

COLORADO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES NOMINATION FORM

SECTION I

Name of Property

Historic Name Rabbit Ears Motel Sign

Other Names _____

Address of Property

address not for publication

Street Address 201 Lincoln Avenue

City Steamboat Springs

County Routt

Zip 80487

Present Owner of Property

(for multiple ownership, list the names and addresses of each owner on one or more continuation sheets)

Name Rabbit Ears Motel, Inc. (contact: Greg Koehler)

Address PO Box 770573

Phone 970-879-1150

City Steamboat Springs

State CO

Zip 80477

Owner Consent for Nomination

(attach signed consent from each owner of property - see attached form)

Preparer of Nomination

Name Laureen Schaffer (additional material by OAHP)

Date May 22, 2006

Organization City of Steamboat Springs

Address PO Box 775088

Phone 970-871-8278

City Steamboat Springs

State CO

Zip 80477

FOR OFFICIAL USE:

Site Number 5RT.2296

5/26/2006 Nomination Received

Senate # _____

House # _____

8/11/2006 Review Board Recommendation
 Approval Denial

8/31/2006 CHS Board State Register Listing
 Approved Denied

Listing Criteria A B C D E

Certification of Listing: President, Colorado Historical Society

Date _____

COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

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SECTION II

Local Historic Designation

Has the property received local historic designation?

no

yes --- individually designated designated as part of a historic district

Date designated July 2003

Designated by Routt County (Name of municipality or county)

Use of Property

Historic Commerce

Current Commerce

Original Owner H.L. and Evelyn L. Beswick

Source of Information Steamboat Pilot, September 3, 1953

Year of Construction 1953

Source of Information Steamboat Pilot, September 3, 1953

Architect, Builder, Engineer, Artist or Designer Unknown

Source of Information _____

Locational Status

Original location of structure(s)

Structure(s) moved to current location

Date of move 1977-78

SECTION III

Description and Alterations

(describe the current and original appearance of the property and any alterations on one or more continuation sheets)

COLORADO STATE REGISTER OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES

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SECTION IV

Significance of Property

Nomination Criteria

- A** - property is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to history
- B** - property is connected with persons significant in history
- C** - property has distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction or artisan
- D** - property is of geographic importance
- E** - property contains the possibility of important discoveries related to prehistory or history

Areas of Significance

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Agriculture | <input type="checkbox"/> Economics | <input type="checkbox"/> Landscape |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture | <input type="checkbox"/> Education | <input type="checkbox"/> Architecture |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology – prehistoric | <input type="checkbox"/> Engineering | <input type="checkbox"/> Law |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Archaeology – historic | <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment/ Recreation | <input type="checkbox"/> Literature |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Art | <input type="checkbox"/> Ethnic Heritage | <input type="checkbox"/> Military |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Commerce | <input type="checkbox"/> Exploration/ Settlement | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing Arts |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Communications | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Geography/ Community Identity | <input type="checkbox"/> Politics/ Government |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Community Planning and Development | <input type="checkbox"/> Health/Medicine | <input type="checkbox"/> Religion |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Conservation | <input type="checkbox"/> Industry | <input type="checkbox"/> Science |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Invention | <input type="checkbox"/> Social History |
| | | <input type="checkbox"/> Transportation |

Significance Statement

(explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets)

Bibliography

(cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form on one or more continuation sheets)

SECTION V

Locational Information

Lot(s) 3 Block 24 Addition Original Town of Steamboat Springs

USGS Topographic Quad Map Steamboat Springs

Verbal Boundary Description of Nominated Property

(describe the boundaries of the nominated property on a continuation sheet)

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SECTION VI

Photograph Log for Black and White Photographs

(prepare a photograph log on one or more continuation sheets)

SECTION VII

ADDITIONAL MATERIALS TO ACCOMPANY NOMINATION

Owner Consent Form

Black and White Photographs

Color Prints or Digital Images

Sketch Map(s)

Photocopy of USGS Map Section

Optional Materials

Use of Nomination Materials

Upon submission to the Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation, all nomination forms and supporting materials become public records pursuant to CRS Title 24, and may be accessed, copied, and used for personal or commercial purposes in accordance with state law unless otherwise specifically exempted. The Colorado Historical Society may reproduce, publish, display, perform, prepare derivative works or otherwise use the nomination materials for Society and/or State Register purposes.

