

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: Musselshell River Bridge

Other names/site number: Buffalo Trail Bridge/24GV0145

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: Two miles east of Ryegate on Buffalo Trail

City or town: Ryegate State: MT County: Golden Valley

Not For Publication:  Vicinity:

## 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

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

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#### 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:) \_\_\_\_\_

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Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

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#### 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 ☐

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

**Number of Resources within Property**

(Do not include previously listed resources in the count)

Contributing	Noncontributing	
_____	_____	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.)

TRANSPORTATION/road-related (vehicular) = bridge

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

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## 7. Description

### Architectural Classification

(Enter categories from instructions.)

OTHER: Steel Through Truss Bridge

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**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.)

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#### Summary Paragraph

The Musselshell River Bridge spans the Musselshell River on Buffalo Trail about two miles east of the town of Ryegate in Golden Valley County, Montana. The bridge consists of one contributing structure, a riveted Warren through truss built by the Security Bridge Company in 1916. It is maintained by the county and currently serves local traffic. The bridge consists of one 140-foot through truss span, sixteen feet wide with a roadway width of fifteen feet.

Distinguishing structural features include the riveted Warren through truss span, the original angle section guardrails, and the reinforced concrete abutments. It stands as one of four through truss span bridges built by Musselshell County in 1916.<sup>1</sup> The bridge is one of the oldest remaining Montana State Highway Commission-designed bridges; it still functions in its original capacity. Golden Valley County actively maintains the bridge that possesses considerable integrity. It is significant for its association with the state highway commission's initial program to improve Montana's infrastructure during the state's 1910-1918 Homestead Boom. The bridge is an excellent example of an early riveted Warren through truss designed by the state highway commission specifically for automobile and truck traffic. A new alignment of U.S. Highway 12 circumvented this structure in 1936.

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<sup>1</sup> This portion of Golden Valley County was originally part of Musselshell County. In 1920, the state legislature created Golden Valley County with Ryegate as the county seat. Roberta Carkeek Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana: The Story of Montana's Place Names* (The University of Montana, 1971), pp. 101-102.

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

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### **Narrative Description**

The Musselshell River Bridge near Ryegate is a one-span riveted steel Warren through truss structure with a total length of 140 feet, sixteen-foot width, fifteen-foot roadway width, and fifteen-foot clearance. The bridge is owned and maintained by Golden Valley County.

Bridge ends bear on reinforced concrete abutments with wing walls. The lower chords, verticals and diagonals of the superstructure, are two channel sections with lacing bars; upper chords are continuous steel plates riveted to the top flanges of two channel sections with lacing bars riveted to the lower flanges. Seven lines of steel I-beam stringers are riveted to the web of steel I-beam floor riveted to the superstructure. Decking consists of wood planks. Wood curbs flank the deck and portal and sway bracing consist of angle sections. Mid-struts and top lateral braces are angle sections, the same as the bottom lateral bracing. The deck is flanked by angle section guardrails riveted to the vertical members of the truss. In 1994, the Montana Department of Transportation installed steel W-type guardrails adjacent to the roadway. The guardrails are anchored to the structure.

### **Integrity**

The Musselshell River Bridge exhibits very good integrity and is an excellent representative example of the type of Warren through truss structure designed by the Montana State Highway Commission from 1915 to 1931. The bridge, which is still in use, stands at its original location on Buffalo Trail Road about two miles east of Ryegate. It displays the classic Warren through truss design developed by the state highway commission in 1915. All the bridge's steel structural components are present, functional, and in their original configuration. This includes the paired channel sections with lacing bars utilized for the top and bottom chords and the vertical and diagonal members of the truss. The original steel I-beam floor beams, and stringers also remain intact. Other than the addition of steel W-beam guardrails to the structure in 1994, there have been no modifications to the superstructure of the bridge. Golden Valley County has periodically replaced the wood decking of the bridge as routine maintenance. The rural setting of the bridge is intact.

The Musselshell River Bridge retains its original steel components and exhibits integrity of materials and workmanship as a fine example of the bridge-builders' craft in the early twentieth century. The bridge has a strong association with the initial phase of bridge improvements in Montana after the state standardized bridge plans and bidding process in 1915. Finally, the bridge is associated with the post-1915 bridge-building process developed by the state highway commission's bridge department and represents an early example of the type of bridge designed by the commission in the immediate wake of its creation.

