the new bowling alley with a ceremony on the evening of September 5, 1931. The six alleys had the latest Brunswick pin-setting machines and ball returns. The athletic club band played music and Edmund (“Pete”) Edel, the president, and Mark Yahnke, the bowling manager, made short speeches along with the president of the local bowling association. Then the six club members who had the highest averages in the previous season christened the venue by rolling the first balls down the alleys and playing the first games.⁵²

The social center of the East End

With its new building completed the Winona Athletic Club became the social hub of the East End. The bowling alley hosted several shifts of league play daily and occasional tournaments. The club supported baseball and diamond ball on several levels (Figure #8). The billiard tables were active, and horseshoe pits were built outside and a ping-pong table added inside. Schafkopf tournaments were scheduled weekly.⁵³ The club even invested in slot machines.

⁴⁸ Minutes, April 7, 1931.

⁴⁹ “Ultra-Modern Athletic Club Home Finished” *WRH*, April 6, 1931, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Neither basketball nor volleyball became major parts of the Athletic Club’s program. The second floor hall was designed more for dances than athletics. As noted in footnote 43, the club hoped to build an addition which would house a real gymnasium.

⁵¹ “Congratulations!” *WRH*, April 6, 1931, p. 8.

⁵² “Grand Opening of Athletic Club Bowling Alleys Set for Tonight,” *WRH*, September 5, 1931, p. 9. These pin setting machines were not fully automatic and still required pin boys.

⁵³ See footnote 25.

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The board spent most of its time organizing social events, several of which became annual affairs. The biggest of these was the annual family picnic held in July or August usually at the city's Prairie Island Park. Attendance at the picnic had reached 1,400 in 1941 and after the war continued to grow, attracting 2,500 people in 1948.⁵⁴ Besides food and drink, people came for the diamond ball, the tug of war, the bean bag contests, and the many races, with the winners getting prizes. The club also had an annual "stag picnic" in the summer. There was a New Year's Eve dance each year, and during the 1930s a "Hard Times" dance in February, which was later replaced by a Pre-Lenten dance and an Easter Dance. Every December the club organized a Christmas Party for the children of members (Figure #7). Poultry parties were held several times a year. There was the annual banquet in the spring, which began as an event for members and their wives, but became the Stag Banquet starting in 1940 as the membership grew.⁵⁵

Selling beer to members had always been a major attraction in the clubhouse, and the end of Prohibition in 1933 was welcomed at the Winona Athletic Club. In fact, the club played a major role in organizing a May 1932 parade demanding the legalization of alcohol sales. Club president Leo J. Ritter was in charge of organizing the fraternal organization section of the parade, which marched to the Armory where speakers called for an end to Prohibition.⁵⁶ When the Eighteenth Amendment was finally repealed, the club minutes noted that "Good, Old Beer" would now be served.⁵⁷ The outcome was not completely satisfactory however; the club soon learned that they would now have to comply with various regulatory laws, including licensing, to serve alcohol.

The growth of the club set the stage for the creation of two ancillary organizations. In 1931, a group of women organized the Winona Athletic Club Auxiliary. Seventy-five women gathered in the auditorium of the club to approve a constitution and elect officers.⁵⁸ In so doing, they were following a well-worn path as most fraternal organizations in Winona had some sort of women's auxiliary. In addition to providing kitchen crews for Winona Athletic Club events, the auxiliary created its own round of women-only social events. Just a week after forming, it hosted its first card party where women competed at bridge, 500, and of course, schafkopf.⁵⁹ These were regular events, and they also had dress up parties, Mother's Day events, and their own picnics. Eventually the auxiliary took over the Christmas party.

In 1937, long time club leader Edward Libera, an attorney, proposed that the Winona Athletic Club create a benefit society. This also followed a familiar pattern, as most fraternal organizations offered some sort of insurance benefit to members. He proposed a simple death benefit for members who paid a \$2 membership fee and then \$1 assessment when one of the

⁵⁴ "1400 at Family Picnic of Winona Athletic Club, *WRH*, August 11, 1941, p. 3; "Winona Athletic Club Picnic at Prairie Island Attended by 2,500, *WRH*, August 16, 1948, p. 13.

⁵⁵ Other sponsored events included the hiring of a traveling carnival for several years in the 1930s, and one time, the staging of a minstrel show, which was essentially a local talent show.

⁵⁶ "'Wet' Parade to Be Staged Here Tonight," *WRH*, May 14, 1932. In the club's minutes, the event was referred to as the "beer parade." Minutes, May 3, 1932.

