United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

This form is for use in nominating or requesting determinations for individual properties and districts. See instructions in National Register Bulletin, *How to Complete the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form.* If any item does not apply to the property being documented, enter "N/A" for "not applicable." For functions, architectural classification, materials, and areas of significance, enter only categories and subcategories from the instructions.

1. Name of Property

Historic name: Milk River Bridge
Other names/site number: Trafton Park Bridge/24PH3219
Name of related multiple property listing:
Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
(Enter "N/A" if property is not part of a multiple property listing

2. Location

Street & number: Northside of Malta in Trafton Park
City or town: Malta State: MT County: Phillips
Not For Publication: N/A Vicinity: X

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act, 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 at the following level(s) of significance:

___national ___statewide _X_local

Applicable National Register Criteria:

_X_A ___B _X_C ___D

MT State Historic Preservation Officer

Signature of certifying official/Title: **Date**

State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government

In my opinion, the property X meets ___ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of commenting official: **Date**

Title : **State or Federal agency/bureau or Tribal Government**

4. National Park Service Certification

I hereby certify that this property is:

___ entered in the National Register

___ determined eligible for the National Register

___ determined not eligible for the National Register

___ removed from the National Register

___ other (explain:) _____

Signature of the Keeper | Date of Action

5. Classification

Ownership of Property

(Check as many boxes as apply.)

Private:	☐
Public – Local	☒
Public – State	☐
Public – Federal	☐

Category of Property

(Check only **one** box.)

Building(s)	☐
District	☐
Site	☐
Structure	☒
Object	☐

Milk River Bridge — Phillips County, MT
Name of Property — County and State

Number of Resources within Property
(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
____0____	_____	buildings
_____	_____	sites
_____1_____	_____	structures
_____	_____	objects
_____1_____	_____0_____	Total

Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register __12___

6. Function or Use
Historic Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
_TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular) = bridge__
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Current Functions
(Enter categories from instructions.)
_VACANT/NOT IN USE____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. Description

Architectural Classification
(Enter categories from instructions.)
_OTHER: Steel Through Truss Bridge

Materials: (enter categories from instructions.)
Principal exterior materials of the property: _METAL: Steel, CONCRETE_____

Narrative Description
(Describe the historic and current physical appearance and condition of the property. Describe contributing and noncontributing resources if applicable. Begin with **a summary paragraph** that briefly describes the general characteristics of the property, such as its location, type, style, method of construction, setting, size, and significant features. Indicate whether the property has historic integrity.)

Summary Paragraph
The Milk River Bridge crosses the Milk River at Trafton Park on the northside of Malta in Phillips County, Montana. The bridge consists of one contributing structure, a pin-connected Parker through truss built by the Illinois Steel Bridge Company in 1911. A new alignment of U.S. Highway 2 and the construction of a new Milk River bridge circumvented this structure in 1953; for a short time thereafter, the bridge served local traffic. Phillips County eventually closed the bridge to traffic and later removed the timber deck. In March 2021, Phillips County transferred ownership of the bridge to the City of Malta. The bridge consists of one 200-foot through truss main span and two 25-foot steel stringer approach spans. The bridge has a total length of 250 feet and is 16 feet wide. The bridge's distinguishing structural features are the pin-connected Parker through truss span and the original lattice panel guardrails. The bridge is the last of five truss span bridges built by Valley County in 1911 and 1912.[1] The other four bridges are removed and replaced. The bridge's association with Malta, old U.S. Highway 2, and infrastructure improvements by Valley County during the 1910-1918 Montana Homestead Boom is strong. Despite the lack of the decking, the bridge possesses considerable integrity and is significant as one the few remaining pin-connected Parker through truss bridges in Montana.

Narrative Description
The Milk River Bridge at Trafton Park in Malta is a one-span steel pin-connected Parker through truss with two steel stringer approach spans. The bridge features a total length of 250 feet including one 200-foot main span and two 25-foot steel stringer approach spans. The bridge is 16 feet wide and currently closed to traffic; deck has been removed.

[1] This portion of Phillips County was originally part of Valley County. In 1915, the state legislature created Phillips County with Malta as the county seat in 1915. Roberta Carkeek Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana: The Story of Montana's Place Names* (The University of Montana, 1971), 173.

Lower chords and hip verticals of the through truss span are forged steel eyebars. Remaining verticals are paired channel sections with lacing bars. Diagonals are either eyebars or eyebars with turnbuckles, a feature common to pin-connected steel bridges. Upper chords consist of continuous steel plates riveted to the top flanges of two channel sections; lacing bars are riveted to the lower flanges of the channel sections. The upper struts are angle sections with lacing bars and the top lateral braces are forged eyebars. Mid struts are angle sections and the sway braces are eyebars. The portal braces are paired angle sections. The floor beams consist of steel I-beams. Bottom lateral braces are eyebars. Eight lines of steel I-beam stringers appear on the main span. Guardrails are lattice-type panels bolted to the truss's vertical members. The panels are extended to encompass the approach spans. The timber deck is no longer present on the bridge. The two approach spans are 25 feet in length and 16 feet wide and consist of eight lines of steel I-beam stringers. The approach spans also have lattice-type panel guards and no decking.

The bridge's ends are supported by reinforced concrete abutments with wing walls and the two piers are riveted steel jacketed cylinders filled with concrete. Cast steel plate bearings attach to the tops of the piers and connect it to the superstructure.