For Office Use Only

Property Type: building(s) district site structure object area

Architectural Style/Engineering Type: Outdoor Electric Advertising Sign

Period of Significance: 1953

Level of Significance: Local State National

Acreage less than one

P.M. 6th Township 6N Range 84W Section 17 Quarter Sections NW NW SE NE

UTM Reference: Zone 13 Easting 345045 Northing 4482695 NAD27

Site Elevation: 6,725 feet

Property Name Rabbit Ears Motel Sign

DESCRIPTION and ALTERATIONS

Located at the southeastern gateway to the city of Steamboat Springs, the Rabbit Ears Motel Sign has been greeting residents and visitors along U.S. Highway 40 since 1953. The Rabbit Ears Motel is located to the south of the sign. The Yampa River flows directly behind the motel, to the south and west. The famous mineral springs of the Steamboat Springs Health and Recreation Association are located across US40 (Lincoln Avenue). The sign is one of the first built objects encountered by those entering the original commercial area of Steamboat Springs after having descended from Rabbit Ears Pass.

The motel sign is a freestanding, double-sided, roadside advertising sign. The main body measures 17' 6" wide by 9' tall at the top of the arrow. The painted rabbit head is 7' 6" tall from the chin to the tip of the ears. The edges of the sign measure 14½" deep. Thin aluminum sheets form the sign's skin. The total surface area is approximately 780 sq. ft. The west edge of the sign holds the sign electrical power box. The sign rests on two thick metal posts that rise 2' 10" from grade. Landscape timbers create a rectangular base around the two steel support posts.

The rabbit face on the upper edge of the sign is painted white with black facial features. The sign background is painted yellow-beige. The U-shaped arrow pointing into the motel's parking lot is painted pink. The painted words "Rabbit Ears" are in black on the beige background, while the word "Motel" is painted directly below on the arrow in contrasting white. An 8'W X 19"H X 1½"D rectangular, metal-framed blue marquee occupies the area beneath the top portion of the arrow. The marquee contains a sandstone rock scene done in dark, reddish beige, and the words "Quality Lodging at Affordable Rates, Family Owned and Operated" in white. The lower portion of the arrow contains the 6'6"W X 10"H X 4¼"D "Vacancy" sign that is also framed in metal and encased in glass. Attached to the sign edge facing the road and just beneath the rabbit face is a short (44") horizontal pole supporting a rectangular 24"W X 26"H metal "AAA" sign.

Neon tubes border the edges of the rabbit's face and glow pink when illuminated.¹ The rabbit's eyes are outlined with neon tubes that glow orange. Orange-glowing tubes outline the words "Rabbit Ears." The word "Motel" is bordered with green neon lights. The "Vacancy" sign is highlighted by orange neon and is lit separately from the rest of the sign. The marquee is backlighted without neon tubes. Empty 5/8"-deep sockets border the edges of the arrow, replicating the sockets that originally held blue 40-watt chase lights outlining the arrow.

¹ *Neon* is the generic term descriptive of the entire spectrum of glowing tubes used in electrical signage. Such signs generally use a variety of inert gases to produce different colors. When excited electrically, neon glows a bright orange-red. Argon glows a bright grayish-blue. Bright blue results when mercury is added to argon. The same mixture placed behind a yellow rather than clear glass yields a green light. A white glow is created using helium, and yellow is obtained with helium under yellow glass.

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Figure 1. This postcard postmarked in 1962 shows the Rabbit Ears Motel sign and building before the end of their first decade of operation.

Alterations

Changes to the sign occurred over its half-decade history because of general maintenance and upgrades, new sign regulations, and highway widening. Originally, the neon-outlined eyes of the rabbit were mechanized, creating the effect of the eyes moving from left to right. There were two sets of eyes with a revolving plate behind the eyes that operated via an electric motor. The motor turned one set of eyes on and the other off to give the appearance of the eyes flashing back and forth. Forty-watt blue chase lights outlining the borders of the arrow provided additional nighttime animation. Both the animated eyes and chase lights were prohibited after the 1970s passage of legislation prohibiting animated signs along roads in the State highway system.

The space where the present-day marquee is currently located was actually open when the sign was originally built. A corrugated yellow marquee with black lettering was inserted by the time the Koehler family purchased the property in the early 1970s. Brad Kindred replaced the yellow marquee with stained glass in 1988. The current blue marquee has been in place since 2000-01.