⁵⁷ Minutes, March 27, 1933. This comment reflected the distaste for "near beer."

⁵⁸ "Auxiliary of A.C. Holds First Regular Meeting: 75 Present," *WRH*, September 22, 1938, p. 10

⁵⁹ "240 Attend First Public Card Party at Athletic Club," *WRH*, October 1, 1938, p. 5.

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members died. Membership was open to Winona Athletic Club members who were in good health and not more than 50 years old. At the death of a member, the association paid an amount not to exceed \$200 to the beneficiary, in most cases to the wife of the deceased. The articles of incorporation and the bylaws he prepared were approved by the Winona Athletic Club board, and in November 1937, an organizational meeting was held. The new organization was called the Winona Athletic Club Benefit Association and quickly recruited over 100 charter members. By 1950, over 300 members had joined in the benefit association.⁶⁰

Club membership continued to be mostly Polish Americans, and especially during the Cold War, the Polish identity of the club seemed to be more pronounced.⁶¹ The club was often referred to as “the Polish Embassy,” and the official club jacket was red and white, the colors of the Polish flag, with “Polska” and a Polish eagle on the back.⁶² On the other hand, the club’s growth and prestige increasingly attracted politicians and businessmen of all ethnic backgrounds who perhaps found membership to be an effective way to develop relationships on the East End. The young attorney Leo Murphy, eventually named probate judge, has already been mentioned. Another early joiner was Joseph Page, a man of mixed Italian and Irish ancestry, who became the clerk of court in Winona County.⁶³ After designing the building, the architect Benjamin Boyum joined the club. Eventually most Winona mayors found it prudent to join, as well as politicians from around Minnesota, including 1st District congressmen August Andreson, Governor Floyd B. Olson, and later Senator Hubert Humphrey.⁶⁴

In the mid-1950s, the club had over 1,000 members and all of its sports and social activities were going strong. All this came to an abrupt but temporary halt on October 23, 1954. A duck hunter passing by at 4:00 a.m. noticed flames through a window. A fire had started in a first-floor cloakroom and then burnt a 10 by 20-foot hole in the auditorium dance floor above. Water damaged one of the bowling allies, and there was smoke damage throughout.⁶⁵ Fortunately, the club was well insured and was able to complete repairs and improvements in time for an April 1955 reopening celebration which featured a schafkopf party and a dance. The floor of the

⁶⁰ The minute book of the association, with minutes from January 1937 to the final meeting in December 1997, and two assessment record books, one covering the 1960s and the other 1980-1986 are preserved in the Winona County Historical Society archives. The charter members are listed in the first pages of the minute book. Inside the cover of the minute book are the articles of incorporation and the by-laws.

⁶¹ In their historic structures, Jeffrey Hess and Heather MacGinnis found the Winona Athletic Club eligible for the National Register of Historic Places because of its importance to the social life of the East End. They noted its nickname, “the Polish Embassy,” and identified it with the Polish American community. *Final Report: Historic Survey of the Eastern Portion of the City of Winona*, September 1993, p. 18.

⁶² Jerome Christenson, “History, comraderie frame Winona Athletic Club,” *Winona Daily News*, April 29, 2012.

⁶³ Minutes, September 2, 1924.

⁶⁴ “Winona Athletic Club, formed in 1895, has 1,070 Members, *Winona Daily News*, November 19, 1955, p. 267.

⁶⁵ “\$50,000 Fire at Athletic Club,” *Winona Daily News*, October 23, 1954, p. 1.

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auditorium was completely replaced, the first-floor cloakroom removed, and a women's restroom added.⁶⁶

The Winona Athletic Club continued with all its normal activities throughout the 1960s, including the bowling leagues, the annual stag dinner, the Christmas party, the New Year's Dance, and the annual picnic. The picnic in 1966, for example, attracted 1,500 people to Prairie Island Park.⁶⁷ The stag dinners were grand affairs featuring an entertaining speaker. Meanwhile, the women's auxiliary organized its own activities, including dinners and picnics, which featured prizes and cake walks.