Integrity

The bridge retains good integrity despite its closure to vehicular and pedestrian traffic. It lies in its original location and displays the classic Parker through truss design, notably the "camelback" upper chords. The Milk River Bridge retains all its original steel components and exhibits integrity of materials and workmanship as a fine example of the bridge-builders' craft. The bridge retains a strong association with pre-1915 steel bridges due to its original pin connections. All the bridge's steel structural components are present and functional. This includes the top and eyebar bottom chords, vertical and diagonal member, struts, and floor system. There have been no modifications to the design of the truss or the foundation. Phillips County removed the timber decking sometime after 1953. Replacing the deck with wood would not detract from the integrity of the bridge as wood represented the original decking material of the structure. Moreover, decking was regularly removed and replaced as part of the routine maintenance of the structure before the county closed it to traffic.

The rural setting of the bridge is mostly intact; nearby Trafton Park, which served as a tourist park and cabin camp, was in place by 1921 when the bridge carried the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway over the Milk River at this location.[2] Although a diminishment of integrity of association occurred due to the bridge's abandonment it continues to impart its association with the process of bridge-building by the counties prior to the creation of the Montana State Highway Commission's bridge department and its standardization of steel bridge designs in 1915. It retains integrity of feeling.

[2] The National Register of Historic Places-listed Sleeping Buffalo Rocks (NR# 96000548/listed 5/17/1996) were located at the park from 1931 to 1937 until the Montana Highway Department moved them to their existing location on US 2 about nineteen miles east of Malta. According to local lore, the rocks, which resemble bison, were unhappy with their situation and bellowed loudly enough at night to disturb residents living near the park. Sally Thompson, *Disturbing the Sleeping Buffalo* (Far Country Press, 2024), 126; George C. Reeder, ed., *The Theodore Roosevelt International Highway Guide Through Montana* (The Glasgow Courier, 1921), 30; "Improved Malta Tourist Camp," *The Saco Independent*, May 5, 1932.

8. Statement of Significance

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 grave

[ ] D. A cemetery

[ ] E. A reconstructed building, object, or structure

[ ] F. A commemorative property

[ ] G. Less than 50 years old or achieving significance within the past 50 years

Areas of Significance
(Enter categories from instructions.)
ENGINEERING
TRANSPORTATION

Period of Significance
1911 -1953

Significant Dates
1911, 1953

Significant Person
(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

Cultural Affiliation

Architect/Builder
Illinois Steel Bridge Company/Designer & Builder

Statement of Significance Summary Paragraph (Provide a summary paragraph that includes level of significance, applicable criteria, justification for the period of significance, and any applicable criteria considerations.)

The Milk River Bridge can be listed in the National Register of Historic Places at a local level of significance under criteria A and C. Constructed by the Illinois Steel Bridge Company in 1911, the Milk River Bridge is associated with Phillips County's efforts to improve its infrastructure during Montana's 1910-1918 Homestead Boom. The bridge was an important component of the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway (U.S. Highway 2 after 1926), a 4,060-mile-long interstate thoroughfare that connected Portland, Maine to Seattle and critical to the commerce and public of Malta and Phillips County. It facilitated access to the county seat, Malta, for farmers, ranchers, and traders. Accordingly, the bridge has local significance as a component of the area's transportation system. Despite being closed to

traffic since the 1950s and unmaintained since then, the bridge retains exceptional structural integrity with all its original structural elements (except for the timber deck) intact and unchanged allowing significance under Criterion C. It is an excellent and representative example of an early twentieth century pin-connected Parker through truss bridge.

The Milk River Bridge meets the Registration Requirements set forth in the *Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges* Multiple Property Document (MPD) under the context, *The Golden Age of Bridge Building in Montana, 1888-1915* and the *Steel Highway Truss Bridge* property type. The *Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges* Multiple Properties Document (MPD) notes an eligible steel truss bridge must be associated with county-sponsored and funded infrastructure improvement programs during periods of expansion or consolidation. The Milk River Bridge was constructed during Montana's 1910-1918 Homestead Boom along with four other bridges to accommodate the thousands of new residents who moved to the state to take advantage of the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act. The bridge provided access to community supply centers and transportation facilities for the county's new residents. Its construction coincides with a broad period of county road building and improvement projects associated with the Homestead Boom. The period of significance begins with its construction in 1911, within the context's period of significance, through 1953, when the Montana State Highway Commission removed it from the Federal Aid highway system. For a time, it served local traffic until Phillips County permanently closed the bridge to all traffic sometime after 1953. The county subsequently removed the timber deck after the bridge's closure, likely in the 1950s.

Narrative Statement of Significance (Provide at least **one** paragraph for each area of significance.)

The Milk River Bridge is an excellent example of a multi-span pin-connected Parker through truss bridge and is eligible to list in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A. The Jacksonville, Illinois-based Illinois Steel Bridge Company designed and built this bridge and four others in Valley County in 1911 and 1912. Parker through trusses were generally used at wide river crossings, like the Milk River. From 1888 to 1915, the bridge contracting companies active in Montana utilized pin connections because it allowed easy fabrication, shipment to the project site, and expedited assembly of the structures possible. This bridge is the sole remaining through truss built by the Illinois Steel Bridge Highway Department in 1911-1912. The bridges, including this one, were part of a countywide effort to improve Valley County's infrastructure during the height of the 1910-1918 Homestead Boom. During that eight-year period, the county's population significantly expanded as homestead filings and population increased. This bridge, along with the four now-demolished, facilitated traffic from area homesteads to the Roosevelt Highway (now U.S. Highway 2), the Great Northern Railway, and the communities along the length of the railroad in the county, including Malta, the county seat. The Milk River Bridge was a significant part of that transportation system and represents the times it was constructed. Phillips County assumed ownership and maintenance of the structure in 1915.