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The original colors of the sign were red (arrow), green (background), yellow (“Rabbit Ears”), white (“Motel” and rabbit face), and grey (rabbit fur). These were changed to a rusty, reddish pink and blue prior to 1971. The sign wore fluorescent pink, yellow and blue until 1988. (Postcard, 1962; McPherson, 2003)

Brad Kindred completed a major rehabilitation of the sign in 1988, stripping it down to bare metal, patching it with fiberglass where necessary, replacing transformers, and re-pumping or replacing the glass as needed for the neon. He also toned the colors to their present-day pink with beige-yellow background. In 2000-01 the sign was re-faced in aluminum and repainted because paint would no longer adhere to the original galvanized steel (McPherson, 2003).

In 1977-78, the Colorado Department of Highways widened US 40 into a four-lane road in front of the motel, necessitating the condemnation of the roadside frontage. Located in the condemned area, the sign was situated close to or in what is now part of the outermost southbound lane of the highway. The Koehlers tried unsuccessfully to preserve the sign in its original location. By 1978 the sign stood in its current location on the motel property (McPherson, 2003).

Historic Integrity

The Rabbit Ears Motel sign has changed over time, though the overall shape remains intact. The infilling of the open portion of the U-shaped arrow is the only noticeable change to the sign’s basic form. General maintenance necessitated repainting and the repair of lighting elements. As a feature of the day and night, the sign’s integrity needs to be assessed in both daylight and after dark environments.



At least three paint schemes have been used, though it appears that the rabbit face, the single most important aspect of the sign, retains its original paint colors. The change from the bold red, green, yellow and white to the pastels first applied in 1988 and continuing to the present results in some loss of integrity of design and materials, particularly when the sign is viewed in daylight hours.

The removal of the chaser lights is most noticeable at night. The attention-catching

Figure 2. A recent photo of the illuminated sign at night.

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and eye-directing qualities of the animated arrow border have been lost. Beyond the animation, the arrow now lacks a light-defined edge. Though the arrow remains visible after dark, the infilling of its center opening renders it less defined. However, as is true of the daylight conditions, the single most important nighttime features are the rabbit head, along with the "Rabbit Ears" and "Motel" wording. These remain highly visible in their neon outlining. Neon tubes were replaced in kind, retaining integrity of design and materials when the sign is viewed at night.

The sign also has lost some integrity of location with its 1977-78 move. The relocation was a short distance, less than 100 feet. The sign remains on land historically part of the motel in 1953. The sign retains its original compass orientation and its orientation to US 40. The sign is also approximately the same distance from the shoulder of the widened highway as it was from the highway in 1953. The change in location has minimally affected the sign's ability to convey its significance.

The Rabbit Ears Motel Sign, though somewhat changed since its 1953 construction, retains sufficient integrity to convey its geographical significance.



Figure 3. A 1961 travel guide advertisement for the Rabbit Ears Motel includes the sign. Source: "Where to Vacation in Colorado, 1961-62 Edition," Rocky Mountain Motorists. Collection of Lyle Miller.

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SIGNIFICANCE STATEMENT

The Rabbit Ears Motel Sign is a well-recognized, locally significant commercial feature at the southeastern edge of the original Town of Steamboat Springs. The 1953 constructed roadside sign is eligible for listing in the Colorado State Register of Historic Properties under Criterion D in the area of ***Geography/Community Identity***. The motel sign remains an enduring and established visual feature of the community and serves as a source of local identity. The large neon sign with its grinning rabbit face marks the entrance to the community. Once considered by some to be a tacky eyesore, the sign survived periods of downtown “modernization” to become a much beloved local geographic landmark. The sign now transcends its traditional role and has become a community icon.

Tourism in Steamboat Springs

Tourism has long played an important role in the economy of Steamboat Springs. The varied amenities of the region, including the hot springs, hunting, skiing, and other opportunities for outdoor recreation have drawn tourists to the region since the early 1900s. The arrival of the railroad in 1909 and the Victory Highway after World War I increased accessibility to the Yampa Valley. The highway was designated U.S. Highway 40 in 1935 after it was reconstructed and opened to year-round travel. Twentieth-century tourism waxed and waned with national economic trends, peaking in the 1920s, declining in the 1930s and early 1940s due to the Great Depression and World War II, and increasing again in the late 1940s and 1950s with the postwar economic boom.

