

The Coliseum
535 4th Avenue North
HPC #94-03 - Designated September 1994



The circa 1924 Coliseum, designed in the Mediterranean Revival style, is one of the South's largest operating ballrooms and is the center for community social events and dancing. Located within the early recreational and entertainment section of the city, the facility is near the Lawn Bowling Club, Shuffle Board Club, Mirror Lake Public Library, and City Hall. Designed as a ballroom facility to enhance the City's tourism, the Coliseum soon became a major southern destination for performers of the swing era during the 1920s and 1930s. Big name entertainers of the swing era made the Coliseum a regular stop on the travel circuit. Performers included Louis Armstrong, Count Bassie, Les Brown, Cab Calloway, Jimmy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Buddy Holly, Sammy Kaye, Kay Kyser, Ted Lewis, Guy Lombardo, Glenn Miller, Will Rodgers, Artie Shaw, Rudy Vallee and many more.

Even though the Coliseum was booked by many big name shows, it was also the gathering place for many community functions such as the Exchange Club, St. Petersburg Debutante Balls, St. Petersburg High School Alumni Dances, the Policemen's Balls, and the Festival of States Coronation Balls. The Coliseum was also used for many non-dancing activities. Before the invention of television, radio shows such as "Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour," "The Old Gold Show," and "Don McNeil's Breakfast Club" were recorded there.

C. F. Cullen proposed the idea for the Coliseum with the intent of providing St. Petersburg with Broadway entertainment to attract wealthy northerners. The design idea incorporated features from "Somewhere in France," an amusement establishment near Los Angeles that was stated to have the acoustic properties of the Tabernacle at Salt Lake City, Utah. With the design skills of the ballroom architect/engineer, T. H. Eslick the Coliseum was designed with Moorish towers and an arched roof.

The Coliseum's volumetric interior space is unique and has not changed over the history of the building. The interior space gains its beauty from its structural design. The building's arched roof is supported by 13 large wooden trusses. Each truss spans 128 feet and weighs nine tons. These curved trusses were used to create the same acoustic qualities of the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City. The ceiling was constructed of tongue-and-groove wooden boards.

At the time of construction the newly proposed state-of-the-art lighting system was described to be "a feature worth traveling a long distance to see." The 13 wood trusses contained an intricate lighting system with lights facing the Coliseum ceiling. The system also contained a Rotary Jewel lighting system comprised of four cone-shaped cylinders fastened together to form a square. The cones were made of cedar reinforced with plaster of paris and covered with mirrors. Electrically operated, the "Jewel" revolved slowly for moonlight dances.