The Milk River Bridge can be listed in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion C because as an intact example of a rare pin-connected steel Parker through truss structure. Designed and built by the Illinois Steel Bridge Company in 1911, it exhibits pin-connections at the panel points, an attribute

common to steel through truss bridges built in Montana before 1915. The counties built Parker trusses, a variation of the Pratt truss, at wide river crossings. At 250 ft in length, the Milk River qualified as wide river crossing and was suited to a Parker through truss. The 1981 Montana historic bridge inventory listed only 24 vehicular Parker trusses built between 1888 and 1915 out of the 411 vehicular bridges surveyed. Parker trusses feature polygonal top chords, making them stronger in long spans. The polygonal chords are distinctive and uncommon for vehicular bridges. Except for the lack of a timber deck and virtually no maintenance since the 1950s, there have been no structural modifications to the bridge and it stands as originally constructed in 1911. The Milk River Bridge retains its historic appearance and configuration with all its original structural components and features intact. All the structural components (other than the decking) are original to the Milk River Bridge. No alterations or modifications have been made to the bridge's foundation or superstructure. The historic structural components, including the distinctive lattice panel guardrails, are still present.

Engineering Significance

The Parker truss is a variation of the Pratt truss developed by engineer C. H. Parker in the 1870s. The Parker "introduced the plan of making the top chords of through trusses polygonal, thus effecting quite an economy of weight of metal for long spans." The greatest depth of the truss is at the center of the span, making it particularly suitable for long span bridges crossing wide river crossings, such as the Missouri, Yellowstone, Clark Fork, and Milk rivers. The Milk River Bridge exhibits the classic Parker through truss design, including the polygonal top chords and the subdivided panels. At 250 feet in length, including approach spans, it efficiently crosses the wide Milk River in the vicinity of Malta. Of the 411 vehicular bridges documented by the MDT's 1981 historic bridge inventory, only 24, six percent, were Parker through trusses. Six of those bridges spanned the Milk River along Montana's Hi-Line. This structure is the last of the Milk River Parker through truss spans built in the second decade of the twentieth century that remains in northeastern Montana. The bridge has engineering significance as a classic example of an intact pin-connected Parker through truss built in the early twentieth century.

History

Northcentral Montana was a traditional crossroads for the Indian tribes now associated with eastern Montana, North Dakota, Saskatchewan, and Alberta. The lush prairie grasses and open range provided ideal pasturage for bison, elk, and other game animals. The Assiniboine, Chippewa-Cree, Sioux, Áaniiih (Gros Ventre), and Blackfeet Indians hunted bison in the region until the 1880s, when the mass extermination of the animals and the construction of the St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway (Manitoba) profoundly impacted the tribes by forcing them onto US Government-administered reservations. Prior to that, however, the Lame Bull Treaty of 1855, set aside the area north of the Missouri River from the Dakota border westward to the continental divide as part of an enormous reservation for several tribes in Montana. Beginning in 1874 and culminating in 1889, the reservation was reduced in size and then divided into three separate reservations: the Blackfeet, Fort Belknap, and Fort Peck. The

construction of the Manitoba Railway through northeastern Montana in 1887 opened the region to cattle ranching, an industry that dominated the region from 1888 until the early twentieth century.[3]

In 1909, the US Congress passed an amended version of the 1862 Homestead Act it hoped would draw farmers to the vast tracts of public land on the northern Great Plains. The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 had a significant impact on northcentral and northeastern Montana. The act granted each potential homesteader 320 acres of public domain if he or she made improvements to their claim and lived on it for five years. Key to the success of the act was the practice of dryland farming. Developed by Hardy Campbell and others in the early twentieth century, dryland farming relied on the conservation of moisture already in the soil, new varieties of wheat, and abundant rainfall to assure homesteaders of bountiful harvests in areas with few natural stream courses and limited water resources. Over an eight-year period between 1910 and 1918, 32 million acres of public land passed to private ownership in Montana because of the Enlarged Homestead Act and dryland farming techniques.[4]

The Homestead Act coincided with a period of abundant rainfall on the northern Great Plains. The semi-arid region experienced average annual rainfall amounts of 16 inches, most that occurred at critical growing periods in the spring and summer months. Consequently, wheat production boomed with some homesteaders reaping a whopping 35-50 bushels of wheat per acre in 1916. The above average rainfall occurred between 1910 and 1916.[5]

Beginning in 1917, however, severe drought followed the wet years. Rainfall dropped to four inches annually with the nadir transpiring in 1919. The drought, coupled with a post-World War I economic depression, had a profound impact on eastern Montana. Between 1919 and 1925, banks foreclosed on 20,000 farms in the state. Banks, which had overextended credit to the homesteaders during the prosperous years, suddenly found themselves deep in debt, which forced the closure of 191 banking institutions across the state. Over 60,000 people fled Montana, making the only state in the union to lose population in the 1920s. Phillips County's population fell from 9,311 people in 1920 to 8,208 in 1930. After a short cycle of abundant rainfall between 1924 and 1929, drought and depression again hit the region. Phillips County has steadily lost population since 1920 and many of its small communities have either disappeared or are little more than ghost towns. Some communities along the railroad, however, like Malta, prospered during the bad times.[6]

Malta

Malta originated as Siding 54 on the St. Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railroad (Manitoba) in 1877. James J. Hill began construction of the Manitoba in April 1887 and pushed his crews hard during that summer and fall, completing 550 miles of track from Minot, North Dakota to Great Falls, Montana in just