Accommodating the resurgence of visitors in the postwar era, local entrepreneurs constructed several hotels, motels, and travel courts. The Harbor Hotel at 7th Street and Lincoln Avenue (U.S. Highway 40) opened in 1940 and business warranted the addition of a second story in 1947. The Western Lodge, constructed in 1947 at the west end of town, expanded in the 1950s. The owners of the Bristol Hotel undertook a renovation project in 1953. The Nite’s Rest Motel, built in 1946 and expanded in 1949, underwent remodeling in the spring and summer of 1953. During the remodel, the motel owners added a “drive-in” office, reflective of the automobile tourism age. An 18’ by 28’ aluminum-faced canopy with indirect lighting extended from the motel office to the curb. The changes modernized the building and were “patterned after new desert motels found in New Mexico and Nevada.” Local business owners remodeled or spruced up their storefronts, and many new neon signs attracted visitors’ eyes. Steamboat Springs drew a record number of tourists in 1953 (*Steamboat Pilot*, May 21, June 4, July 23, and September 3, 1953).

In March 1953, H. L. and Evelyn L. Beswick, formerly of Kansas City, Missouri, purchased several lots at the east end of Steamboat Springs from the Town in order to develop their own tourist court. The Beswicks had passed through Steamboat Springs on several occasions and decided they would like to own and manage a motel in the area. Building the motel over the course of the summer, the Beswicks were joined by Evelyn’s sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Leon D. Faler, who came to help maintain and manage the motel. Opening during the first weekend in September 1953, Steamboat’s latest tourist court offered 20 units constructed by

Property Name Rabbit Ears Motel Sign

E.S. Carlson of Denver and featured red brick with green and yellow trim. Beckoning tourists, the “eye catcher” for the prospective visitor to the new motel was a large neon sign with a grinning rabbit face on top of a large arrow. Painted in colors that matched the new motel, the friendly rabbit stirred travelers’ attention, while chase lights outlining the large arrow beneath pointed the way to the establishment (*Steamboat Pilot*, July 23 and September 3, 1953).

The Beswicks owned the Rabbit Ears Motel for almost ten years, selling the property in the spring of 1962. The property had various owners until the spring of 1971, when Ronald G. and Lyle F. Koehler purchased the property. Ronald Koehler was a businessman in Butte, Montana, owning Ron’s Gambles and Marine Store for many years. He first came through Steamboat Springs while visiting his son’s family in Craig. The Koehler family continues to own and operate the Rabbit Ears Motel (Routt County Assessor’s Office; McPherson, 2003).

Roadside Advertising

Operators of roadside businesses depend heavily on signs to catch the attention of automobile travelers and to motivate them to turn in to purchase the advertised goods and services. The speed of automobile traffic and the general commercial clutter of the roadside afford any one sign only a few seconds to convey its message and stimulate a positive reaction. Merchants and sign designers have long used a variety of techniques to attract the traveling public.

Roadside signs tend to use bold shapes and forms that stand out from the surrounding roadside environment. Outdoor signs often employ arrows or other devices to encourage the eye to move from the sign toward the business itself. Bold colors attract attention as does movement or animation. Simple signs convey their message quicker and more easily than do cluttered signs. Roadside signs tend toward few words, as a motorist has little time to read a long message and small print is difficult to comprehend quickly from a moving vehicle.

Many roadside businesses operate during both daylight hours and after dark. Their signs must be effective both during the day and at night. Bold shapes and colors noticeable in the light fade to obscurity at night. Flood and backlights, neon outlines, and theater marquee-type chaser lights provide signs with distinction, legibility, and animation when viewed after sunset.

Motel operators face the same advertising challenges as other roadside retailers. While some travelers make advance reservations, many rely on being able find an attractive and available motel room by driving by the choices at the end of each day’s journey. As these room-seeking travelers generally pass by in late afternoon and early evening, an effective motel sign must be appealing in the daylight and when lighted at night. Postwar motel signs often included bold shapes and colors, distinctive lettering, and eye-catching arrows. Neon outlines and lettering, flashing lights, and chaser lights also were common.

Wording was kept to a minimum, often including nothing more than the motel name and the availability of rooms (the ubiquitous “vacancy” “no vacancy” signs). Some signs highlighted desirable amenities. Early signs might note “telephones” or “steam heat,” while modern signs announce the availability of spas, Internet access, and cable TV.