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

## 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.)

- ☒ 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.
- ☒ 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

Musselshell River Bridge

Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT

County and State

**Areas of Significance**

(Enter categories from instructions.)

ENGINEERING

TRANSPORTATION

**Period of Significance**

1916 -1975

**Significant Dates**

1916

**Significant Person**

(Complete only if Criterion B is marked above.)

**Cultural Affiliation**

**Architect/Builder**

Charles A. Kyle/Designer

Security Bridge Company/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 Musselshell River Bridge is eligible for listing the National Register of Historic Places under criteria A and C. Under Criterion A, the Musselshell River Bridge is associated with a profound change in how counties built bridges in the state at the dawn of the automobile age. Prior to 1915, counties were entirely responsible for bridge design and construction within their jurisdictions. After 1915, the Montana State Highway Commission took over that role and imposed order onto what had been a chaotic system. The bridge represents that initial phase in the new order of bridge design and construction in the state. Under Criterion C, the bridge

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

represents a fine example of the standard type of riveted steel Warren through truss designed and built in Montana beginning in 1915. With the exception of steel W-beam guardrails installed by the MDT in 1994, there have been no modifications or alterations made to this structure since 1916. It represents an example of the standard type of steel through truss bridge designed and built by the highway commission from 1915 to 1931.

The Musselshell River Bridge meets the Registration Requirements set forth in the *Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges* Multiple Property Document and the associated context, *The Montana Highway Department Takes Over: Bridge-Building at High Tide, 1915-1946*. The period of significance begins in 1916, reflecting the date of the structure's construction, and ends in 1975, corresponding to the end of the historic period; the bridge continues to be used as a vital crossing of the Musselshell River.

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

The Musselshell River Bridge is eligible to list in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A for its association with the Montana State Highway Commission's program to regulate the bridge building industry in the state and through the state and counties' efforts to provide modern infrastructure improvements to the thousands new Montana residents during the 1910-1918 Homestead Boom. It is one of the oldest highway commission-designed riveted through truss bridges remaining in service on Montana's roads. The Montana State Legislature created the state highway commission and followed that up two years later by mandating it form a bridge department. The legislature and commission directed the new bridge engineer, Charles A. Kyle, standardize the design steel truss, steel stringer, reinforced concrete, and timber stringer bridges. They also directed Kyle and chief engineer George Metlen develop a process whereby the state oversee the bridge bidding process in the counties, include highway commission personnel at project lettings, place resident engineers to monitor bridge construction projects, and, along with the county commissioners and county surveyors, accept completed projects from the contractors. In 1915 and 1916, the state highway commission provided standardized plans and oversaw the bridge building process for seventy bridges in twenty-four Montana Counties.<sup>2</sup> The Musselshell River Bridge was one of those bridges. The state and counties utilized this system until 1927 when the enactment of a gasoline tax redefined how the counties participated in the process. The Musselshell River Bridge is significant for its association with this system of bridge building in Montana and one of the last remaining structures from that initial period of state regulated bridge construction.

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<sup>2</sup> George R. Metlen, *Report of the Montana State Highway Commission for the Years 1915-1916* (Montana State Highway Commission, 1917), pp. 8-10.



Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

Additionally, the bridge is associated with the 1910 – 1918 Montana homestead boom. The federal government's enactment of the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act promised 320 acres to any adult male or female willing to abide by the terms of the legislation. If done, the claimant would receive fee title ownership of the property. Montana was one of the primary destinations of the would-be farmers. During that eight-year period, nearly 200,000 people flooded into eastern Montana and filed on 320-acre homestead claims. Because of the state's thousands of new residents, the counties contended with minimal infrastructures to serve them. The county commissioners placed a high priority on roads and bridges to serve their constituents. One of the reasons for the legislature's formation of the state highway commission in 1913 and its bridge department in 1915 was because of the infrastructure needs to accommodate Montana's new residents. In September 1915, the highway commission oversaw Musselshell County's letting of four bridges to contract that facilitated access to Milwaukee Road Railroad stations for homesteaders and ranchers in the Musselshell River valley. The bridges also facilitated improved access to Roundup (and later Ryegate), the local trade center and county seat. The Musselshell River Bridge is significant for its association with the early bridge-building programs of the Montana state highway commission and because of its significance to the 1910-1918 Homestead Boom in Musselshell County.

