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**PRESERVATION TEXAS NAMES HISTORIC SMALL TOWN THEATERS
TO ITS FOURTH ANNUAL LIST OF TEXAS' MOST ENDANGERED HISTORIC PLACES**

AUSTIN, TEXAS... Historic theaters that once dominated town squares in small Texas communities have been named to Preservation Texas' 2007 list of *Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places*.

Preservation Texas officials announced the selection on the steps of the Texas State Capitol on February 7, Preservation Day 2007. Recognized as a statewide trend, historic small town theaters were among 12 sites named to the list. "Each listing is threatened by possible destruction, adverse development or neglect, and each has a compelling reason for being saved," said Libby Buuck, president of Preservation Texas, Inc., a statewide partner of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. "The sites represent the most eminent needs and highest probability for positive action."

Throughout the nation, hundreds of historic movie houses have closed, overwhelmed by the rise of television, shifting demographics, and suburban multiplexes. Through World War II, movie going was the most common form of popular entertainment with people attending two or three times a week. In 1946, the peak of the movie industry's attendance figures, 90 million people a week attended the movies.

Theaters were a community meeting place, an entertainment mecca for cities and towns that valued movies in a public place, vaudeville shows, recitals and informational presentations. Most of them were located in the center of the town square and were landmarks in the community. Many were architectural gems--ornate buildings constructed in a variety of exotic and opulent styles, including Moorish, Art Deco, Egyptian, Mayan and Oriental.

Historic theaters deserve an encore as part of Main Street developments that are revitalizing small towns and it is important that they are protected and restored instead of demolished.

This statewide trend is represented by:

Palace Theater, Brady, McCulloch County. The Brady Palace Theater, built in 1927, is vacant and suffers from years of neglect after having been occupied by and remodeled for a variety of

retail businesses. The theater has decorative elements, glorious glimpses of its past, and needs to be restored to its former beauty and usefulness

The Wise Estate/Grand Theater, Paris, Lamar County. Constructed in 1937, the Grand was the largest theater in Paris for over fifty years, and its fly-loft was the tallest west of the Mississippi. In 1996 a new theater was constructed. The already deteriorating Grand closed and later, the property owners abandoned the building. Roof-top openings allowed water to seep in causing water damage and pigeon infestation; peeling paint and crumbling ceiling tiles make the building a health hazard. There is flooding in the basement and a crack along the outside of the north wall. But the people of Paris know that with the rebirth of the downtown, the Grand Theater can again become the beautiful building it was designed to be by architect Jake Elder, designer of the Interstate Theater chain. The important historic buildings of downtown Paris will be further enhanced by the rehabilitation of the Grand Theater.

The River Oaks and Alabama Theaters, Houston, Harris County. Both theaters are threatened by the Weingarten Realty Investors' plan to demolish both properties for mid to high-rise residential development. Interstate Theaters opened the Alabama and River Oaks theaters in 1939. Dallas architect Scott Duane designed the Art Moderne Alabama Theater. The firm of Pettigrew & Worley created the plans for the Art Deco River Oaks Theater. Both theaters remain in good condition with original architectural detailing and fixtures intact. Public outcry that is unprecedented in Houston resulted because of threats to these buildings.

The Capitan Theater, Pasadena, Harris County. The Capitan is deteriorating though attempts to restore the building's exterior, neon signage and some interior murals have been made. The theater remains threatened and closed to the public. The Capitan is a twin to the Granada Theater in Houston; both were built for the Isley chain which operates theaters in Texas and Oklahoma.

Preservation Texas, Inc. is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to preserving our state's historic resources by direct action and by empowering individuals and local and state organizations through partnerships in education, communications, and advocacy. Preservation Texas named its first list of endangered historic sites in 2004. Several sites recognized by Preservation Texas have benefited from inclusion on the list of *Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places* through energized conservation efforts, commitments for restoration, and additional funding.

Other sites on the 2007 list of *Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places* include:

CENTRAL TEXAS

Texas Capitol Views Austin, Travis County

The Capitol is the heart of Austin. Completed in 1888, the red granite and limestone building is a reference point from almost any angle as you enter the downtown area. By law, the view must be clear on all sides, meaning that no tall buildings can block the protected Capitol sightlines. Thirty view corridors, each with secondary sightlines, converge on the Capitol from major Austin landmarks and vantage points. With the fast-paced growth of the city and developers eager for additional residential and commercial projects downtown, the City Council has formed a committee to evaluate the sightlines, with the possibility of eliminating some of them.

For close to 25 years, these legal protections have ensured continued views of the State Capitol, the most prized and recognized symbol of Austin, and today they are more relevant than ever. With the action of the Austin City Council, these Capitol view corridors are endangered. The views are priceless and any modification to the view corridors would endanger a treasure that belongs to all Texans.