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The independent motel operator faces a particularly difficult marketing challenge. Chain and franchise operations use identical signs or sign elements at each associated motel. The so-called “Great Sign” of the Holiday Inn chain is a notable example. (See Fig. 4) Travelers experiencing a pleasant night’s stay at one location will be on the lookout for the chain’s standard sign when visiting other towns. The independent motel owner relies on his sign to entice travelers without any prior knowledge of his facilities, and often against the competition of



Figure 4. The huge roadside sign designed by Kemmons Wilson for his Holiday Inn chain was distinctive, eye-catching, and immediately recognizable from a considerable distance.

Source: Postcard from the mid-1960s.

a familiar chain operation just down the road. The sign must convey safety, cleanliness, desirable amenities, and of course, availability. An enticing sign can make the difference between commercial success or failure.

Owners strive to select appealing motel names, not just in general terms, but specifically for use on the roadside sign. Cute names and distinctive spellings abound, such as Kozy Kort, Doze Inn, and Nite’s Rest. Regional geography plays a big role in motel naming. A Coral Court, Palm Tree, or Sands can be found in coastal towns, while the Cowboy, Blue Spruce, or Westward Ho celebrates the western travel experience, and the Cactus, Roadrunner and Oasis signal day’s end in towns across the desert southwest. Certain names also lend themselves to distinctive sign shapes or elements. Many Cactus motel signs display the instantly recognizable saguaro, even when hundreds of miles from the native range of this desert dweller.

Motel names often play on local tourist attractions. What trip to Yellowstone would be complete without a stay en route at a Geyser court or Old Faithful motel? The roadside sign for these tourist lodgings may be counted on to feature an image of their erupting namesake.

The advertising sign installed by the Beswicks at their Rabbit Ears motel incorporates many of the classic elements of the roadside sign. The bold shape and sweeping arrow catch the motorist’s attention and direct the eye to the motel building. The simple lettering makes the sign easy to read from a moving car. However, it is the relationship between the name and the design that gives this sign its major appeal. Travelers coming west toward Steamboat on U.S. Highway 40 first surmount the summit of 9,426-foot Rabbit Ears Pass before dropping into the Yampa Valley. As motorists on the mountain highway enter Steamboat Springs, a friendly reminder of their recent automotive triumph greets them—the smiling rabbit’s face on the sign at the Rabbit Ears Motel. The giant rabbit head topped by a massive pair of ears employs humor to cement the bond between motorist and sign. Who could pass by without a chuckle? Better yet, who could resist the children’s pleas to stay the night? For countless families, the sign at

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the Rabbit Ears Motel stimulated an affirmative answer to that universal question, Are we there yet?

Community Identity

Many physical elements, both natural and human-made, contribute to a community's identity. Prominent buildings and sites unique to an area differentiate it from other communities. Often, the elements that provide this identity were designed for other purposes. Their long association with a place and a community give them geographical importance unrelated to their original design and use. The Rabbit Ears Motel Sign is such a feature.

Though designed strictly as a roadside marketing device, its long association with the community, its place as a gateway marker in the landscape, its reference to a local geographical landmark by name and design, and its overall distinctiveness reinforced by its unforgettable humor, have made this advertising sign an icon. It supplies Steamboat Springs with part of its identity, both for residents and repeat visitors. For more than a half-century of service, the sign at the Rabbit Ears Motel signaled one's arrival in Steamboat Springs. The historic sign's survival in the changing physical landscape provides a visual anchor for the southeastern entry to the downtown area.

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Jakle, John A. *City Lights: Illuminating the American Night*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001.

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Richards, Dee. *Steamboat Round the Bend*. Steamboat Springs: *Steamboat Pilot*, 1976.

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"Where to Vacation in Colorado, 1961-62 Edition." Denver: Rocky Mountain Motorists, 1961.

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION

The Rabbit Ears Motel Sign is located in Lot 3, Block 24 of the Original Town of Steamboat Springs, Section 17, Township 6 North, Range 84 West. The boundary includes the sign and the land extending three feet in each direction to form a rectangle from the footprint of the sign.