[3] Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (University of Washington Press, 1992), 120-21, 143; Merrill G. Burlingame, *The Montana Frontier* (State Publishing Co., 1942), 389.
[4] Malone, et al., *Montana*, 236-237, 238.
[5] *Ibid*, 280-281.
[6] *Ibid*, 42, 280, 283, 289; Joseph Kinsey Howard, *Montana: High, Wide and Handsome* (Yale University Press, 1943), 197, 221.

seven months. The Manitoba deposited sidings and stations in its wake, many that developed into towns and cities. In the early 1880s, Robert M. Trafton and a crew of Cree and mixed bloods collected the skeletal remains of thousands of bison killed to make way for the railroads, cattle, and sheep. Trafton stored the bison bones in wooden ricks at Siding 54. Manitoba trains hauled the bones to fertilizer manufacturing plants in Minneapolis. Later, Trafton built a log trading post about five miles west of the siding.[7]

The disappearance of the great bison herds and the reduction in size of the northern Montana Indian reservation opened up enormous tracts of land to cattle and sheep ranchers. The Bloom Cattle Company established its headquarters west of Malta in 1892. Coburn's Circle C Cattle Company founded its outfit south of the siding. The presence of large cattle outfits in this part of Montana greaetly effected the development of the Siding 54, transitioning it from a remote railroad station to an important supply and business center in this part of the state.[8]

In 1892, the Manitoba Railroad extended its line to Seattle and renamed itself the Great Northern Railway. As part of that extension, the railroad improved many of its sidings, including number 54. When word got out that the Great Northern intended to build a station and water tank at the siding, Trafton moved his trading post to the site. It was followed by a corral and hotel. In 1897, there were enough people in the area to warrant a post office. Great Northern officials christened the siding Malta after the Mediterranean island. By 1900, Malta existed as a classic railroad town with the main street paralleling the northside of the tracks. In 1909, Malta incorporated with the commercial and residential districts on the south side of the tracks (the Milk River was a barrier to expansion to the north).[9]

The Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909 caused Malta to boom as thousands of would-be farmers flooded into the area. The boom created a significant expansion of the commercial district as businesses opened to provide services and supplies to the county's new residents. By 1920, two years after the boom collapsed, Malta claimed a population of 1,423, a 229% jump over its 1910 population of 423. The post-WWI economic depression and drought caused an exodus from Montana as homesteaders fled the ravages of the double disaster. Phillips County, which the state legislature created in 1915, suffered as much as the rest of eastern Montana. Malta, however, weathered the storm because of its diversified economy, as a shipping point for area ranchers and farmers, and because of the proximity of the US Reclamation Services Milk River Irrigation Project. Despite that, many Malta businesses, including one of its three banks failed.[10]

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[7] Don Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana* (Mountain Press Publishing Co., 1999), 35-36; Malone, et al., *Montana*, 178-179, 180; Gladys R. Costello, "The Malta Story" in Phillips County Historical Society, comp., *The Yesteryears* (Griggs Printing & Publishing, 1976), 177-178.

[8] *Montana Place Names from Alzada to Zortman: A Montana Historical Society Guide* (Montana Historical Society Press, 2009), 167-168; Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana*, 147; Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana*, 35-36; Costello, *The Yesteryears*, 178-179.

[9] Malone, et al., *Montana*, 181; *Montana Place Names*, 167-168; Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana*, 147; Costello, *The Yesteryears*, 180.

[10] *Montana Place Names*, 168; Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana*, 36; Costello, *The Yesteryears*, 180-181; "Sheldon-Arnot Banking Combine in Milk River Valley Collapses When Malta Bank Closes its Doors," *The Phillips County News*, December 31, 1925.

Malta, like all of Montana, suffered in the Great Depression in the 1930s. Drought again ravaged the northern Great Plains along with another round of farm foreclosures and hordes of grasshoppers. Again, Malta weathered the storm because of its importance as a regional trade and business center, the presence of the Great Northern Railway and the nearby Milk River Irrigation Project. A year later, the federal government created the Milk River Resettlement Project, also known as the Malta Plan, to resettle struggling farmers and their families on new 40-80 acre irrigated tracks in the irrigation project. The resettled families were eligible for low interest government loans to get started coupled with the proceeds of the sale of their dryland farms to the government. The plan served to fill the Milk River Irrigation Project with farmers and relieve the impacts of the depression on them. The Malta Plan was the "largest such endeavor in the US and used as the blueprint of other resettlement plans, including on the Sun River Project near Great Falls. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal established a Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Malta.[11]

Called drab and apathetic by the Federal Writers' Project in 1939, Malta enjoyed steady population growth in the 1930s. In 1940, it had a population of 2,215 individuals. While the population dipped some in 1950, it grew again to 2, 339 people in 1960. Malta's economy has remained stable because of its status as a trade center, the county seat, and the Milk River Irrigation District.[12]

The Milk River Bridge

In April 1911, rancher and carpenter James LeNoir and Lee C. Edwards, a Malta hardware store merchant, presented a petition to the Valley County commissioners for the construction of a new bridge spanning the Milk River at Malta. The old wooden bridge built in the 1890s had "become a decrepit, sway-backed, aged old man of a bridge" and condemned by the county. The men came to the meeting with rights-of-way signed over to the county by the property owners at the proposed bridge site. Mary Clark, a teamster, and Malta real estate developer Robert Trafton and his wife, Marion, donated the land for the new bridge. On March 28, 1911, the county commissioners directed the county clerk to advertise for the construction of five bridges.[13]