The Musselshell River Bridge is also eligible to list in the National Register under Criterion C. It is an excellent example of the type of riveted Warren through truss bridge standardized design developed by the state highway commission's bridge department in 1915. It marks a major departure from the pin-connected Pratt trusses built in large numbers by the counties between 1892 and 1915. Pre-1915 truss bridges were intended for wagon and horse traffic. After 1915, the highway commission intended them for use by automobiles, tractors, and trucks. The heavier truss members and riveting enabled that transition to occur. The bridge displays the profile and structural features standard to the Warren through truss from 1915 to 1931. That includes the "W" profile of the truss members, the channel section chords and the diagonal and vertical components of the truss. Also included in the standard design and still present on the bridge are the steel I-beam floor beams and stringers, the angle section guardrails and sway bracing, top and bottom lateral bracing and the top struts. Although the highway commission designed the bridge to carry a concrete deck, it has sported a wood deck since its construction in 1916. The Musselshell River Bridge exhibits all seven criteria of integrity and is a representative and early example of the style.

### **Engineering Significance**

Beginning in 1915, the Montana Highway Department standardized the use of riveted Warren trusses on the state's roads. The Warren truss is easily recognized by the "W" configuration of the diagonal members of the truss. The simplicity and economy of design of the truss made it appealing to American bridge engineers in the early twentieth century. The Minneapolis Steel

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

and Machinery Company built the first known Warren through truss in Montana across the Beaverhead River in Madison County in 1907. By 1915, portable field riveting machines supplanted the need for pin-connections, making a stronger and more reliable vehicular bridge. The Montana State Highway Commission's bridge department standardized a Warren through truss design in 1915 as part of its effort to provide a reliable, durable, and affordable bridge design to Montana's counties. The first Warren truss built under standardized design crossed the Bitterroot River near Florence in Ravalli County. Built in 1915, it provided the model for other Warren through truss bridges constructed in Montana until 1933. Although the highway commission and counties built nearly 150 Warren trusses on the state's primary and secondary highways between 1915 and 1933, the Musselshell River Bridge is one of only a few intact examples of the state-designed trusses remaining in Montana. The bridge was important to the functioning of the Buffalo Trail, a 300-mile road between Yellowstone National Park and Great Falls, Montana.

### History

Trappers employed by American Fur Company's Upper Missouri Outfit were well acquainted with the Musselshell Valley by the 1830s, but did not actively trap the area because "Indians of uncertain tendencies held undisputed sway in the region." The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 gave the Crow Indians all the territory south of the Yellowstone River to the Wyoming border and east to the divide between Rosebud Creek and the Big Horn River. Within months of its ratification, however, gold was discovered in the Beartooth Mountains within the reservation's boundaries. Mining interests and the Northern Pacific Railway Company put pressure on the federal government to move the Crow to a new reservation in the Judith Basin, part of which encompassed the Musselshell River valley in central Montana. Because of the negative reaction of Montana ranchers to the idea of locking them out of the grass-rich basin, the government abandoned its plan to move the tribe to the Judith Basin in 1875. By that time, however, the Lakota and Northern Cheyenne Indians had filtered into the valley from the south. It was not until the U. S. Army defeated the tribes during the Great Sioux War in 1877 that non-Indian ranchers began moving into the Musselshell Valley.<sup>3</sup>

The Musselshell valley changed dramatically in the early twentieth century because of two events: the completion of the Milwaukee Road Railroad through the valley in 1907 and the enactment of the Enlarged Homestead Act the following year. The railroad provided access to national markets for the formerly isolated valley. The Enlarged Homestead Act and the

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<sup>3</sup> Malcolm B. Millegan, *Montana Counties: Gems in the Diadem of the Treasure State* (Standard Publishing Co., 1931), np; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, Rev. ed. (University of Washington Press, 1991), pp. 122-123; *Water Resources Survey: Musselshell County*, volume I (State Engineer's Office, 1949), p. 6.

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

Milwaukee Road's promotional department also drew new residents to the valley beginning in 1910.