The Winona Athletic Club Since 1970

By the 1970s, fraternal organizations across the country were in decline because they were not replacing their aging members with young recruits. This social trend eventually caught up with the Winona Athletic Club but not until several decades later. However, the club ran into financial difficulties in 1969 which led to the closing of the bar, the termination of all staff, and the election of new leadership. The board had tended to be fiscally cautious over the years, but somehow in the 1960s allowed expenses to steadily increase without growing its revenue. One factor was the decision to borrow money to buy six massive Brunswick automatic pinsetters. Meanwhile, the club's annual dues were \$5, a figure that had not been changed for many years.⁶⁸

Within a year the club had a new president, a new board, a new manager, and was financially healthy.⁶⁹ In 1970, 1st District Congressman Albert Quie was the featured speaker at the annual Stag Banquet.⁷⁰ The club and the auxiliary continued during the 1970s much as they had in the 1960s, with the same activities and levels of participations. The annual picnic, for example, continued to attract a large crowd. In 1980, the club held an anniversary dinner to celebrate the 50-year anniversary of its building and the 82nd year of its existence. The dinner featured an elaborate cake decorated to resemble the Winona Athletic Club building (Figure #9).

The Winona Athletic Club continues to be a viable institution today but not with the same level of activity as in the past. There are still about 200 members, a group which since the 1990s has included women. At about the same time, the auxiliary organization ceased to function. The bar is open to the public and operates daily in the afternoon and evening. The bowling alleys are closed because it was no longer possible to maintain the aging automatic pinsetter machines. Members who visit continue to enjoy, as manager Terry Howell put it, "an atmosphere of great fellowship." The auditorium is also the monthly venue for the dances sponsored by the River

⁶⁶ "Athletic Club, Restored After Fire, Sets Opening," *Winona Daily News*, April 13, 1955, p. 10-11.

⁶⁷ "1,500 Attend Athletic Picnic," *Winona Daily News*, July 19, 1966, p. 14.

⁶⁸ "Athletic Club Closes Bar; Will Reorganize," *Winona Daily News*, August 21, 1969, p. 3.

⁶⁹ "Officers are installed at Athletic Club," *Winona Daily News*, March 6, 1970, p. 7. The new president was Max Kulas, who brought to the role of president his experience as superintendent of buildings and grounds at St. Mary's University.

⁷⁰ "Quie to speak at WAC Dinner," *Winona Daily News*, June 1, 1970, p. 9.

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City Ballroom Dancers, who offer free lessons before each dance. The meeting room on the first floor, called the Embassy Room, is rented for small parties and meetings.⁷¹

One sign of changing times was the decision of the Winona Athletic Club Benefit Association to end its death benefit program. According to the records of the association, the paid membership peaked at about 375 in 1960 and then began a slow but steady decline, shrinking to 304 by 1970, 203 by 1980, and 131 by 1990. In a 1997 letter to the 75 remaining members, the board noted that no new members had joined since 1984. They decided to distribute the remaining funds to the members on a pro rata basis, according to the number of years they had been members.⁷²

Conclusion

In 1898, young Polish American men born in Winona's East End neighborhood organized a fraternal organization called the Winona Athletic Club. The club prospered and grew, and in 1931 was able to build a new clubhouse on the neighborhood's main commercial street. The building is locally significant under Criterion A in the area of European Ethnic Heritage and Entertainment/Recreation. The building was the hub of social life on the East End, second only to Saint Stanislaus Catholic Church in its importance to Winona's Polish American community. Like other fraternal organizations, the club had a women's auxiliary and a benevolent society providing death benefits. The period of significance begins with the construction of the building in 1931 and continues until 1960 when evidence of the decline common to similar fraternal organizations can first be observed.

⁷¹ Interview with Terry Howell, December 12, 2018; Jerome Christenson, "History, comraderie frame Winona Athletic Club," *Winona Daily News*, April 29, 2012.

⁷² Minutes of the Benefit Association and a copy of the letter December 11, 1997 letter from the board to the members announcing the dissolution, all in Winona County Historical Society archives.

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Lucas, Amy and Carole Zellie, "Washington-Kosciusko School," *National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form*, 2011

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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 # _____

Primary location of additional data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
☐ Other State agency
☐ Federal agency
☐ Local government
☐ University
☐ Other: Winona County Historical Society

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): WN-WAC-0711

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property Less than one acre

UTM References

Datum (indicated on USGS map):

☒ NAD 1927 or ☐ NAD 1983

1. Zone: 15 Easting: 610720 Northing: 4877560

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

Commencing at the northeast corner of Block 41, Hamilton's Addition of the City of Winona, south and parallel to Mankato Avenue 150 feet, then west at a right angle 112 ½ feet, then north at a right angle 150 feet, then east 112 ½ feet to the place of beginning.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)

This is the description of the property bought by the Winona Athletic Club in 1929 as a site for the building. There have been no changes in the boundary since that time.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Greg Gaut
organization: Heritage Preservation Consultant
street & number: 1235 Yale Place #408
city or town: Minneapolis state: Minnesota zip code: 55403
e-mail: GregGaut@gmail.com
telephone: 612-200-9494 date: January 9, 2020

Additional Documentation

- **USGS map.**
- **Sketch map**
- **Photo Log**

Name of Property: Winona Athletic Club

City or Vicinity: Winona County: Winona State: Minnesota

Photographer: Greg Gaut Date Photographed: November 2019

Photo #1 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0001)

North and east facades, camera facing southwest.

