NPS Form 10-900
(Rev. 10-90)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

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1. Name of Property

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historic name Chelsea Motel

other names/site number _____

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2. Location

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street & number Northeast corner, First and Historic Route 66 not for publication N/A
city or town Chelsea vicinity N/A
state Oklahoma code OK county Rogers code 131 zip code 74016

NATIONAL REGISTER
LISTED

MAY 27 '04

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3. State/Federal Agency Certification

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As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this X 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 X meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant ___ nationally ___ statewide X locally. (N/A See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Bob Blackburn 4-12-04

Signature of certifying official Date

Oklahoma Historical Society, SHPO

State or Federal agency and bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria. (___ See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

_____ _____

Signature of commenting or other official Date

_____

State or Federal agency and bureau

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4. National Park Service Certification

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I, hereby certify that this property is:

____ entered in the National Register _____ _____

___ See continuation sheet.

____ determined eligible for the _____ _____

National Register

___ See continuation sheet.

____ determined not eligible for the _____ _____

National Register

____ removed from the National Register _____ _____

____ other (explain): _____

_____ _____ _____

Signature of Keeper Date of Action

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5. Classification

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Ownership of Property (Check as many boxes as apply)

_x_ private
___ public-local
___ public-State
___ public-Federal

Category of Property (Check only one box)

_x_ building(s)
___ district
___ site
___ structure
___ object

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing	Noncontributing
1	_____ buildings
_____	_____ sites
_____	_____ structures
1	_____ objects
2	_____ Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register 0

Name of related multiple property listing (Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing.) Route 66 and Associated Historic Resources in Oklahoma

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6. Function or Use

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Historic Functions (Enter categories from instructions)
Cat: DOMESTIC Sub: hotel

Current Functions (Enter categories from instructions)
Cat: VACANT / NOT IN USE Sub: _____

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7. Description

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Architectural Classification (Enter categories from instructions)
OTHER: Ranch style

Materials (Enter categories from instructions)
foundation CONCRETE
roof ASPHALT
walls STUCCO; WOOD

other

Narrative Description (Describe the historic and current condition of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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8. Statement of Significance

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Applicable National Register Criteria (Mark "x" in one or more boxes for the criteria qualifying the property for National Register listing)

__x__ 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.

__x__ 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 a grave.

____ D a cemetery.

____ E a reconstructed building, object, or structure.

____ F a commemorative property.

____ G less than 50 years of age or achieved significance within the past 50 years.

Areas of Significance (Enter categories from instructions)

COMMERCE
ARCHITECTURE

Period of Significance 1936-1954

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8. Statement of Significance (Continued)

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Significant Dates 1936

Significant Person (Complete if Criterion B is marked above)
N/A

Cultural Affiliation N/A

Architect/Builder UNKNOWN

Narrative Statement of Significance (Explain the significance of the property on one or more continuation sheets.)

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9. Major Bibliographical References

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

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 # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data
___ State Historic Preservation Office
___ Other State agency
___ Federal agency
___ Local government
___ University
____ Other
Name of repository:

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10. Geographical Data

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Acreage of Property less than 2 acres

UTM References (Place additional UTM references on a continuation sheet)

	Zone	Easting	Northing		Zone	Easting	Northing
1	15	282828E	4046092N	3			
2				4			

N/A See continuation sheet.

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property on a continuation sheet.)

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected on a continuation sheet.)

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11. Form Prepared By

==========

name/title Michael Cassity

organization Oklahoma State Historic Preservation Office date December 13, 2003

street & number 304 W. Albuquerque telephone 918 451-8378

city or town Broken Arrow state OK zip code 74011

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Additional Documentation

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Submit the following items with the completed form:

Continuation Sheets

Maps

A USGS map (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.

A sketch map for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources.

Photographs

Representative black and white photographs of the property.

Additional items (Check with the SHPO or FPO for any additional items)

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Property Owner

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(Complete this item at the request of the SHPO or FPO.)

name Anna Coleman, c/o Shirley Rider

street & number 218 Walnut Street telephone (no listing for either)

city or town Chelsea state OK zip code 74016

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Description

Located directly inside a curve of Route 66, and in fact, at the junction of an earlier alignment of U.S. Route 66 with the newer road, the Chelsea Motel was situated in an ideal location for serving the traveling public as it followed the storied highway through northeastern Oklahoma. The motel, built about 1936, is a simple rectangular building about 75 feet long on its west elevation and 16 feet deep on its south elevation, divided into six motel units. The motel faces west in a triangular piece of land formed by the intersection of First Street (an east – west conduit) and Historic Route 66 which approaches from the southwest and at this point begins a curve to the east. A gravel drive exits the highway and passes directly in front of the linear building and connects with First Street to the south. Immediately to the east of the motel is a rectangular house that once served as the motel office and residence of the operator; that house has been modernized in recent years and is not part of this nomination. A garage has been added south of the house and a narrow asphalt drive separates the motel from the other buildings.