On June 7, 1911, the Valley County commissioners opened bids from 12 bridge construction companies, all from out-of-state. They awarded five bridge projects to the Illinois Steel Bridge Company (the legislature created Phillips County from parts of Blaine and Valley counties in 1915). Included in the project letting was a planned new bridge to span the Milk River at Malta. The Jacksonville, Illinois-based company constructed many bridges along Montana's Hi-Line and, unlike other bridge contracting companies, designed and fabricated the components of the structures. The Illinois Steel Bridge Company

[11] Malone, et a., *Montana*, 292; *Montana Place Names*, 168; Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana*, 36; Costello, *The Yesteryears*, 182; "New Project Far Exceeds Malta Plan," *The Phillips County News*, December 10, 1936; "CCC Company Will Have Dance at City Hall Saturday," *The Phillips County News*, December 7, 1939.
[12] Federal Writers' Project, *Montana: A State Guide Book* (Hastings House, 1939), US Census Records, viewed at www.ancestry.com.
[13] [Valley] County Commissioners Minutes, Book 3, pp. 171-172; "Steel Bridge Over River to be Continued in Service," *The Phillips County News*, February 9, 1956; US Census Records.

won the contract with its low bid of $9,800 for the all-steel structure. The new bridge would replace an earlier timber structure the county previously condemned as unsafe.[14]

The contractor had a 12-man crew at work on the new bridge by late July 1911. Charles Karsten supervised the construction of the bridge for Illinois Steel. The contractor completed the bridge by mid-September 1911. The Malta *Enterprise* praised the contractor and bragged about the town's new bridge:

> The handsome two-hundred-foot span steel bridge, thirty feet high, with camel shaped top, steel reinforced abutments and twenty-foot approaches, across the Milk River where it washes the northwestern boundary of the city, is at last completed and stands as a monument of the skilled workmanship of a force of men under Charles Karsten of the Illinois Steel Bridge Co.

Karsten and his men then left Malta to build a new bridge across the Milk River at Tampico (now demolished). The Tampico bridge was "exactly like the one just finished here."[15]

Four days after the completion of the bridge, Karsten returned to Malta. County commissioners J. T. Farris, A. Davidson, and county surveyor W. H. Mann inspected and accepted the bridge on behalf of Valley County. The bridge passed inspection "with only words of praise and admiration for the quality of material used and the skill displayed in the building of it." The county's acceptance of the structure was followed by a celebratory banquet at the Great Northern Hotel hosted by Malta's political leaders and businessmen.[16]

The Milk River Bridge was part of the Theodore Roosevelt International Highway (U.S. Highway 2 after 1926). In 1921, the Roosevelt Highway became a component of Montana's Federal Aid highway system, a designation that meant the highway (and the bridge) was eligible for federal funding for improvements. Despite that, the Montana state highway commission expended no money on the Vandalia to Malta (including the bridge) between 1919 and 1928. The first highway project to encompass U.S. 2 at Malta occurred in 1931, though the highway commission did no work to the bridge as part of that project.[17]

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[14] County Commissioners Minutes, pp. 168, 188-189; "Commissioners Hold Session," *The Valley County News*, June 9, 1911; "Proceedings of the County Commissioners," *Culbertson Republican*, June 16, 1911; Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana*, 207-208.

[15] "Malta: A Town with a Future," *The Montana Record-Herald*, September 4, 1911; "Valley Builds Many Bridges," *The Montana Record-Herald*, September 12, 1911; "New Bridge Across the Milk River Inspected – Dinner Follows," *The Enterprise*, September 21, 1911.

[16] "News of Malta," *The Great Falls Tribune*, September 17, 1911; "New Bridge Across the Milk River Inspected – Dinner Follows," *The Enterprise*, September 21, 1911.

[17] Statewide Highway Planning Survey, *History of the Montana Highway Department, 1913-1942* (Helena: Montana State Highway Commission, 1943), 23; *Report of State Highway Commission of Montana for Period Ending December 1928* (Montana State Highway Commission, 1928), 26-29; State of Montana, State Highway Commission, Plan & Profile of Proposed Federal Aid Project No. 142, Malta-Vandalia Highway (February 14, 1931), Plans on file at the Montana Department of Transportation. Helena, Montana.

In July 1951, the Montana State Highway Commission awarded a project to the Kiely Construction Company of Butte to construct a 240-foot steel girder bridge across the Milk River on US Highway 2 just outside Malta to replace the old through truss on an entirely new alignment. The highway commission also let a project to construct five miles of new highway to replace the old Highway 2 alignment. Flooding, bad weather and the late arrival of steel at Kiely's job site, however, meant the new bridge wasn't completed until June 1953, marking the end of the Milk River Bridge's service as an important part of U.S. Highway 2.[18]

With the completion of the new bridge, the highway commission abandoned about 900 feet of the old US Highway 2 alignment, including the old Milk River Bridge. In January 1956, the *Saco Independent* announced the "state highway department [had] plans to construct the short stretch of road necessary to connect highways 19 and 2 just west of Malta." The project would route traffic over the new Milk River bridge "rather than over the old bridge north of town." In July 1956, the highway commission awarded a project to the Richardson Construction Company to realign 0.435 miles to provide the new connection. Phillips County built a new connection from the old bridge to a junction with Montana 19 (now US Highway 191).[19]