Photo #2 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0002)

East façade, camera facing northwest.

Photo #3 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0003)

South façade, camera facing north.

Photo #4 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0004)

West façade, camera facing southeast.

Photo #5 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0005)

Bar on first floor, camera facing southwest.

Photo #6 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0006)

Ticket and coat check windows in hallway leading to second floor auditorium, camera facing south.

Photo #7 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0007)

Auditorium on second floor with stage at south end, camera facing south.

Photo #8 (MN_Winona Co._Winona Athletic Club_0008)

Bowling alleys in basement, camera facing north.

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Historic Photos and Documents; Site Maps

Figure #1: Members of the Winona Athletic Club gathered for a formal photograph in 1922 in their clubroom in Radecky Hall on Winona's East End. From the Polish Cultural Institute Collection, Winona, Minnesota.

Figure #2: In 1925, a photographer took individual photos of club members and created a wall display which currently hangs in a hallway on the first floor of the Winona Athletic Club. From the Polish Cultural Institute Collection.

Figure #3: An example of a membership application form. This 1927 application is from Harry Cada (1905-1974), a second-generation Bohemian American who worked at Bay State Milling. He was sponsored by Mark Yahnke (1907-1968), a third generation American of Polish ancestry, who at the time worked at J. R. Watkins Co. In the 1930s, Yahnke managed the bowling alley at the Winona Athletic Club. From the Winona County Historical Society archives.

Figure #4: Boyum, Schubert and Sorenson prepared this perspective drawing of the proposed new building in early 1930. From the *Winona Republican Herald*, July 10, 1930, p. 1.

Figure #5: A photograph of the building when it was very new, circa 1933. From the Minnesota Historical Society collection.

Figure #6: A photograph of the building from 1940. From the Winona Historical Society collection.

Figure #7: In addition to the many dances that the Winona Athletic Club organized in its auditorium, other organizations hosted events there, including the band that the club sponsored. From the Winona Athletic Club archives.

Figure #8: The Winona Athletic Club contributed to the support of the Polish National Alliance baseball team, photographed here in East End Park in 1939. Gene Gabryck (fourth from right, first row) was the star second base man for the PNA team. He died while serving in the U.S. military during World War II. Today, East End Park is named Gene Gabryck Park. From the University of Minnesota Immigration History Center Archives.

Figure #9: Photograph and caption from the October 27, 1980 *Winona Daily News* marking the 50th anniversary celebration of the Winona Athletic Club building.

Figure #10: Google Earth photo of City of Winona with a yellow star indicating the location of Winona Athletic Club on the city's East End.

Figure #11: Site Map which indicates Winona Athletic Club property boundaries in yellow and camera direction of Photos #1-4. Scale: 1 inch = 100 ft. Source: Winona County GIS map available on line.

