

**Colorado Cultural Resources Survey Form:
Moraine Park Museum Amphitheater**



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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

The Moraine Park Visitor Center was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places (NR) in 1976. The nomination recognized the building as an important piece of architecture worthy of preservation. The larger site of the building—a designed landscape containing trails, parking, amphitheatres and plantings—was ignored in the nomination process, even though the site was planned as one entity during the rehabilitation of the Moraine Lodge by the Conservation Civilian Corps (CCC) in 1935. In the intervening three decades, significant advances in the field of historic preservation and cultural geography have established the importance of understanding landscapes as repositories of historical information and cultural meaning. These theoretical advances have begun to trickle into practice, and more recent NR nominations have broadened their scope to include features of the designed as well as natural landscape alongside buildings on the site.

This work revisits the Moraine Park Visitor Center site and proposes that its boundaries be expanded to include features of the designed landscape from 1935-1937, as well as the natural landscape of the site. The site is significant as its development parallels the NPS's trajectory of interpretive advances in the first quarter of the twentieth century, when it was developing its mandate as an educational agency. The site has since remained a vital interpretive site in Rocky Mountain National Park (ROMO) and even today experiences heavy visitations.

As a part of the work the author was assisted by Bill Butler and Cheri Yost in preparing a new nomination for the site using information from historical research and fieldwork. After consultations with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in Denver it was decided to prepare a new nomination that addresses the landscape components of the site, particularly the amphitheatre, which has seen years of neglect and disrepair. Although the museum is a dominant feature on the site, this report only addresses its spatial and functional relationship to the amphitheatre and the site in general, since the previous nomination contained ample information on the museum. The Preliminary Evaluation Form was prepared and submitted to SHPO for review. The SHPO has approved the nomination and the park is planning a clean-up of the site in the honor of the 75th anniversary of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 2005.

The report is structured in four sections as per the Preliminary Evaluation Form. The sections include Architectural Description, Construction History, Historical Background and Statement of Significance. The information collected is based on field and archival work.

Architectural Description

Moraine Park Amphitheatre is located on a small terrace on the edge of a ponderosa pine forest at the eastern end of Moraine Park. The site lies west of the Moraine Park Museum, which is already listed on the National Register. The site can be accessed from Bear Lake Road, a little over a mile from the Beaver Meadows Headquarters and Visitor Center on US Highway 36 (fig. 1). The landscape around the amphitheatre is dominated by ponderosa pine with an understory of grass and shrubbery, including brush, gooseberry, bitter brush and common juniper among others. The site is at an elevation of roughly 8100'. It affords spectacular views of Moraine Park, a meadow of grass and shrub which is surrounded by towering glaciated peaks, and through which meanders the Big Thompson River.

Other sites and structures in the Moraine Park include the Moraine Park campground (located among a ponderosa pine forest), the William Allen White National Register Historic District (summer residence of the Pulitzer Prize winning author), and The Scottage, a cottage in private ownership. Until as recently as the mid-twentieth century, Moraine Park was the site of many old lodges and hotels which have since been destroyed.

The amphitheatre is accessed from the parking lot of the Moraine Park Museum by a flight of steps located at the northwest corner. Constructed from rough hewn stone, the sixteen steps have irregular treads measuring 14-16" and rises measuring 3-5". The steps reach an asphalt trail 3-4' wide that heads northwest in the direction of the amphitheatre, gaining gradually in elevation. The asphalt is cracked and appears to have been poured over existing stonework. It is possible that the original trail