The motel is of wood construction (in fact, using patterned lumber ordinarily used on interior walls) on the west elevation, with stucco applied to the other elevations. The eave of the gable roof with asphalt shingles overhangs on the west providing protection for the entrances to the rooms. The eave shows exposed rafter tails and still holds the series of neon tubes extending laterally across the full length of the eave. The eave is supported by a row of square wooden piers; while symmetrical, these five piers are not evenly spaced, with two near at the ends and one in the center. The six motel units are arranged in a manner in which the doors of adjacent rooms are paired next to each other, so that the rooms mirror each other. Each room has a tall double-hung window; although air conditioners at one time were positioned in the lower section of each window, they have been removed and that section sealed. A concrete walk extends the full distance of the elevation.

The south elevation includes a pair of double hung windows in the last motel unit. Although the elevation has deteriorated somewhat, this also reveals the construction and cladding materials. A simple wooden frame building, the motel has been covered on this (and other elevations except for the west) elevation with tarpaper and then coated with stucco and painted. (Several horizontal planks of wood laminate have been mounted over the lower portion of this wall to provide protection.) The same cladding and deterioration are also evident on the east elevation. The only structural features evident on that elevation are the paired bathroom windows located high on the wall. The north elevation is a mirror image of the south, with the pair of double-hung windows positioned nearer the front (west) elevation. A vent is positioned directly beneath the center ridge on both the north and south elevations.

An important part of this motel is the sign located near the highway. Although the paint has faded, this is an outstanding feature of the property and has been otherwise well preserved. The sign consists of three horizontal panels mounted on two steel posts, one (south) vertical and the other (north) angling toward the base of the first, thus creating a triangle that provides ample support for the largest sign at the top. The sign announces CHELSEA MOTEL with neon script over the paint. Beneath those words on the panel, an additional sign has been positioned indicating that the motel is air-conditioned. This is not enhanced with neon. On the top of this panel, and visible from both

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directions, two neon tubes are shaped as arrows, the arrow nearest the highway appearing to be compressed and spring loaded, and the second being fully extended so that when the two illuminated alternately the image pointed to the motel in an animated way.

A second panel is located beneath the large main sign panel. This one is shaped generally like an arrow and carries the neon words NO VACANCY. The simple toggle switch controlling this sign is located on the third panel which is a wooden rectangle painted with the word OFFICE and an arrow. An additional sign, attached to the VACANCY / NO VACANCY arrow informs travelers that the motel also has showers. By all accounts the sign is still completely operable (as is the neon lighting on the eave of the motel), although the electricity has been turned off. Stories abound of the special glory of this motel and its red neon lighting literally beckoning the weary traveler with a radiant promise of rest and modernity.

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Significance.

The Chelsea Motel is significant within the Multiple Property Nomination, "Route 66 and Associated Historic Resources in Oklahoma." The motel was built about 1936 and the business provided lodging for travelers along U.S. Highway 66 throughout the period of historic significance and in the rise of the highway, and then subsequently its decline, it reflected fundamental contours of the role of transportation in twentieth century American history as a force generating social change. In this way, the motel qualifies under that multiple property nomination. The motel is significant under Criteria A and C because it represents the property type, "Motels / Tourist Courts" in the area of significance of Commerce and Architecture.

Historical Significance.

The historical significance of the Chelsea Motel derives not from the fact that it was an especially important place of lodging or from the particular activities associated with it during its years as an operating business. Rather its historical significance has to do with the circumstances that gave rise to it in the first place as a motel along a new highway that promised to transform the social and economic landscape of the nation, and then the circumstances of its decline as Route 66 continued to reshape the area, this time by leaving behind the communities and businesses that had depended on it. The Chelsea Motel is significant because it is representative of the multitude of now anonymous mom and pop motels that once offered hope, for a while delivered handsomely, and then faded from the nation's roadside just like the paint on its marquee standing silent and dark by the highway today.