The Richardson company completed the new connection between Montana 19 and US 2 in July 1957. Phillips County commissioner William Cotter assured Malta residents the county commission had no plans to remove the old bridge. While the structure was unsafe for heavy vehicles and loads, it could still accommodate automobiles and pickup trucks. The county intended the old bridge to be used as a short cut into town from the north: "There are a number of people living north of Milk River who walk to work or to school and the old bridge affords them a convenient crossing." It is not known when the county closed the bridge to all traffic, including pedestrians, and removed the timber deck. In March 2021, the county transferred ownership of the bridge to the City of Malta. The bridge stands as a silent sentinel of Malta's past in Trafton Park near the county fairgrounds.[20]

Criterion C—Engineering—Parker Through Truss Bridges, 1889-1915

Engineer C. H. Parker developed a variation of the Pratt truss for use by the railroads in the 1870s. The Parker through truss utilized polygonal top chords, giving the truss a distinctive profile. The polygonal top chords, according to famed bridge engineer J. A. L. Waddell, "thus [effected] quite an economy of weight of metal for long spans." Some Parker trusses, like the Milk River Bridge, have subdivided panels to increase the truss's efficiency. The Parker through truss was particularly suitable for wide river crossings, like the Milk River. While C. H. Parker initially developed his variation of the Pratt truss for the railroads, other engineers were quick to adapt the design for vehicular traffic. The oldest vehicular

[18] Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes, Book 11, pp. 329, 330, 467, 468, 276.
[19] State of Montana, State Highway Commission, Plan and Profile of Proposed Secondary Road Project No. S-282(3), Malta-North. Plans on file at the Montana Department of Transportation, Helena, Montana; "Highway Construction Plans Announced for this Year by County Commissioners," *The Saco Independent*, January 5, 1956; Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes, Book 13, p. 359; Ibid, Book 14, p. 53.
[20] "Steel Bridge Over River to be Continued in Service," *The Phillips County News*, February 9, 1956; Bill of Sale. Phillips County to the City of Malta, Book 92, pp. 915-916. Clerk and Recorders Office. Phillips County Courthouse. Malta, Montana.

Parker through truss spans in Montana were all built by the Illinois Steel Bridge Company in Phillips and Valley counties in 1911 and 1912. The Milk River Bridge at Malta is the last remaining Parker through truss span remaining from that initial flurry of bridge building on the hi- line. There have been no structural alterations to the trusses since 1911.[21]

The Illinois Steel Bridge Company

Formed in 1889 from a conglomeration of Midwest steel manufacturers, the Illinois Steel Bridge Company was, for a short time, the largest steel producer in the United States. Headquartered in Chicago, the company maintained corporate offices in New York City, St. Paul, Minnesota, Cleveland, St. Louis, and Denver. The company's steel mills were located in Illinois and Wisconsin. Illinois Steel specialized in the manufacture of rail track, steel bars and plates, wire, and pig iron. After Carnegie Steel attempted to force the company into receivership in 1896, Illinois Steel expanded into the American West, fabricating structural components and building bridges in Iowa, Arizona, Texas, Nebraska, as well as Montana. The company was most active along Montana's Hi-Line because of its direct connection to St. Paul, Minnesota, on the Great Northern Railway. The Illinois Steel Company became part of US Steel in 1901, operating under its original name until 1962.[22]

[21] J. A. L. Waddell, *Bridge Engineering* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1925), 24, 469; Fredric L. Quivik, *Historic Bridges of Montana* (Historic American Engineering Record, 1982), 47; Jon Axline, *Conveniences Sorely Needed: Montana's Historic Highway Bridges, 1860-1956* (Montana Historical Society Press, 2005), 36; "Parker Through Truss" viewed at https://www.ncdot.gov.

[22] Kenneth Warren, *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 11; https://historicbridges.org.

9. Major Bibliographical References

Bibliography (Cite the books, articles, and other sources used in preparing this form.)

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"The New Bridge is Completed." *The* (Malta) *Enterprise*, September 14, 1911.

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Report of State Highway Commission of Montana for Period Ending December 1928. Montana State Highway Commission, 1929.

State of Montana. State Highway Commission. Plan and Profile of Proposed Secondary Project No. S-282(3). Malta-North. Phillips County. Plans on file at the Montana Department of Transportation. Helena, Montana.

"Steel Bridge Over River to be Continued in Service." *The Phillips County News*, February 9, 1956.

United States Census Records. Viewed at www.ancestry.com.

Warren, Kenneth. *Big Steel: The First Century of the United States Steel Corporation, 1901-2001.* University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001.

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 # _____
____ recorded by Historic American Landscape Survey # _____

Primary location of additional data:

____ State Historic Preservation Office
_X_ Other State agency
____ Federal agency
____ Local government
____ University
____ Other
Name of repository: __Montana Department of Transportation___

Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned): _____

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property _____0.5_____

Use either the UTM system or latitude/longitude coordinates

Latitude/Longitude Coordinates
Datum if other than WGS84:_____
(enter coordinates to 6 decimal places)

1. Latitude: 48.363740 Longitude: -107.873980

2. Latitude: Longitude:

3. Latitude: Longitude:

4. Latitude: Longitude:

Verbal Boundary Description (Describe the boundaries of the property.)
The boundary for the Milk River Bridge is a rectangle measuring 340 feet x 60 feet, slightly larger than the bridge itself to provide a sense of setting and to include 130 feet of the north approach. The rectangle encompasses the bridge and the remnant of its north approach. The boundary is centered on the bridge. The structure is located in Section 18, T30N, R30E. Reference to the maps on pages 29 and 30 confirm this location.