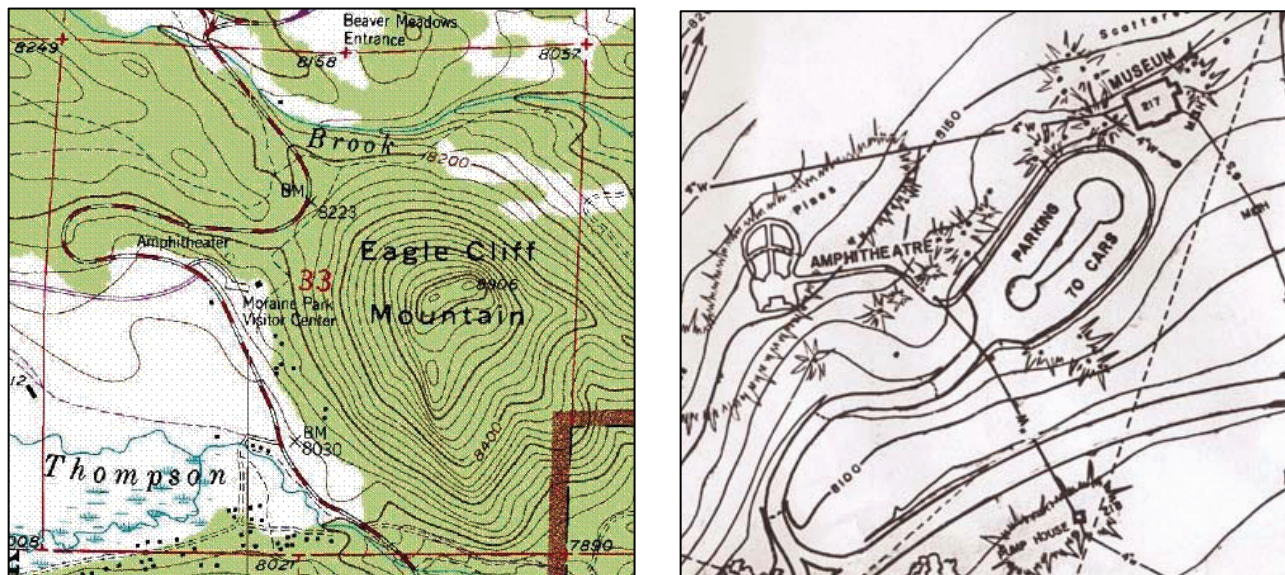


Fig. 1: (a) Location of the Moraine Park Museum site and (b) site map showing the museum, amphitheatre and the parking lot. Figs. 1a and 1b are aligned with north and northeast at the top, respectively.

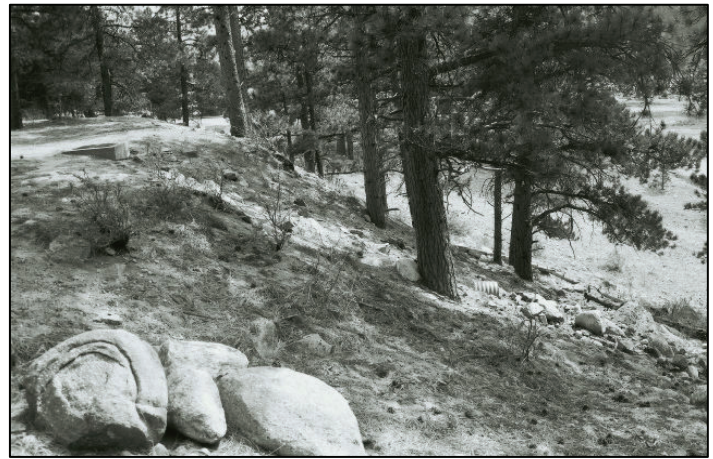


Fig. 2 (left): The asphalt trail from the parking lot to the amphitheatre. Fig. 3 (right): The elaborate drainage design concealed within the slope behind the stage.

to the amphitheatre may have been finished with irregular stones (not confirmed). Two trails (earth-packed and lined with rough stones) coming from the back and front of the Moraine Park Museum converge and meet the asphalt trail close to the edge of the stone steps. Their convergence is marked by a large pine tree surrounded by common chokecherry, with other shrubs and stones scattered in the landscape. From this point the asphalt trail to the amphitheatre is lined by pine trees and gains elevation to arrive at the stage area of the amphitheatre (fig. 2).

The design of the Moraine Park Amphitheatre maximizes the use of existing site conditions (such as the bowl shape) and natural materials to carefully craft architecture that blends with the setting, enhancing the naturalness of the site. The earth cut from the seating area of the amphitheatre was likely used to create the slope that holds the stage area. At the edge of the slope is a drain that channels stormwater down the slope into another channel defined by a stone lining, before entering an inlet under Bear Lake Road. This drainage pattern exemplifies the elaborate construction techniques used in the creation of the site (fig. 3).