In November 1901, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad (later Milwaukee Road) president Albert Earling and board chairman Roswell Miller made the decision to extend the CMSP to the Pacific coast. The extension would make the railroad a transcontinental line and give it access to the Pacific Northwest and east Asian markets. The Milwaukee Road divided the construction into districts with the Musselshell valley part of the Mobridge to Butte section. The company, in turn, organized the section into smaller construction districts with this section of the line part of Melstone to Lombard district and divided even further into the Musselshell section. The railroad's contractor for the section, McIntosh Brothers, began work on the Pacific extension in 1906. McIntosh Brothers subcontracted the work in this district.<sup>4</sup>

This Musselshell River valley presented a host of challenges to the railroad and its contractors. Unlike other districts that were sparsely populated, the Musselshell district had been heavily populated by cattle and sheep ranchers since the 1870s. After the hard winter of 1886-1887, many of the ranchers grew alfalfa and hay to feed their animals during the long winter months. The fields relied on irrigation ditches. Accordingly, there were many long-established and extensive irrigation systems in the valley. The Milwaukee Road's surveys established a line that minimized the number of river crossings, but then impacted the irrigation systems. Railroad right-of-way agents spent a considerable amount of money building new dams, headgates, and ditches for the impacted landowners. They also paid thousands of dollars settling the claims made by ranchers. The Milwaukee Road completed its line through the Musselshell River valley in 1907.<sup>5</sup>

The completion of the railroad coincided with the passage of the 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act. Under the terms of the legislation, men and women could file on 320-acre homesteads and eventually gain fee title ownership of the claims after meeting the requirements of the act. Thousands of would-be homesteaders flooded into Montana and Musselshell County beginning in 1910. Many people were lured to the Musselshell valley by the aggressive advertising of the Milwaukee Road Railroad, which offered incentives to settle along its line. The railroad, moreover, deposited settlements in its wake, many that became important local shipping and trade centers.

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<sup>4</sup> Steve McCarter, *Guide to the Milwaukee Road in Montana* (Montana Historical Society Press, 1992), pp. 14, 17-18; August Derleth, *The Milwaukee Road: The First Hundred Years* (Creative Age Press, 1948), p. 180.

<sup>5</sup> *Water Resources Survey: Musselshell County, Montana* (State Engineer's Office, 1949), p. 8; Malone, et al., *Montana*, 150-151; Derleth, *The Milwaukee Road*, 180-181.

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

The Milwaukee Land Company, a subsidiary of the Milwaukee Road, acquired the site of Ryegate in late 1906 or 1907. Railroad surveyors named the site either for a field of ryegrass or because of thick stands of ryegrass along the Musselshell River. In 1907, the railroad established a depot and station agent at the site and christened it Ryegate, the founding corresponding with Congress passing the Enlarged Homestead Act. The Act, along with the Milwaukee Road's advertising campaign brought thousands of people to this part of Montana, formerly dominated by large cattle and sheep ranches. By 1910, Ryegate boasted a population of seventy-five individuals and a lively commercial district.<sup>6</sup>

Located about two miles west of the Musselshell River Bridge, Ryegate prospered during the Homestead Boom. By 1916, it had 300 residents and a commercial district consisting of two hotels, two banks, mercantile stores, garage, restaurant, saloons, a barber, drugstore, and a furniture store. In 1920, the residents of portions of Musselshell and Sweet Grass counties had enough optimism in the future of the locality they successfully lobbied for the creation of Golden Valley County with Ryegate winning the fight as the county seat over nearby Lavina. At its height in 1920, Ryegate counted a population of 405 people. The collapse of the Homestead Boom in 1918, however, presaged bad times for the community. In 1923, it lost both banks and fire and neglect contributed to a much-reduced commercial district. By 1930, Ryegate's population dropped to 292 folks, but rebounded slightly to 348 people by 1940. Ryegate has continued to hold on and is a trade center for local farms and ranches.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Montana State Highway Commission's Bridge Department**

In March of 1915, Montana legislature directed the State Highway Commission create a bridge department. The new department established oversight of the county system for advertising, letting, and accepting bridge projects from contractors where the proposed bridge would cost over \$500. Prior to the formation of the department, bridge contract lettings differed in each county. There was no way to ensure the process was conducted fairly or that the counties received what their constituents paid for. Importantly, the new process required contractors bid on bridge plans developed by state engineers rather than the contractors themselves.

Consequently, the bridge department developed standardized plans and bid forms used by contractors submitting proposals to the counties. A state representative, moreover, had to be present at each county bridge letting to ensure the process was conducted according to the law.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> *Water Resource Survey: Musselshell County*, p. 8; Clyde Reichelt, "Rye Grass or Fine Field of Rye," *The Great Falls Tribune*, September 7, 1958; Harriet Fitzgerald Sanders, *History of Montana*, vol. 2 (The Lewis Publishing Co., 1913), p. 1771; Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana*, pp. 233-34; *Montana Place Names from Alzada to Zortman: A Montana Historical Society Guide*, p. 232; US Census Records viewed at [www.ancestry.com](http://www.ancestry.com).