Boundary Justification (Explain why the boundaries were selected.)
The boundary is determined by space occupied by the bridge and its north approach.

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11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Jon Axline/Historian
organization: Montana Department of Transportation
street & number: 2701 Prospect Avenue
city or town: Helena state: MT zip code: 59620-1001
e-mail jaxline@mt.gov
telephone: (406) 444-6258
date: May 2025

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

name City of Malta
street & number PO Box 1300 telephone (406) 654-1251
city or town Malta state MT zip code 59538

Additional Documentation
Submit the following items with the completed form:

- **Maps:** A **USGS map** or equivalent (7.5 or 15 minute series) indicating the property's location.
- **Sketch map** for historic districts and properties having large acreage or numerous resources. Key all photographs to this map.
- **Additional items:** (Check with the SHPO, TPO, or FPO for any additional items.)

Photographs

Submit clear and descriptive photographs. The size of each image must be 1600x1200 pixels (minimum), 3000x2000 preferred, at 300 ppi (pixels per inch) or larger. For simplicity, the name of the photographer, photo date, etc. may be listed once on the photograph log and doesn't need to be labeled on every photograph.

Photo Log, All Photographs

Name of Property: Milk River Bridge
City or Vicinity: Malta, Montana
County: Phillips State: MT
Photographer: Rob Park
Date Photographed: May 2025
Description of Photograph(s) and number, include description of view indicating direction of camera:
1 of ___.

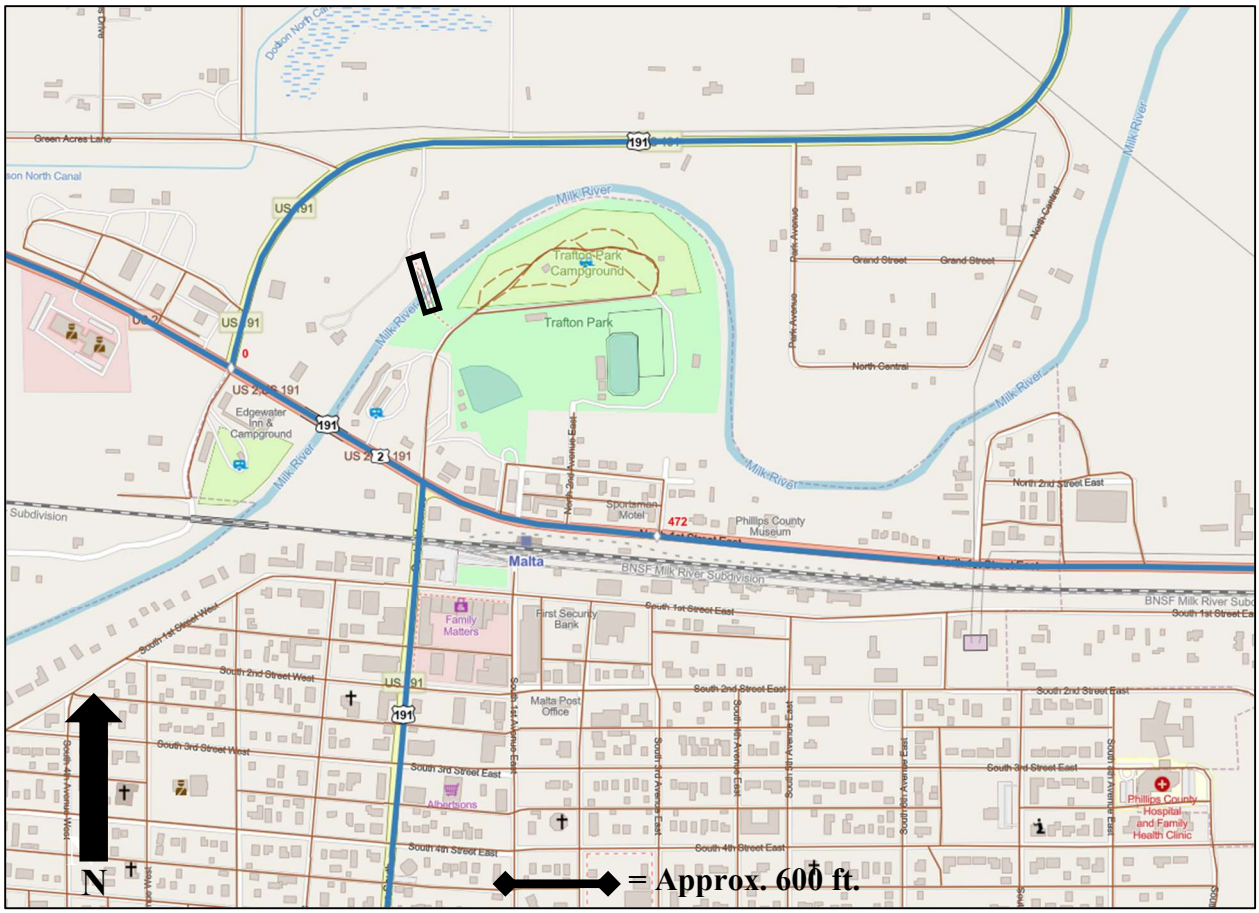
Please see Continuation Sheets

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

Milk River Bridge
Name of Property
Phillips County, Montana
County and State
MT's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