The elliptical stage area is marked by a partial remain of the stage (two of the four corners pieces still remain) and a line of trees forming the curtain wall behind the stage. Partial remains of a traditional campfire—embedded stones that once defined the ring of the circular fire pit—can still be seen in front of the stage wall (fig. 4a). A few large stones remain *in situ*, revealing their smooth surface on the floor of the stage. The wooden picture screen on which the slides were projected no longer remains (fig. 4b).

Sixteen aisles and two arcs of seating ascend from the stage area, arranged in an irregular fan shape facing the stage and fire pit. The seats were created by placing a row of somewhat regular stones



Fig. 4: (a) The filled-in fire pit. Seen are the remains of the ring of stones around it.

(b) Stage area with the remains of the stage. The trees were carefully used in creating a curtain wall behind the stage.



Fig. 5: The two rows of seating rise from the stage.

some 10" high. Timber wedges (11" x 4") lie on this stone wall about 4-5' apart, with milled lumber in rectangular planks (2 1/4" x 11" x 4-6") nailed to the wedges. The joinery between the planks as well as the wedges use large unfinished nails. The planks are painted with NPS's signature brown paint. The seating between rows 10 and 13 in the right arc is broken to accommodate an existing tree in a rectangular planting bed and probably also the now-absent projection booth but no evidence substantiates this conjecture (fig. 5). The seats are accessed from three main circulation paths with stone steps. The one in the center is the most regular, about 4' wide. Those on the sides hug closely to the natural slope. Large stones and trees surround the northern corner of the seating area (three trees have been cut down to their stumps for unknown reasons). The circulation path of the south side is defined by a line of trees. Cement mortar was used at some point to stabilize the rocks holding the rectangular seating planks. The lighting fixtures under the seating are defunct.