<sup>7</sup> Sanborn Fire Insurance Map 1916; US Census Records; Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana*, p. 310; Cheney, *Names on the Face of Montana*, pp. 121-22; *Montana Place Names*, p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> George R. Metlen, *Report of the Montana State Highway Commission for the Years 1915-1916* (Montana State Highway Commission, 1916), pp. 4-5; Statewide Planning Survey, *History of the Montana Highway*

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

In May of 1915, the state highway commission hired its first bridge engineer, Charles A. Kyle. In addition to regulating the bidding process, the highway commission directed Kyle to develop standardized bridge plans for use by the counties. To that end, Kyle developed plans for steel, reinforced concrete, and timber bridge structures. On July 18, 1915, the highway commission supervised its first bridge contract letting – for a steel truss bridge across the Bitterroot River east of Florence in Ravalli County. Over the course of the next year, the new Bridge Department oversaw the construction of sixty-eight bridges in counties throughout Montana, including eight in Musselshell County alone. The Musselshell Valley was the focus of much of the highway commission's early bridge-building efforts.<sup>9</sup>

### **Buffalo Trail**

In November 1919, a group of Montana good roads enthusiasts and tourism promoters met in Judith Gap to discuss ways to improve and maintain a highway between Billings and Great Falls. Representatives of every “town and hamlet” between the two cities attended the meeting. The result was their formation of the Buffalo Trail Association to develop and promote the highway. It was one of several roads organizations active in the state in the years following World War I. Their goal was to improve Montana's highway system, promote tourism to Glacier and Yellowstone national parks and publicize businesses in the communities along the routes.<sup>10</sup>

The named highways were really nothing more than linkages of county roads that acquired descriptive names like Yellowstone Trail, Yellowstone-Glacier-Banff Line, Park-to-Park Highway, Great White Way, and Vigilante Trail to name a few. The Buffalo Trail was one of thirteen named highways active in Montana between 1914 and 1926. The associations sponsored “trail days” where communities along the highways repaired and made improvements. They also published brochures and pamphlets with information about the highways, services along the routes, and attractions to visit.<sup>11</sup>

Loren W. Loy, Ryegate insurance agent and legislator, served as secretary-treasurer of the association that oversaw the Buffalo Trail passing through Ryegate and crossing the Musselshell River Bridge east of the community. Brown and white steel signs bearing the image of a buffalo with “Trail” in raised letters below it and a “B” painted on rocks or fence posts blazed the

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*Department, 1913-1942* (Montana State Highway Commission, 1943), pp. 102-103; Jon Axline, *Taming Big Sky Country: The History of Montana Transportation from Trails to Interstates* (The History Press, 2015), pp. 52-53.

<sup>9</sup> MSHC, book 1, p. 77 (14 August 1915); Metlen, *Report of the Montana Highway Commission, 1915-1916*, p. 9; Axline, *Taming Big Sky Country*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>10</sup> “Buffalo Trail Highway Association Organized,” *The Billings Gazette*, November 20, 1919.

<sup>11</sup> Axline, *Taming Big Sky Country*, pp. 64-66.

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

highway. The association held annual conventions in Billings to plan improvements to the road, seek federal aid funding to pay for them, and develop advertising campaigns. The Buffalo Trail Association's promotion materials evoked images of the old west, describing it as "the route over which the buffalo, Indians, freighters, and stages of other days traveled from the Yellowstone to the great falls of the Missouri."<sup>12</sup>

In 1921, the Buffalo Trail Association merged with the Billings-Cody Way to provide a connection to Yellowstone National Park. The following year, Loy placed trail signage along roads south of Cody to connect the road to Pueblo, Colorado with his ultimate goal to create a link to twelve national parks in five western states. He bragged that the trail "has a wonderful future as it is the only practical and feasible north and south road in the west which is located east of the Rockies." The association produced maps of the route and extended the trail marking all the way to Texas. Despite the Buffalo Trail Association's best efforts, the organization declined after the state highway commission designated a Federal Aid system of which only a part of the trail was included. The commission's numbering of Federal Aid highways in 1926 further hastened the decline. By 1930, the Buffalo Trail Association ceased its activities. The county road incorporating the Musselshell River Bridge, however, still bears its old Buffalo Trail designation.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Musselshell River Bridge**