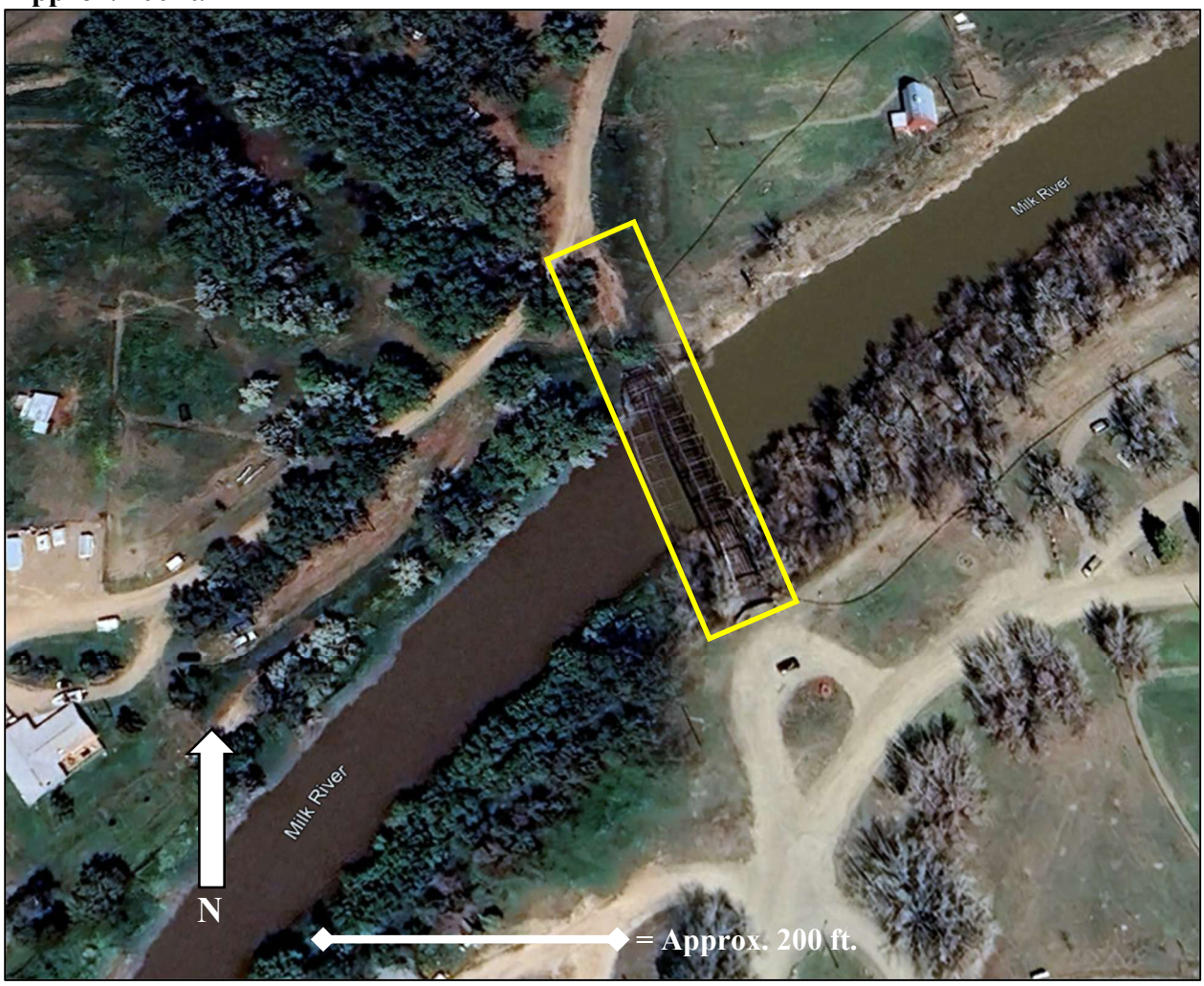
National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 21



Location of the Milk River Bridge. Found on the USGS 7.5' Malta East, Montana (2011) quadrangle map:. Center point = Latitude: 48.363740 Longitude: -107.873980.

Approx. 400 ft.



Aerial view of the Milk River Bridge (bordered in yellow). Center point = Latitude: 48.363740 Longitude: -107.873980

Photo Log, All Photographs:

Name of Property: Milk River Bridge
City or Vicinity: Malta
County: Phillips State: MT
Photographer: Rob Park
Date Photographed: May 2025

Milk River Bridge. Southwest side of bridge. View to north.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0001

Milk River Bridge. Southeast side of bridge. View to the north.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0002.

Milk River Bridge. Southwest side of bridge. View to north-northeast.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0003.

Milk River Bridge. Southwest side of bridge. View to north.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0004.

Milk River Bridge. Northeast side of bridge. View to northwest.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0005.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Milk River Bridge
Name of Property
Phillips County, Montana
County and State
MT's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number National Register Photographs Page 28

Milk River Bridge. Southeast side of bridge. View to northeast.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0006.

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places
Continuation Sheet

Milk River Bridge
Name of Property
Phillips County, Montana
County and State
MT's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number National Register Photographs Page 29

Milk River Bridge. Southeast approach. View to the northwest.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0007.

Milk River Bridge. Northwest approach. View to southeast.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0008.

Milk River Bridge. Detail of southeast pier and guard panel. View to southwest. MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0009.

Milk River Bridge. Detail of Parker through truss and floor system.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0010.

Milk River Bridge. Detail of upper chord and pin-connection. View to the north. MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0011.

Milk River Bridge. Detail of stringers and floor beams. View to the northwest. MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0012.

Milk River Bridge. Detail of southeast abutment and re-use of guard panel. View to southwest.
MT_PhillipsCounty_MilkRiverBridge_0013.