When Route 66 was originally designated a U.S. highway in November 1926 it followed existing roads rather than coursing the distance between Chicago and Santa Monica on a new path, and as such it connected the string of towns in northeastern Oklahoma between Miami and Tulsa. Some of these towns had been part of the Ozark Trails system of roads, and while that network followed varied, and competing, paths it appears that by the mid-1920s it went along the St. Louis and San Francisco Railroad and through the small farming town of Chelsea. Founded in the Cherokee Nation in the 1880s, Chelsea was the location of the first discovery of oil in what would become Oklahoma and by the 1920s had developed a solid town center and at least one oil refinery on its periphery to the north (the Tidal – Chelsea Refining Company). Until 1932 the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map for Chelsea marked the center of the town as the railroad depot.

The advent of Route 66 was welcome and the changes the road brought were subtle, at least initially. The highway entered Chelsea from the north for the westbound traveler, crossed Pryor Creek, and then head straight west until it intersected with Walnut, an avenue that ran parallel to the railroad, and on the opposite side of the railroad from the business district. On the west side of the railroad was the original town, the town center, the commercial district and a good portion of the residential area which was expanding to the east, although the railroad seemed to present an obstacle to growth to the east. Notably, the new highway did not actually enter the business district but continued on

to the southwest headed toward Claremore and Tulsa. In doing so, however, the highway unleashed powerful forces that caused the pattern of commerce, the course of social change, and the very future of the city to alter inexorably into a different mold.

Within just a few years a string of new businesses emerged along the east side of Walnut Avenue, businesses that were designed to accommodate the automobile traffic that was increasing along that route. In the process, the business district lost some of its weight in the community and the center of gravity in Chelsea shifted from west of the tracks to the corridor of businesses on the east side. Already Route 66 had worked a profound shift in the community of Chelsea. But more change was to come.

Exactly when the tourist court on the northeast corner of First and Walnut emerged is not certain. This was an area known as Orr's Addition, a small parcel containing only two or three blocks. In 1921 the owner of that specific plot, appears to have anticipated the road construction (or laying out, since there was precious little actual construction involved in building unpaved roads) when Georgia Palen made her mark on a document declaring her intent to use the land "exclusively for farming and agricultural purposes" and professing that she had "not closed nor attempted to close any public highway, laid out according to law."[1]

In fact, the highway that ran south of Ms. Palen's property in 1926 was not obstructed by that property, but ten years later the new highway substantially cut through her farm. The new alignment of Route 66, part of a larger state-wide effort to pave the road and also to eliminate some of the sharp corners it made as it generally followed section lines across Oklahoma, curved to the northeast from the intersection of First and Walnut. As the new highway made an arc, the road and easement took the northern part of some of the lots in that addition. Whether the new tourist court preceded or followed the new alignment is unclear; most speculation about the date of construction puts it at about the same time. In either case it is clear that Route 66, in its original alignment and in its new course, created an opportunity for the tourist court that became known ultimately as the Chelsea Motel.

In 1939 Palen sold the land along the new highway to Nellie Bly Parker. About Ms. Parker little is known, except, of course, that she was named after the late-nineteenth-century celebrity journalist and Jules Verne-class world traveler Nellie Bly, an appropriate and symbolic change for this highway that promised to bring not only the future but the world to Chelsea, Oklahoma. The corner of the property where the two roads came together—the old Route 66 which turned to the east toward Pryor Creek Bridge, and the new Route 66 which arched to the northeast—was a low area that required some fill before building on it. But wagons of dirt were brought in and the motor court quickly took shape, its long front elevation greeting traffic, especially as it approached from the southwest. Behind the building containing the row of rooms a frame house was also built to serve as both the office and residence of the operator.

Like many of the small mom and pop businesses along Route 66 which neither attracted public attention nor left a

[1] Declaration of Georgia Palen, property records, book 154, page 352, October 17, 1921, Rogers County Clerk Office, Claremore, Oklahoma.

clear record of their activities, during the years of its operation this motor court represented a link between earlier forms of accommodation and the new motels that would come to be an icon of the American roadway. The broad contours of the times are clear. In 1939 the property was purchased by Nellie Bly Parker, who clearly operated the motor court here. By this point a number of businesses had emerged along the east side of Route 66 in Chelsea, a point indicated by the remaining buildings and also by the memory of individuals like Raymond Erdwin who worked at the Home Garage in Chelsea in 1940 and 1941, an establishment, he says, that "was located on the east side of the highway, we had the coldest keg beer between Saint Louis and Amarillo, Texas, [and which] was the official bus station for Greyhound and M-K-O Trailways Lines."[2] In 1946, after World War II, Parker (a widow, and another indicator of something of the social landscape of motel ownership) sold the property to Ted and Mildred Noland; it appears that the spectacular neon sign was added around 1947 and the Nolands operated the motel during the robust years following the war when tourism skyrocketed but they sold it in 1952. In the following several years, the property changed hands several times, culminating in the ownership in 1961 by Billy J. Owen. The years of the early 1950s are often identified as something of an apex in the motel industry, a time when limited capital was required as an investment and when a good location on a major thoroughfare could provide a steady income for the mom and pop operations that prevailed.