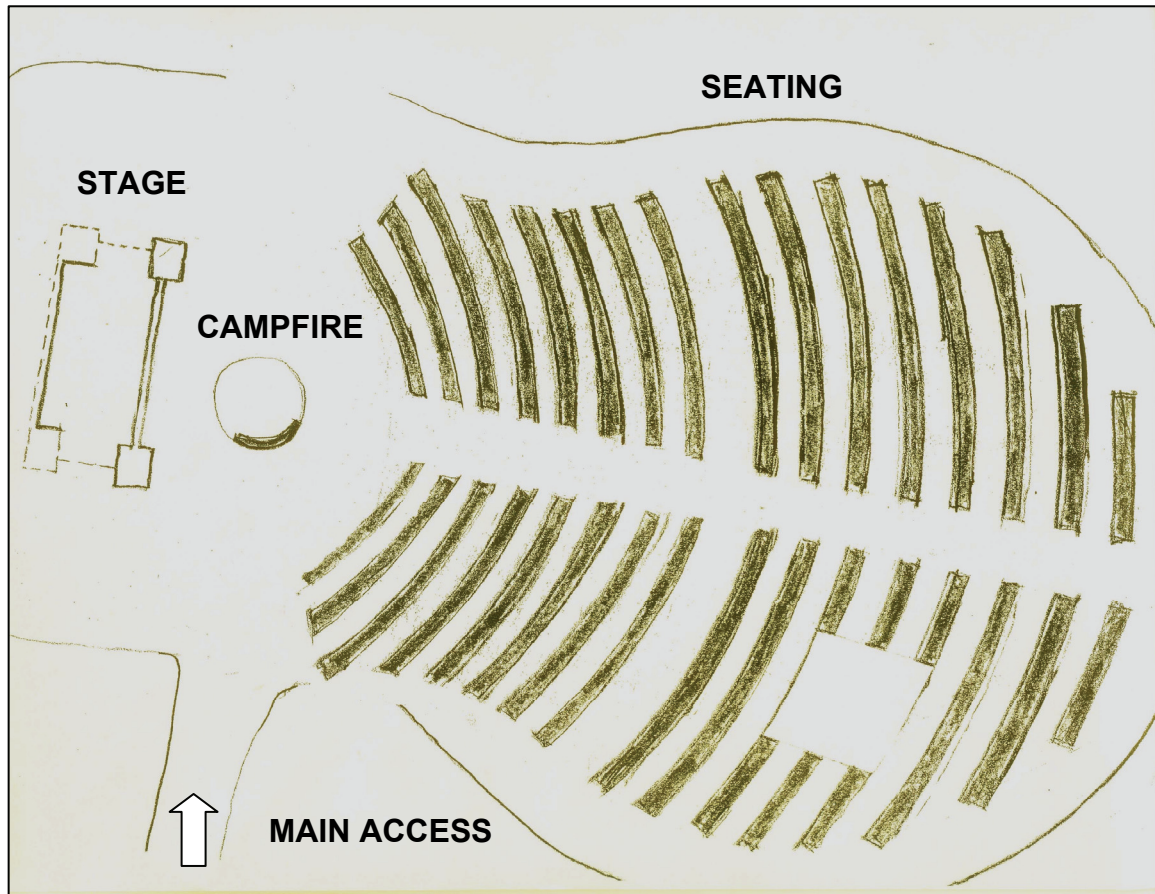


Fig. 6: Sketch Plan of amphitheatre

Construction History

The design of the amphitheatre is grounded in the “naturalistic” style of construction to which NPS required all new designs in the early twentieth century to adhere. Much of the credit for formulating this rustic style goes to Stephen Mather and Horace Albright, the founding fathers of NPS. The style draws primarily from the romantic and the idealistic tenets of nineteenth century designers Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted. This “NPS Rustic” style (which some call “parkitecture”) effectively maintained the overall wilderness character of the landscapes and remained *de rigueur* until the 1960s, when it was interrupted for about a decade by the “Mission 66” program. The basic tenets of naturalistic design were straightforward—that architecture would play a subordinate role to nature, the massing of the structure would respond to the terrain, and the design would hide and blend with the naturalness of the setting. Although NPS standardized the design of new buildings in terms of floor plan and elevations, they did not standardize the materials and techniques of construction. Instead, the use of native material available in the vicinity of the site was encouraged, making stone and timber the materials of choice for most parks, including Rocky Mountain. With regard to the techniques of construction, nature again was expected to provide clues, along with the region’s vernacular traditions. Suitable prototypes used natural finishes and handcrafted details emphasizing irregular lines and rough textures, mimicking pioneer traditions of construction (fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Longs Peak Trailhead area in Rocky Mountain National Park exhibiting the NPS Rustic Style.

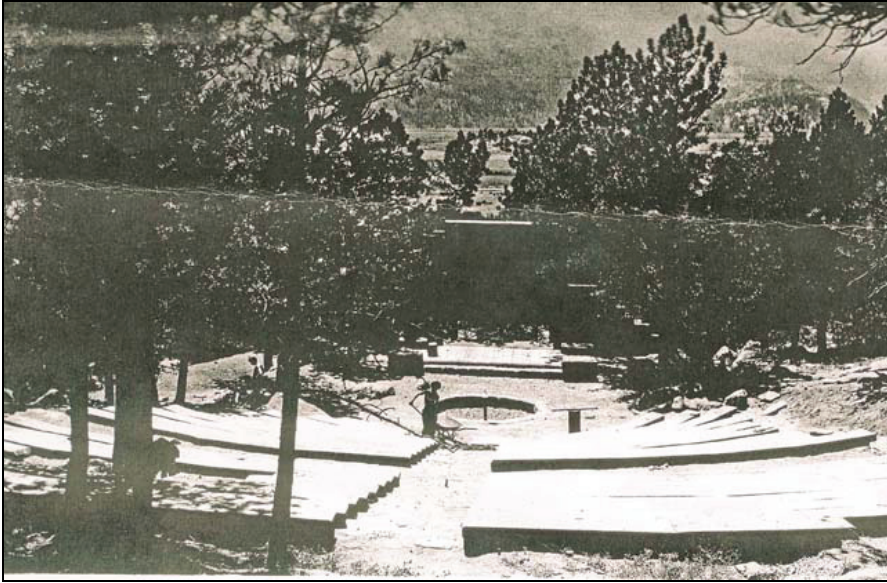


Fig. 8: CCC recruits working on the construction of the amphitheatre. The fire pit in front of the stage can be seen clearly in this old picture.