After years of petitioning the Musselshell County commissioners, the county and the Montana State Highway Commission advertised for the construction of four steel bridges spanning the Musselshell River on August 12, 1915. The bridges were among the first planned for construction under the highway commission's new bridge policy. Charles Kyle designed all four Warren through truss bridges. The *Roundup Tribune* wrote:

Any division in Musselshell County will hereafter be a social or political one for the county commissioners are preparing to eliminate the only physical divisions now existing within the county. By placing four new bridges across the Musselshell River the commissioners expect to bind the southern end of the

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<sup>12</sup> "Buffalo Trail Highway Association Organized," *The Billings Gazette*, November 20, 1919; "Markers for Buffalo Trail Being Marked," *The Billings Gazette*, July 1, 1920; "Buffalo Trail Men will Meet Here," *The Billings Gazette*, November 9, 1920; "Buffalo Trail Meeting Scheduled for Dec. 2," *The Billings Gazette*, November 27, 1920; "Buffalo Trail Offices to be Established Here," *The Billings Gazette*, December 4, 1920; "Call Buffalo Trail Meeting," *The Billings Gazette*, June 15, 1923.

<sup>13</sup> "Comes to Boost Merger of Buffalo-Cody Trails," *The Billings Gazette*, May 7, 1921; "On Buffalo Trail," *The Billings Gazette*, August 2, 1921; "Marks Buffalo Trail South to Glacier Park North," *The Billings Gazette*, August 11, 1921; Axline, *Taming Big Sky Country*, 66.

Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

county to the northern and facilitate travel from the rapidly settling country to the south.<sup>14</sup>

The bridges spanned the Musselshell River at Delphia, near Gage, Geneva/Absher, and just east of Ryegate. All four bridges were placed or near stations on the Milwaukee Road Railroad. Contractors bidding on the project could submit a proposal for one or all four bridges.<sup>15</sup>

On September 15, 1915, the county commissioners awarded a contract for the construction of three bridges to the Security Bridge Company (SBC) of Billings. Security bid \$24,232 for the bridges. A week after obtaining the contract, Security Bridge Company president A. L. Hewett placed an advertisement in the Roundup newspapers for a subcontractor to construct the approaches to the Ryegate, Gage, and Delphia contracts. It is not known what company obtained the contract for that phase of the project. Fortunately for the SBC, the company bid on steel for the bridges at \$1.40 per hundred. By mid-January 1916, the price per hundred had risen to \$2.20 per pound, likely because of the United States' increasing involvement in the European war. Three of the bridges would require forty tons of steel. Steel prices in 1916 would have substantially raised the price of the bridge projects.<sup>16</sup>

The *Ryegate Weekly Reporter* was especially excited about a bridge finally crossing the Musselshell River at the Dominick Schaff Ranch two miles east of the community. Homesteaders and ranchers who wished to trade, do business, or ship their livestock from the Milwaukee Road Railroad station at Ryegate were hampered by a river ford not always passable. The newspaper reported to its readers the bridge would be completed in the fall of 1915. What it didn't know at the time was the SBC wouldn't build all four bridges concurrently. The company was overextended in Musselshell County constructing Roundup's sewer system and a host of timber bridges meaning the Delphia and Gage bridges would be constructed the same time and then the bridges at Absher/Geneva and near Ryegate. Flooding on the Musselshell River in the spring of 1916 also delayed the start of the bridge near Ryegate.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> "Four New Steel Bridges Planned for Musselshell," *The Roundup Tribune*, August 12, 1915.

<sup>15</sup> Prior to the bridge letting, the county commissioners removed the Musselshell River Bridge at Geneva from the project letting. The county commissioners awarded the contract for the bridge to the Security Bridge Company in November 1915. "Red Light Must Quit Old Stand," *The Roundup Tribune*, November 4, 1915; "Call for Bids," *The Roundup Tribune*, August 12, 1912; "County Asks for Bids on Four New Bridges," *The Roundup Record*, August 13, 1912.