But the pressures were increasing on these small motels. For one thing they were multiplying in number. Nationally, the number of motels at least doubled and possibly trebled between 1946 and 1953. [3] And they were mainly individually owned mom and pop operations. (In 1948 98.2% were individually owned rather than corporate owned.[4]) For another, the motels were changing. They were getting fancier and they were getting bigger. Pressure increased to provide additional amenities like telephones and air conditioning, and the Chelsea Motel responded to that demand. But it was difficult to compete with the rising tide of motel chains with their expansive lodging in the major cities of the nation. According to historian Warren Belasco, by 1953, a pivotal year in retrospect, the trade journal *Hotel Management* estimated that, "although only 10 percent of the country's courts had twenty-five or more rooms, these leaders did 40 percent of the business, especially along the lucrative main routes."[5] And certainly Route 66 was one of those main routes. The competition with the chains may not have been an immediate threat, as it would have been to the locally-owned motel down the street from a new chain unit, and the larger cities where such chains reached first were miles away, but there was another, related force that impacted this motel and others.

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[2] Raymond A. Erdwin, "These Were my Kicks on Route 66," in Oklahoma Route 66 Association, *Memories on Route 66* (Bethany, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Route 66 Association, 1991), 37.

[3] John Jakle, Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 82.

[4] Jakle, Sculle, and Rogers, *The Motel in America*, 82.

[5] Warren Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel 1910-1945* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 170.

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As traffic increased in the post-war years, the highway became packed with cars and trucks and buses and the effort to improve the highway turned into a project to replace the highway. In 1953 the Turner Turnpike between Tulsa and Oklahoma City opened, generally running parallel to Route 66 in that area. In 1957 the Will Rogers Turnpike opened between Tulsa and Joplin, bypassing the small communities served by Route 66. Although Route 66 continued, officially, to pass through Chelsea and neighboring towns, the turnpike, which then became Interstate 44, drew more and more of the traffic it had once carried. Mary Hudson Herrick's father operated the Chelsea Motel in later years, and she remembers her father observing that "Once they opened the turnpike, they shut off the business to the small towns."[6] In coming years the motel would be sustained by local business, especially by the opening of a nearby coal mine, but that was a substantially different life from what it had led when it was one of the reliable outposts of hospitality along the Main Street of America. It finally closed its doors for good around 1976 and has since been used for storage.

Summary

The Chelsea Motel would not have existed had it not been for Route 66. And, for that matter, it may still be operating were it not for the replacement of Route 66 by a faster, wider highway a few miles away. But during its association with Route 66 over a period of around two decades, the Chelsea Motel reflected the changes the highway brought to the nation. Its elaborate array of neon lights, now darkened, once illuminated the Chelsea night and symbolized the bright hopes of travelers and motel operators alike. In this way, the Chelsea Motel qualifies for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a representative of the property type "Motels / Tourist Courts" in the area of significance of Commerce on Route 66, within the Multiple Property Nomination, "Route 66 and Associated Historic Resources in Oklahoma" under Criterion A. It also shows significance as an excellent example of early independent motel design under the same property type.

[6] Interview with Mary Hudson Herrick, Chelsea, December 15, 2003.

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Major Bibliographical References

Anderson, Kathy, Jim Ross, and Gary Ray Howell, Oklahoma Route 66 Association, *Oklahoma Route 66 Roadbed Documentation Project (1926-1970): A Survey of Roadbed and Integral Structures* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma SHPO, 2002).

Belasco, Warren James, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel 1910-1945* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979).

Erdwin, Raymond A. "These Were my Kicks on Route 66," in Oklahoma Route 66 Association, *Memories on Route 66* (Bethany, Oklahoma: Oklahoma Route 66 Association, 1991)

Herrick, Mary Hudson, Interview, Chelsea, Oklahoma, December 15, 2003.

Jakle, John A., Keith A. Sculle, and Jefferson S. Rogers, *The Motel in America* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

Land Records, Office of the County Clerk, Rogers County Courthouse, Claremore.