The parks were further encouraged to address the uniqueness of site conditions such as topography, climate and vegetation in the design of new buildings. This approach made standardized designs less sterile and more contextual. Landscape architecture followed the same naturalistic path established by Olmsted in his work in Yosemite National Park and Niagara Falls, whereby the work of the landscape architects was expected to “hide behind” the naturalness they created. These design principals, first implemented in the 1920s, remain at the heart of park design even today.

In Rocky Mountain National Park, as in other national parks and forests, recruits from the New Deal-era Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) helped out with a variety of tasks relating to construction (road, trail, campground and new building construction) and conservation (maintenance, demolition, improvement, vegetation management). Their legacy remains visible in the park, including the Moraine Park amphitheatre site, but is gradually fading (fig. 8).

The amphitheatre was originally scheduled to open in 1936, as gauged from the Annual Report from Fiscal Year 1936 for Rocky Mountain National Park, which stated that the amphitheatre “will be ready for use before the end of the summer.” However, construction on the site was still underway a year later, as is evident from the Superintendent’s Monthly Report from May 1937: “[i]n the Moraine Museum area the following E.C.W. [Emergency Conservation Works] construction is under way: the steps to the amphitheatre, the trail to the amphitheatre, the path to the museum, sodding slopes, surfacing the parking area, erosion control, and cementing of steps in amphitheatre.” The Superintendent’s Monthly Report from June 1937 states that “[t]he Moraine Park Amphitheatre and parking area are fast rounding into shape and should be completed early next month. This job has been one of the largest that E.C.W. crews have been placed on, and has taken them a year to complete. The job called for many types of works, including log, rock, cement, grading and landscaping. When completed, it will be an excellent improvement to the park.” Following the prediction of the Superintendent’s Monthly Report, the amphitheatre was opened to the public on August 6, 1937 and

“its first meeting drew 97 people, a very encouraging prospect for the new centralized lecture program.” (Superintendent’s Monthly Report, July 1937)

The *Estes Park Trail*—a local newspaper—published a list of the weekly “Program of Free Government Services” offered during the summer high season, including the offerings at the Amphitheatre. The latter included programs as diverse as “Winter Scenes in Colored Movies” (July 28, 1939) and “The Red Man in the Rockies” (July 1, 1938). The success of the Amphitheatre can be seen from an article in the newspaper from April 22, 1938: “Of importance to the naturalist program for the Park visitors was the construction of an amphitheatre, seating 390 persons, near the Moraine Park Museum. Complete in every respect, it is equipped with a large moving picture screen, stage, lighting, projection booth, a fire pit for the comfort and comfortable wooden seats arranged in a semi circle on a slope to assure visibility for all visitors” (fig. 9a).

The Superintendent’s Monthly Report from July 1937 states that “[t]he development of the new lecture center at Moraine Park Amphitheatre has shown itself to be logical, in that attendance has been showing a steady figure of from 75 to 100 when weather conditions are favorable (fig. 9b). Rainy and cold evenings out crowds somewhat, but no lectures are postponed, rather being held inside the museum in improvised arrangements.”



Fig. 9: (a) The wooden screen of the amphitheatre no longer remains; (b) sunrise religious service being held at the Moraine Park Amphitheatre.

Historical Background

Prior to acquisition by the National Park Service, the site of today's Moraine Park Museum and Amphitheatre contained a resort comprising a recreational building/lodge and a cluster of cabins and other structures (roughly 40 structures total). This resort served as a social hub for the elite residents of the area, especially during the summer season (fig. 10). The resort was open to the public on July 19, 1923 by Ms. M. Imogene Green, who had acquired the land twenty-five years previously from the original homesteader, J. Pringle. That day's *Estes Park Trail* reported: "[t]he new building, just inside the gate to the Lodge grounds, contains the business offices and a nice tea room on the ground floor and the hall occupies the entire second floor." The National Park Service purchased the site from Mrs. McPherson (formerly Miss Green) later in 1931 and razed the existing buildings on the property with the exception of the Assembly Hall.