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Figure #1

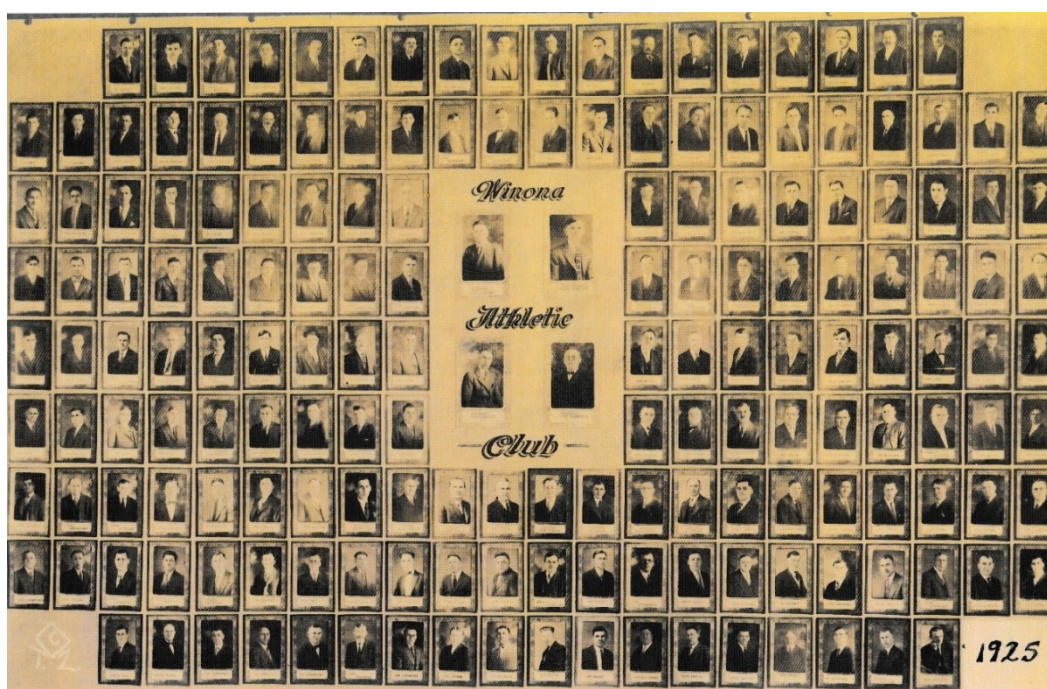


Figure #2

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Pd 5.00

**APPLICATION FOR
MEMBERSHIP**

Winona Athletic Club, Inc.

I hereby respectfully make application for membership in the WINONA ATHLETIC CLUB, INCORPORATED, of Winona, Minnesota, basing my application on the following facts, which I affirm to be true, and enter into the following agreements which form a part of the consideration of my acceptance as a member.

1. My full name is Harry Cada
2. My age is 22
3. My Residence or P. O. Address is 652 East 2nd St
4. I agree to accept and be bound by the Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws of this club and also any and all amendments thereto, and I agree to respect and obey all officers and persons in authority of said club.

Dated 1/31/27

Harry Cada
 (Applicant sign full name here.)

PROPOSED CERTIFICATE

I, the undersigned hereby certify as a member of the Winona Athletic Club, Incorporated, that I am personally acquainted with the above named applicant and hereby endorse and certify that he is of good moral character and fit and desirable for membership in said club.

Mark Rydbeck

Figure #3

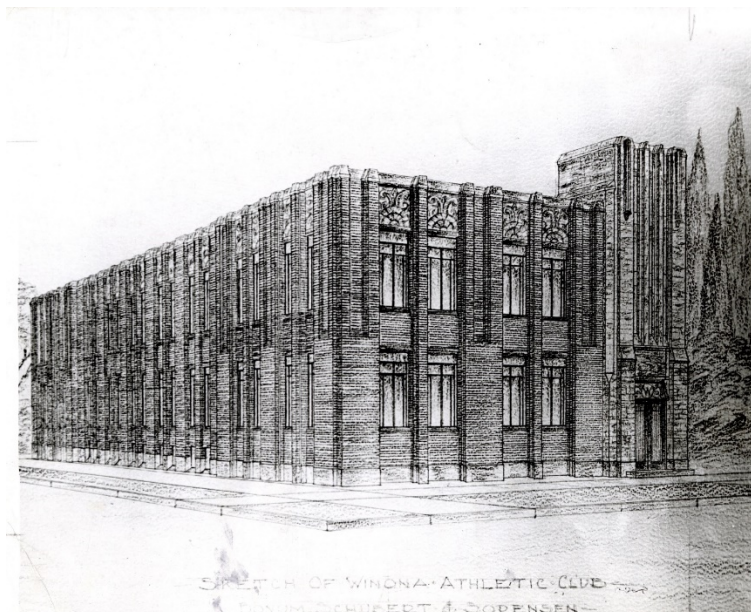


Figure #4

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Figure #5



Figure #6

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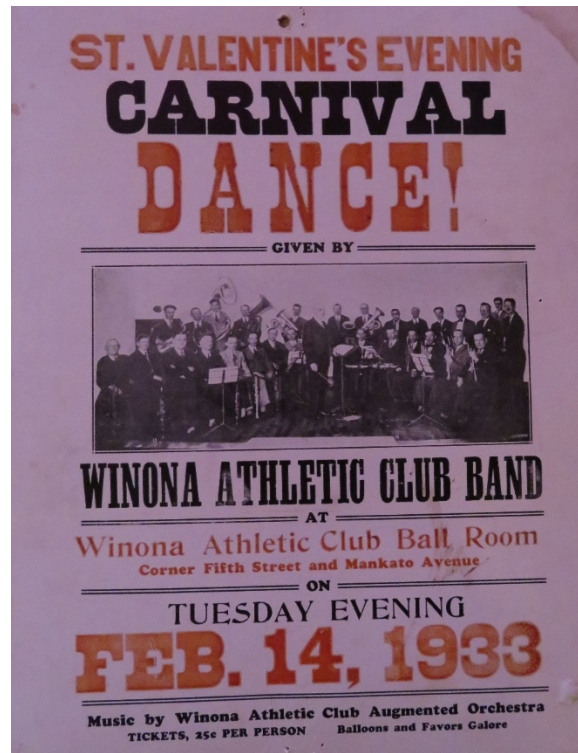