Rittenhouse, Jack D., *A Guide Book to Highway 66* (Los Angeles: privately published, 1946; reprint, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989, 2000).

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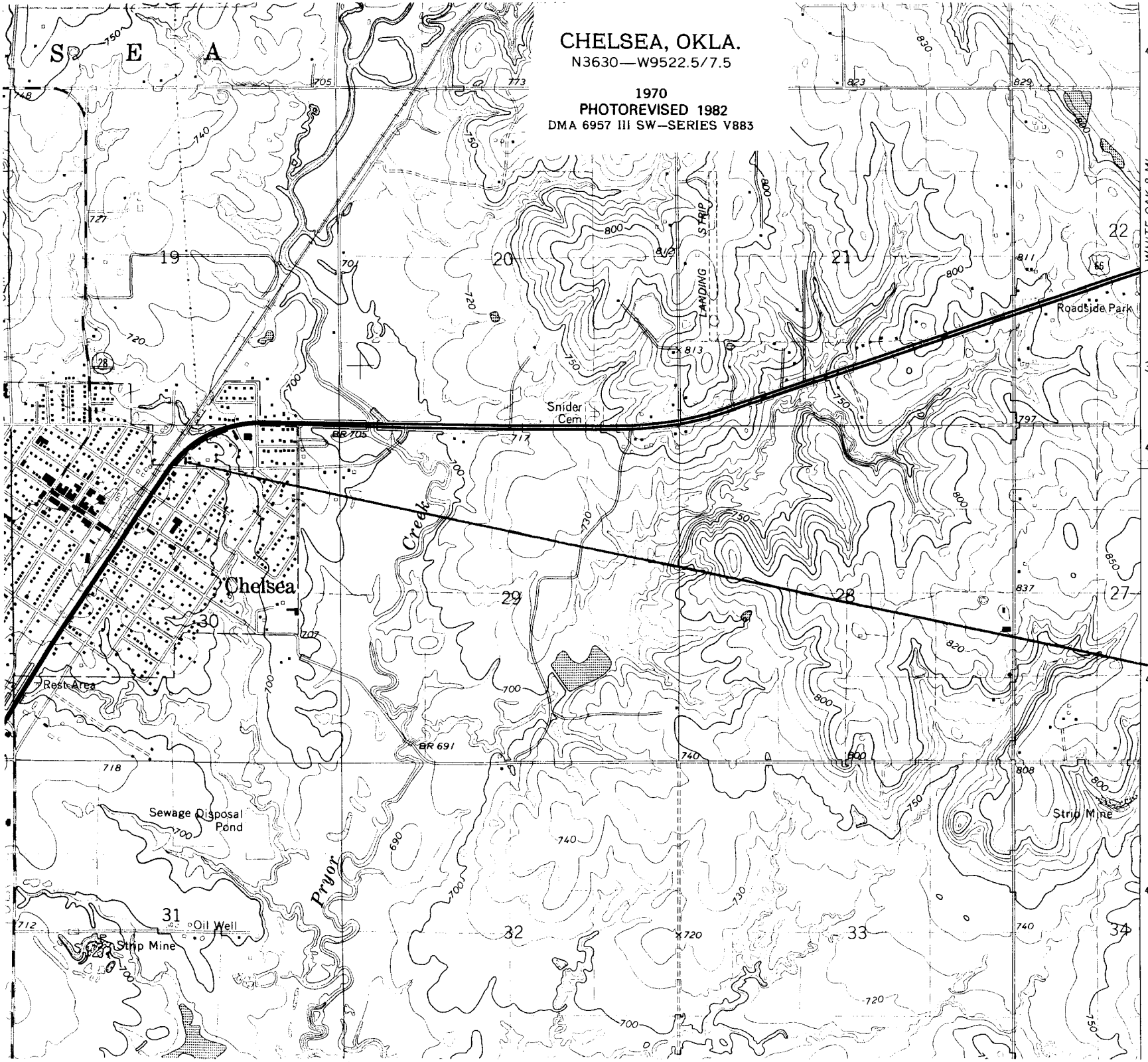
Verbal Boundary Description

This property consists of the triangular area on the northeast corner of First and Walnut reaching from the corner along both streets to the motel building and sign. This property is located on parts of lots 3, 4, 5, 15, 16, 17, 18, and 19 less the highway in Block 1, Orr's Addition to Chelsea, Oklahoma.

Boundary Justification

This boundary includes the property historically associated with the Chelsea Motel.

Chelsea Motel



Chelsea Motel
Chelsea, Rogers County, Oklahoma

UTM Zone 15
282828E
4046092N