The condition of the site prior to the rehabilitation can be gauged from the entry in the Superintendents' Monthly Report from October 1933, which noted that "[t]wenty-seven have been razed, the earth regraded to its original slope and some planting done." The remaining building was remodeled in 1936 to become the Moraine Park Museum. Amphitheatre construction started around the same time at an adjacent site. The newly rehabilitated lodge was linked to the amphitheatre by a trail and the two functioned as an important joint interpretative site in the park. The rehabilitation as well as the new construction was carried out by the CCC. The opening of the museum was delayed until the summer of 1937 by the completion of the amphitheatre and the parking lot. The date at which the use of the amphitheatre became discontinued for regular evening programs is unclear; however, it is still used for environmental education and interpretative programs and private functions such as weddings.

Fig. 10: The site of the Moraine Lodge in 1924



Statement of Significance

Rocky Mountain National Park contains five amphitheatres, including the Moraine Park Amphitheatre. What makes the Moraine Amphitheatre unique is that it is the only one linked spatially as well as functionally to an existing National Register property-the Moraine Park Museum. The construction of the amphitheatre occurred at the time when the Assembly Hall was rehabilitated to house the Museum; they share similar rustic architectural style and are linked together spatially by a short trail. The two facilities also play a joint role in educating park visitors on the natural and cultural history of the park; for instance, although the amphitheatre was the venue for most evening programs, in the event of “rain or cold, Moraine Amphitheatre Lectures are held indoors at the Museum” (*Estes Park Trail*, July 1, 1938).

The site is a cultural landscape that reflects an important era in NPS history, relating to the development of new approaches to visitor interpretation in the national parks that developed in the decade of 1920s. Many foundational ideas for park interpretation were conceived at this time in the Educational Division of NPS, under the leadership of chief naturalist Ansel F. Hall. Wayside exhibits, outdoor auditoriums and museums were all outcomes of this program, including both the Moraine Park Museum and the Moraine Park Amphitheatre. The idea of the outdoor amphitheatre first took shape in Yosemite National Park; sponsored in part by the Sierra Club, construction took advantage of the natural amphitheatre site in the design. The Yosemite amphitheatre then became a prototype for amphitheatre designs in the national parks across the country. Typically called the “woodland amphitheatre”, the design was a rustic interpretation of the Greek amphitheatre built into a hillside with seating radiating in semicircles from a center stage. The site represents one of the earliest fully realized examples of this type of amphitheatre design.

The site is also significant for the CCC’s involvement in its construction. The legacy of the CCC can be interpreted from this site, making clear the important role they played in the development of Rocky Mountain National Park and the National Parks in general, something that has received little attention in interpretation thus far. The Moraine Amphitheatre gains more significance in its association with the Moraine Park Museum.

In addition, the site is a prime example of the naturalistic landscape design promoted by the NPS and widely used for new construction in the parks.

The period of significance is 1937-present. The first date represents the point when the amphitheatre and Museum began their joint role as an interpretative site. Both retain their historic integrity of location, design (including material) and setting, as well as feeling and association. The amphitheatre has lost some minor architectural features; however, their loss does not diminish the design integrity given that the form and original materials remain intact. Contributing features include the curtain wall of pines, the stone steps, the paths, seating and views. The fire pit can be excavated relatively easily and the screen and projection booth can be reconstructed based on historical documentation without much difficulty. Despite the loss of some historic materials and disrepair, largely due to minimal maintenance, the site retains a majority of the features that illustrate its naturalistic design in terms of the massing, spatial relationships, proportion, planting and historic relationships (Fig 11).