<sup>16</sup> Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes, Book 1, p. 78; "Proceedings of the Board of County Commissioners of Musselshell County," *The Roundup Tribune*, September 16, 1915; "Security Bridge Co. Gets Contract for Three Bridges," *The Roundup Record*, September 17, 1915; "Notice to Dirt Movers," *The Roundup Tribune*, September 23, 1915; "Contracts for Bridge Let," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, September 30, 1915; "Contracts Save Cash for County," *The Roundup Tribune*, January 6, 1916.

<sup>17</sup> "Additional Local Items," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, September 9, 1915; "Contracts for Bridge Let," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, September 30, 1915; "Delphia Driftings," *The Roundup Record*, November 12, 1915;

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

As work progressed on the Delphia and Gage bridges, residents in western Musselshell County grew impatient. The railroad delivered the steel to the construction site in December 1915, yet work didn't begin on the structure until March 1916. The Ryegate newspaper blamed the county commissioners for the delay in construction of the bridge as they failed to place a deadline on the SBC to complete the project. Perhaps in response to the *Ryegate Weekly Reporter's* complaint (or at least thought so by the newspaper), SBC crews arrived in Ryegate on March 16<sup>th</sup> and immediately went to work on the bridge's superstructure (the concrete abutments and approaches were already completed). The newspaper cheered, "the people of this district have had their road troubles during the past seven years, but now that the worst of them are over, the fatted calf will be killed and rejoicing to the limit."<sup>18</sup>

By the third week in March, the bridge's steel work was in place and the riveting in progress. The *Weekly Reporter* called it a "substantial" bridge with a sixteen-foot clearance on the deck (it has a fourteen foot clearance). The newspaper's publisher, Charles H. Allen, eagerly looked forward to the completion of the bridge:

The old ford which has an interesting history will become only a thing of history and will be given a fond farewell by those who have been using it lo these many years, and especially auto owners who more than once have found themselves in the middle of the stream in a drowned car.

The workers completed the riveting on April 1<sup>st</sup> and began installation of the deck planking. Five days later, the Security Bridge Company completed the long-awaited Musselshell River Bridge. The Montana State Highway Commission's resident engineer on the project reported to his employers that the bridge was complete. In September 1916, nearly a year after the county awarded the SBC the contract, the highway and county commissioners officially accepted the bridge from the SBC.<sup>19</sup>

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*Ibid*, May 5, 1916; "Gage Briefs," *The Roundup Record*, December 3, 1915; "County Bridges in Danger from Floods," *The Roundup Tribune*, February 24, 1916; "Co. Bridges High Enough to be Out of Danger," *The Roundup Record*, March 10, 1916.

<sup>18</sup> "Iron for Bridge Arrives," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, December 30, 1915; "Printing vs. Bridges," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, March 9, 1916; "Structural Work Soon to be Complete," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, March 16, 1916.

<sup>19</sup> Charles Kyle designed the four Musselshell River bridges to have concrete decks. To hold down the costs, though, the county commissioners opted for wood planking. The bridges never had concrete decks. "Bridge Will Soon be Finished," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, March 30, 1916; "Bridge Across Musselshell Finished," *The Ryegate Weekly Reporter*, April 6, 1916; Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes, Book 1, p. 91; "Finish 7 Musselshell Spans," *The Melstone Messenger*, September 8, 1916.



Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

The Musselshell River Bridge came under the jurisdiction of Golden Valley County after the state legislature created it in October 1920. In October 1936, the highway commission awarded a contract to construct the highway between Ryegate and Roundup on a new alignment, thus circumventing the old bridge. The bridge is still owned and maintained by Golden Valley County.<sup>20</sup>

### Security Bridge Company

Cousins William Sherman Hewett and Arthur L. Hewett founded the Security Bridge Company in 1905. Born in South Hope, Maine, in 1864, William Hewett went to work as a clerk for his bridge-builder uncle, Seth M. Hewett, in 1887. William received his training in bridge and structural design from his uncle Maurice and a German employee. By 1895, William was the joint proprietor of his uncle Seth's company, while his cousin, Arthur, worked as the firm's traveling agent. In 1897, the cousins formed W. S. Hewett and Company, one of Montana's most active bridge-building companies in Montana until 1906.<sup>21</sup>

The Tongue River Bridge at Miles City was one of the first steel truss bridges built in Montana by the Hewett Company. In 1902 the firm built another Pennsylvania through truss structure across the Yellowstone River at Miles City. The Fort Keogh Bridge provided a valuable connection between Miles City and the farms and ranches north of the river. In 1905, William dissolved the company and with his cousin Arthur as partner formed the Security Bridge Company.<sup>22</sup>