Figure #7



Figure #8

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

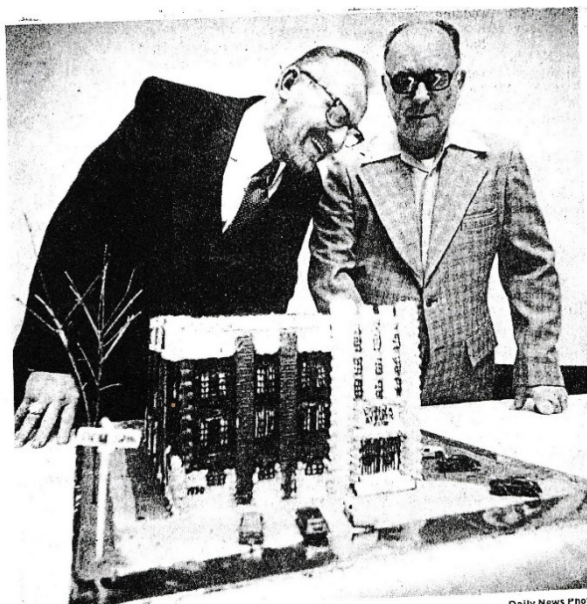
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Daily News Photo

Fifty years ago the Winona Athletic Club moved into its new building at 5th Street and Mankato Avenue. Sunday evening some 350 members and friends were at the club for a dual celebration — the 50th anniversary and to honor Dan

Bambenek, who has retired after serving as club secretary 18 consecutive years. Highlight of the dinner was the cake, an exact replica of the club. Bambenek, left, and Marvin Fenske, board president, admire the intricate designs on the cake. *Oct 27, 1980*

Figure #9



Figure #10

United States Department of the Interior
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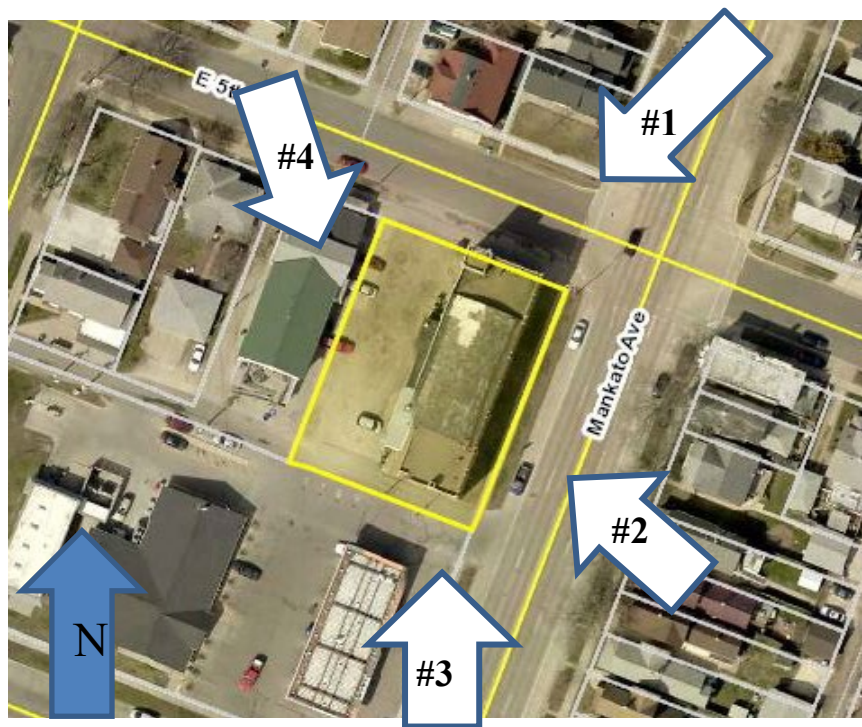
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Figure #11