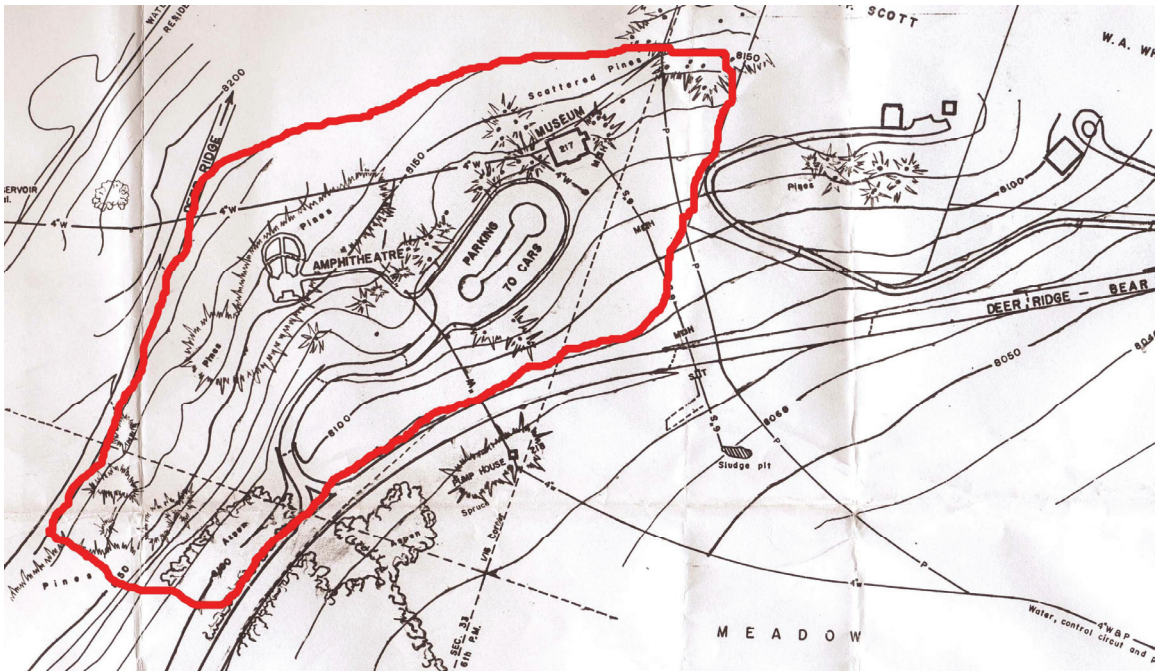


Fig. 11: Proposed Historic District

The feeling and association with this property comes from the naturalistic design of architecture and landscape (trails, planting and grading) and the historic layout and connections that convey the period of significance of the property. The property retains essential features that convey its historic identity. The amphitheatre, Moraine Park Museum, parking lot, associated trails and vegetation all contribute to a cultural landscape. Since the Museum is already listed on the National Register, the addition of these other features is recognition of their historic relationship.

Information Sources

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Appendix: Page 1 of the Preliminary Evaluation Form (National Register of Historic Places, Colorado State Register of Historic Properties)

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

**COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation
1300 Broadway Denver, CO 80203**

COUNTY: Larimer

CITY: Estes Park

HISTORIC BUILDING NAME(S):
Moraine Amphitheatre

CURRENT BUILDING NAME:
Moraine Park Museum Amphitheatre

BUILDING ADDRESS:
Moraine Park in Rocky Mountain National Park

OWNER NAME & ADDRESS:
National Park Service, Rocky Mountain National Park

ORIGINAL OWNER:
Source of information:
National Park Service

HISTORIC USE(S):
Outdoor Amphitheatre

PRESENT USE:
Outdoor Amphitheatre

LOCAL LANDMARK DESIGNATION:
 yes no Date of designation:
Designating authority:

PLAN SHAPE: north arrow ↗

STATE SITE NUMBER:

OFFICE USE ONLY BELOW

Eligible for National Register yes no
date initials
Criteria A B C D
Contributes to a potential National Register district
 yes No district name:

Eligible for State Register yes no
date initials
Criteria A B C D E
Areas of significance:

Period of significance _____
Needs data _____ date initials Style:

Building type:

UTM REFERENCE:
Zone 13 Easting 450400 Northing 4467590

OFFICE USE ONLY ABOVE

LEGAL LOCATION:
P.M.: 6 Township: 5N Range: 73W
NE ¼ of SW ¼ of SE ¼ of NW ¼ of Section: 33

USGS quad name: Longs Peak
Year: 1978 7.5' 15'

Lot(s):
Block: NA
Addition:
Year of addition:

original location moved
Date of move(s):

CONSTRUCTION DATE: estimate: actual: 1937
Source of information:
Estes Park Trail Gazette (see attached sheets)

ARCHITECT: No information available

BUILDER/CONTRACTOR: National Park Service
Source of information:

EXTERNAL MATERIALS:
Stone and timber

STORIES: BUILDING DIMENSIONS:

ASSOCIATED BUILDINGS:
 yes no
Building types:
Moraine Park Museum