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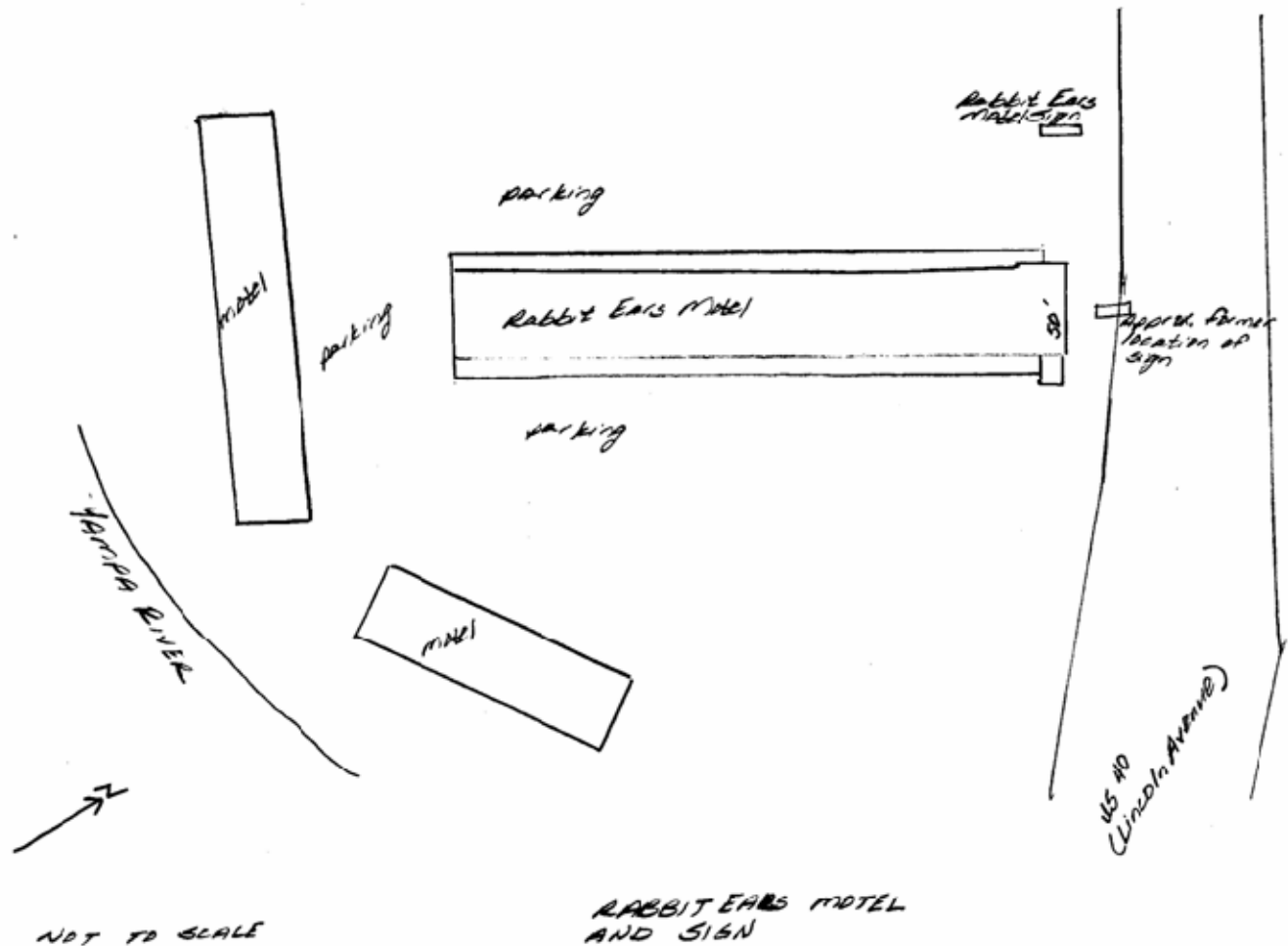
PHOTOGRAPH LOG

The following information pertains to photograph numbers 1-4:

Name of Property: Rabbit Ears Motel Sign
Location: 201 Lincoln Avenue, Steamboat Springs, CO
Photographer: Laureen Schaffer
Date of Photographs: May 12, 2006
Negatives: Steamboat Springs Historic Preservation Office

Photo No.	Photographic Information
1	East side; view to southwest.
2	East side; view to the west.
3	West side; view to the east.
4	South edge; view to the north.