Broad Street Bridge, 1918
408 Broad Street at Comanche Creek
Mason, Mason County

The Broad Street Bridge in Mason, spanning Comanche Creek, is the only reinforced concrete truss bridge in Texas and is one of a small number of known examples in the United States. The 102-foot long bridge is composed of two truss spans, each measuring 51 feet in length and supported by concrete abutments and one intermediate pier. The Alamo Construction Company of San Antonio constructed the bridge in 1918 as a reliable means of crossing Comanche Creek, which separated north and south Mason. The bridge, slated for replacement by the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT), is threatened because funds to save and rehab the structure into a pedestrian bridge were to come from federal enhancement funds that were recently cancelled by TXDOT.

HOUSTON AREA

River Oaks Shopping Center, 1937
River Oaks Theater, 1939
Alabama Theater Bookstop, 1939
West Gray and Shepherd
Houston, Harris County

Parts of the landmark 1937 River Oaks Shopping Center are in danger of being demolished by owner Weingarten Realty Investors to make room for a chain book store and a high-rise residential building. Targeted for demolition are the architecturally significant curved wings facing Shepherd Drive and the 1939 River Oaks Theater. The Art Deco-style Alabama Theater Center at Shepherd and Alabama, which now houses a Bookshop and other retail stores, is also being considered for demolition.

The demolitions would be a major loss for Houston. River Oaks Shopping Center was part of a development that served as Houston's first auto-centered, suburban shopping center and was one of the first such developments in the country. With its largely unaltered examples of Art Deco construction, River Oaks Shopping Center is significant both architecturally and historically.

The 1939 River Oaks Theater has been in continuous operation since its opening and is Houston's last remaining historic theater that still shows movies. Opened in 1939, the Alabama Theater retains many of its features as a former movie palace and its renovation received national recognition for its sensitive preservation of the theater's distinctive interior.

The center and the theaters are examples of late-1930s Art Deco design and are among a handful of viable retail buildings of their age and style in the city. Demolition could begin this year.

James and Jessie West Mansion, 1929-30
3303 NASA Parkway at Space Center Blvd.
Pasadena, Harris County

Lumber, oil, and ranching tycoon James Marion West and his wife, Jessie Dudley, hired eminent Houston architect Joseph Finger to design this 17,000-square-foot house as headquarters for their 30,000-acre ranch. A Harris County landmark since its completion in 1930, the West Mansion is an excellent example of the Italian renaissance revival style, which was rarely used in Texas at the time. Finger designed some of Houston's finest commercial and institutional buildings between 1920 and 1940, including Houston City Hall and Houston Municipal Airport.

Easily one of the largest and most well crafted houses constructed in Texas during the late 1920s and 1930s, the West Mansion retains most of its historical paneling, limestone and cast concrete detailing. It was named a Texas Historic Landmark in 1993 and placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1994.

The West Mansion is endangered because there are few, if any, local ordinances in the City of Pasadena to protect it. The development company that owns the property has announced that it plans to subdivide the site it to be sold for development.

**Galveston's Unprotected Historic Neighborhoods
6th Street to 103rd Street (Galveston Harbor to the Gulf of Mexico)
Galveston, Galveston County**

The city of Galveston is situated on the east end of a long barrier island 50 miles south of downtown Houston. The city has weathered many disasters since its founding in 1839. When much of the country's historic façade was being eroded to make way for strip centers and new development, Galveston's economic situation prevented that from happening there. However, over the past five years Galveston has been re-discovered by developers, investors and retirees.

Galveston has five historic districts but much of the city remains unprotected from inappropriate construction or demolition. Large parcels of land have been purchased by developers to build condominium and hotel towers with gulf views. Though the City requires specific permits in the historic core of the city for any building over four stories tall, except along the Seawall, this does not mean developments with looming towers cannot be built. It merely informs the neighbors of the plans for development and gives them a chance to voice their opinion to the Planning Commission, which can ultimately approve or deny a developer's request. Stricter design and height guidelines must be studied and approved to prevent a wall of development from cutting off the historic neighborhoods from the Gulf of Mexico and disrupting the charm that brings people to the island.

DALLAS/FORT WORTH METROPLEX

**Old Arlington High School, 1922
211 S. Cooper Street
Arlington, Tarrant County**

This stable, currently in-use site includes the 1922 Arlington High School academic building and the 1940 gymnasium/cafeteria. It was the largest public education facility between Fort Worth and Dallas and it is one of the few remaining historically important buildings in Arlington. The academic building served as the only high school in Arlington until 1956 when a new building was constructed at another location and the original buildings became a junior high school. In 1968, the school district sold the campus to the University of Texas. It has been used for classrooms and offices ever since.

The high school was the center of community activity and a source of pride. It produced countless leaders who went on to successful careers and positions of leadership in the community. But the buildings are threatened; UTA has stated it plans to demolish the facility for redevelopment purposes, having demolished another historic building on the site.