SITE SKETCH MAP



Property Name Rabbit Ears Motel Sign



RABBIT EARS MOTEL SIGN LOCATION MAP



1 inch equals 150 feet
(when viewed as an 8.5 x 11)

Print Date: May 24th, 2006

NOTE: Aerial Photos Taken Oct 17, 2003

Legend

— 10 Ft Contours

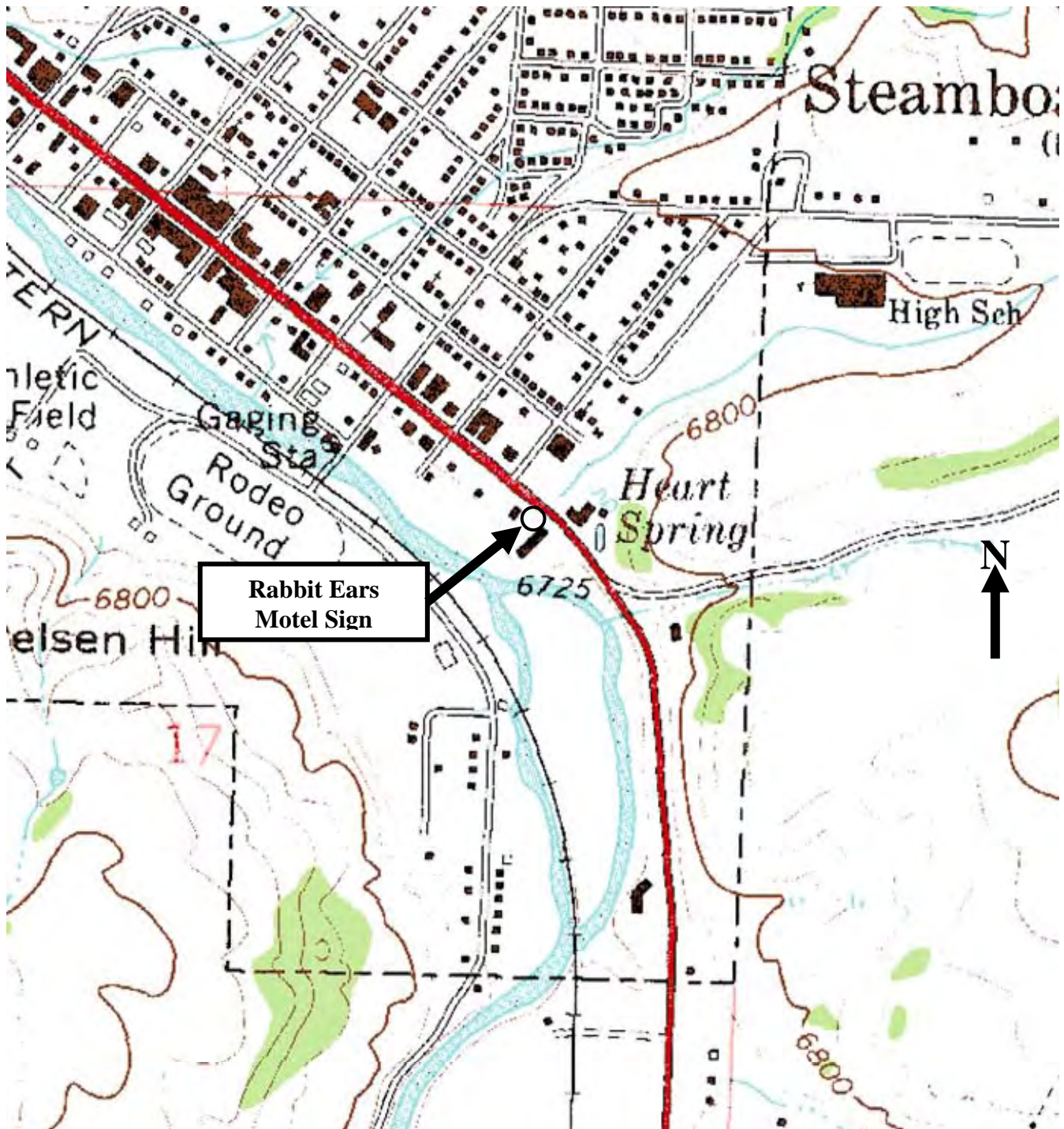
City of
Steamboat Springs
CO 80443

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USGS TOPOGRAPHIC MAP

Steamboat Springs Quadrangle, Colorado
7.5 Minute Series (enlarged), 1969





Rabbit Ears
MOTEL
QUALITY LODGING
At Affordable Rates
Family Owned and Operated

Show Your Card
Approved Lodging

NO
PARKING
ANY
TIME



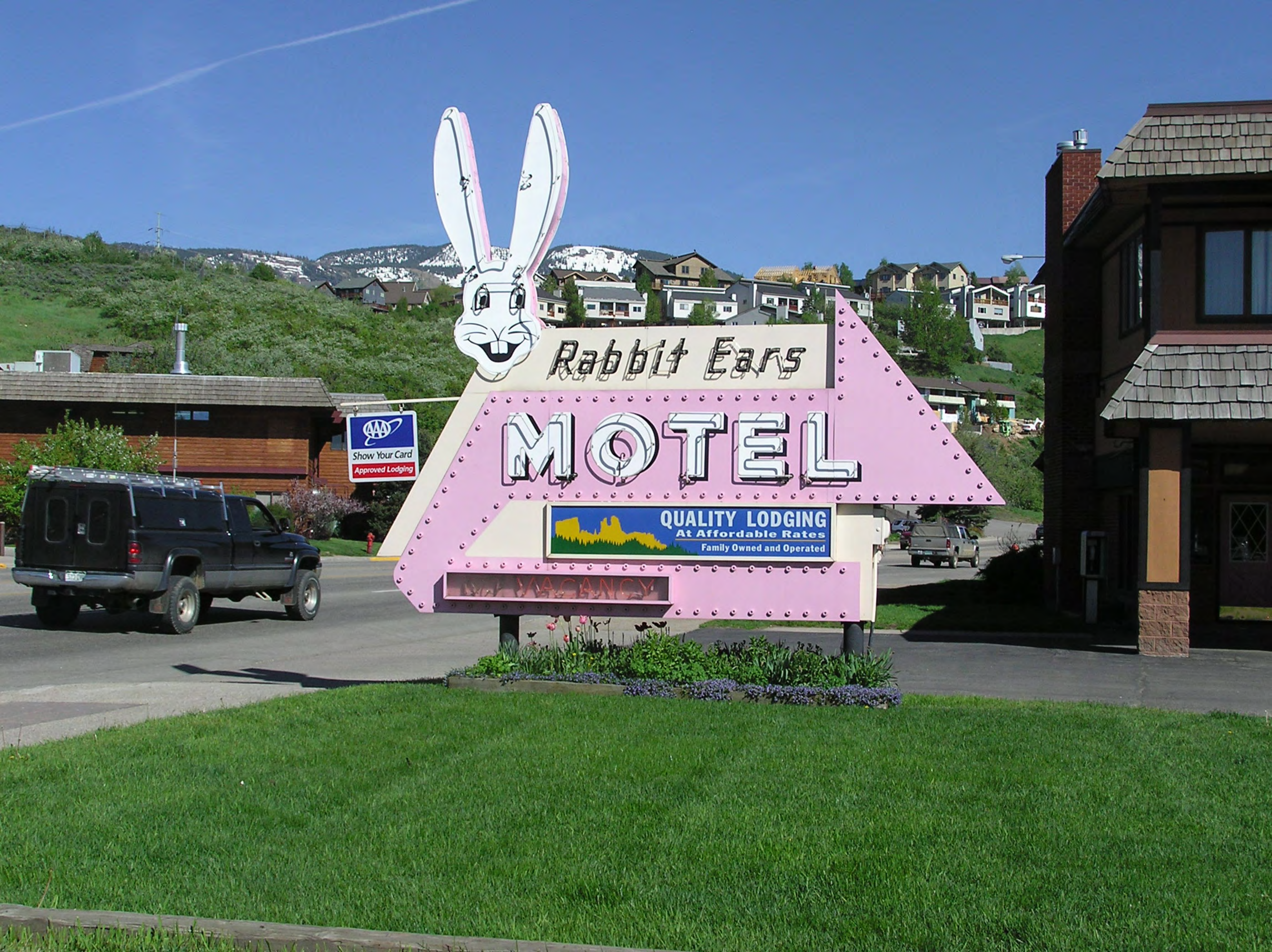


Rabbit Ears

MOTEL

QUALITY LODGING
At Affordable Rates
Family Owned and Operated

VACANCY





Rabbit Ears
MOTEL

QUALITY LODGING
At Affordable Rates
Family Owned and Operated

VACANCY

Show Your Card
Approved Lodging

FedEx

WELLS
FARGO
77

Chevrolet



Rabbit Ears

MOTEL

QUALITY LODGING
At Affordable Rates
Family Owned and Operated

110 VACANCY