The building could be adapted to any number of functions such as a community-friendly information center; a repository of information of the history of AHS and the University; a conference space; an office space; condominiums; lofts; senior housing; and or an art center or museum.

Old Denison High School, 1913-1914
700 Block of Main Street
Denison, Denison County

Built in 1913, this school was constructed on the site of the original 1800s school. Located in a prominent downtown location, the striking architectural design still allows the abandoned school a presence that made the community proud when it was built. Additions to the building over time resulted in the huge complex that fills an entire city block. It was used by the school district until the 1980s, but is now vacant and deteriorating, only infrequently used by the local Jaycees as a haunted Halloween house.

A nonprofit organization, the current owners of the property, failed to find a use for the school and they soon will deed the building to the City of Denison. The city plans to tear it down as soon as they have raised \$500,000, an amount they estimate will be needed to do the job. The Texas Historical Commission, the National Trust, and Preservation Texas visited the city to urge the mayor and city manager to reconsider their plans; citizens have called and written city officials asking them to save the building for re-use.

Comanche St. Louis-San Francisco Railway Company Depot, 1912
302 South Austin Street
Comanche, Comanche County

The Fort Worth and Rio Grand Railway was chartered to build the first rail lines from Fort Worth to Brownwood in 1890. In 1901 the St. Louis and San Francisco Railway Company (FRISCO) acquired and controlled the roadway, but the Fort Worth and Rio Grand continued independent operations of the freight and passenger train. FRISCO constructed the Comanche Depot. In 1950, the passenger and freight service operations were discontinued, and in 1959, sections of the railway were abandoned. The building was used primarily as a storage facility by the City and eventually the railroad granted ownership of the depot to the City. The 1912 passenger depot and platform, constructed of brick on a concrete base is threatened by deterioration and a failed roof system. Comanche is a rural community and lacks the revenue to restore and repair the neglected building.

CORPUS CHRISTI AREA

Mercer House, also known as the Sears House, early 1900s
Roberts and Oleander Streets
Port Aransas, Nueces County

Also known as the Sears House because it was built from a Sears and Roebuck kit by Robert A. Mercer, son of the original settler in the early 1900s, it was one of the few buildings to survive the 1919 hurricane and the strong winds of Hurricane Cecilia. It is one of the city's oldest and most intact residences recalling its early 20th century history as a port community. It was moved once to the corner of Roberts and Oleander, where it now stands. An out-of-town developer bought it in 2006 and plans to demolish the house to make room for a 16-town house complex unless it can be moved again.

The nonprofit Port Aransas Preservation and Historical Association (PAPHA) was offered the property first, but the organization was unable to raise the required purchase price of \$625,000. The current owner offered the house to PAPHA if they move it. PAPHA is trying to raise funds to save this unique house that holds so many holiday memories for the community, to convert it into a house museum.

EAST TEXAS

Texas State Railroad, 1896 Palestine and Rusk Rusk, Anderson and Cherokee Counties

The state of Texas is in danger of losing the Texas State Railroad, designated the "official railroad of Texas" by the Texas Legislature and recognized as one of the nation's largest and most unique steam train operations. More than 56,000 people from all over the world ride the train annually, boarding in Rusk or Palestine.

The Railroad began in the 1880s as a way to deliver pig iron produced by the prison located in Rusk. It has always been operated by the state or by private contractors. It was converted to a heritage railroad attraction in 1976 by the state legislature and is a major tourist attraction, offering visitors a chance to sample a historic travel experience. However, it is scheduled to become a static display by the end of the year. The Texas State Legislature has refused to fund its operation, and the local community has almost exhausted its financial resources. A lack of funding could close this working reminder of life in east Texas.

LUBBOCK AREA

Keller Building, built prior to 1927 326 Burlington Spur, Dickens County

One of the largest buildings in the Spur Historic District, the Keller Building is under the preservation efforts of the Friends of Spur Main Street who would like to turn the building into a visitors' center or multi-purpose educational center. Built in 1927 to house the Riter Hardware Store, the building is unsafe due to the immediate threat of the roof collapsing. The building sat as an empty shell for the past 60 years partially because of neglect and a fire that destroyed the roof in the 1940s. Because the City of Spur is economically challenged, the Keller Building is at risk. Without help from a foundation or other grant sources, the building decline cannot be stopped.

Through its list of *Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places*, Preservation Texas is working in tandem with the Texas Historical Commission's (THC) Historic Endangered Landmarks Program (HELP), which identifies, tracks and publicizes endangered historic properties in Texas. The THC maintains a statewide database of identified properties that can be used to direct assistance to the historic properties that most need it. If you know of an endangered historic property in your community, please complete and submit an Endangered Historic Property Identification Form that can be downloaded from the THC Web site at www.thc.state.tx.us.

For more information on *Texas' Most Endangered Historic Places*, visit our Web site at www.preservationtexas.org, or phone Preservation Texas, Inc. at 512-472-0102.

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