The Security Bridge Company was the most prodigious bridge-construction company in the state from 1906 until 1926. The new company's first project was the construction of a single-span pin-connected Pratt through truss across the Stillwater River at Kern's Crossing in Stillwater County in 1907. By 1917, the company constructed at least sixty truss bridges throughout central and eastern Montana. Most were simple pin-connected Pratt through structures or riveted Warren pony truss structures.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Montana Place Names from Alzada to Zortman: A Montana Historical Society Guide* (Helena: Montana Historical Society Press, 2009), 110; State of Montana, Montana State Highway Commission, Plan and Profile of Proposed Federal Aid Project No. 268-A, Ryegate-Roundup Highway. Plans on file at the Montana Department of Transportation. Helena, Montana; Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes, Book 7, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> Fredric L. Quivik, *Historic Bridges in Montana* (Washington, DC: Department of the Interior, 1982), pp. 41, 43; Fredric L. Quivik, "Montana's Minneapolis Bridge Builders," *IA: The Journal of the Society for Industrial Archeology*, Volume 10, Number 1 (1984), p. 45; Maurice W. Hewett, "William Sherman Hewett: A Biography," Unpublished Manuscript (July, 1956), p. 2.

<sup>22</sup> Quivik, "Montana's Minneapolis Bridge Builders," p. 45; Hewett, "William Sherman Hewett," p. 2; Quivik, *Historic Bridges*, pp. 41, 43.

<sup>23</sup> Quivik, *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Musselshell River Bridge

Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT

County and State

In 1911, the Hewetts relocated the company headquarters from Minneapolis to Billings, Montana, and reincorporated in November 1911 with Arthur as president of the firm and fellow Minnesotan William P. Roscoe as vice-president. Though the creation of the Montana State Highway Commission's bridge department in 1915 ended the primary role of the bridge construction companies in Montana, the Security Bridge Company continued to build bridges for the highway commission and the counties until 1926. Arthur closed the company in 1926 to pursue other interests in Billings. The company's successor, the William P. Roscoe Company, continued to build bridges in the state until 1956.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Quivik, Ibid., p. 43; Business Entity Search at [www.app.mt.gov/bes](http://www.app.mt.gov/bes).

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

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Musselshell River Bridge

Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT

County and State

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Musselshell River Bridge

Golden Valley County, MT

Name of Property

County and State

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#### 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 # \_\_\_\_\_

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

**Primary location of additional data:**

☐ State Historic Preservation Office

☒ Other State agency

☐ Federal agency

☐ Local government

☐ University

☐ Other

Name of repository: Montana Department of Transportation

**Historic Resources Survey Number (if assigned):** \_\_\_\_\_

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**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: 46.301454

Longitude: -109.2077885

**Verbal Boundary Description** (Describe the boundaries of the property.)

The boundary for the Musselshell River Bridge consists of a rectangle measuring 200 x 40 feet, slightly larger than the bridge itself to provide a sense of setting and to include a portion of the approach road on each end of the bridge. The latitude and longitude coordinates center on the bridge. The structure is located in the Section 3, T6N, R20E. 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: June 2025

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

**Property Owner:**

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

name Golden Valley County  
street & number 107 Kemp Street/PO Box 10 telephone (406) 568-2231  
city or town Ryegate state MT zip code 59074

**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.)

Musselshell River Bridge  
Name of Property

Golden Valley County, MT  
County and State

## Photographs

### Photo Log, All Photographs

Name of Property: Musselshell River Bridge

City or Vicinity: Ryegate, Montana

County: Golden Valley 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

**Paperwork Reduction Act Statement:** This information is being collected for applications to the National Register of Historic Places to nominate properties for listing or determine eligibility for listing, to list properties, and to amend existing listings. Response to this request is required to obtain a benefit in accordance with the National Historic Preservation Act, as amended (16 U.S.C.460 et seq.).

**Estimated Burden Statement:** Public reporting burden for this form is estimated to average 100 hours per response including time for reviewing instructions, gathering and maintaining data, and completing and reviewing the form. Direct comments regarding this burden estimate or any aspect of this form to the Office of Planning and Performance Management, U.S. Dept. of the Interior, 1849 C. Street, NW, Washington, DC.

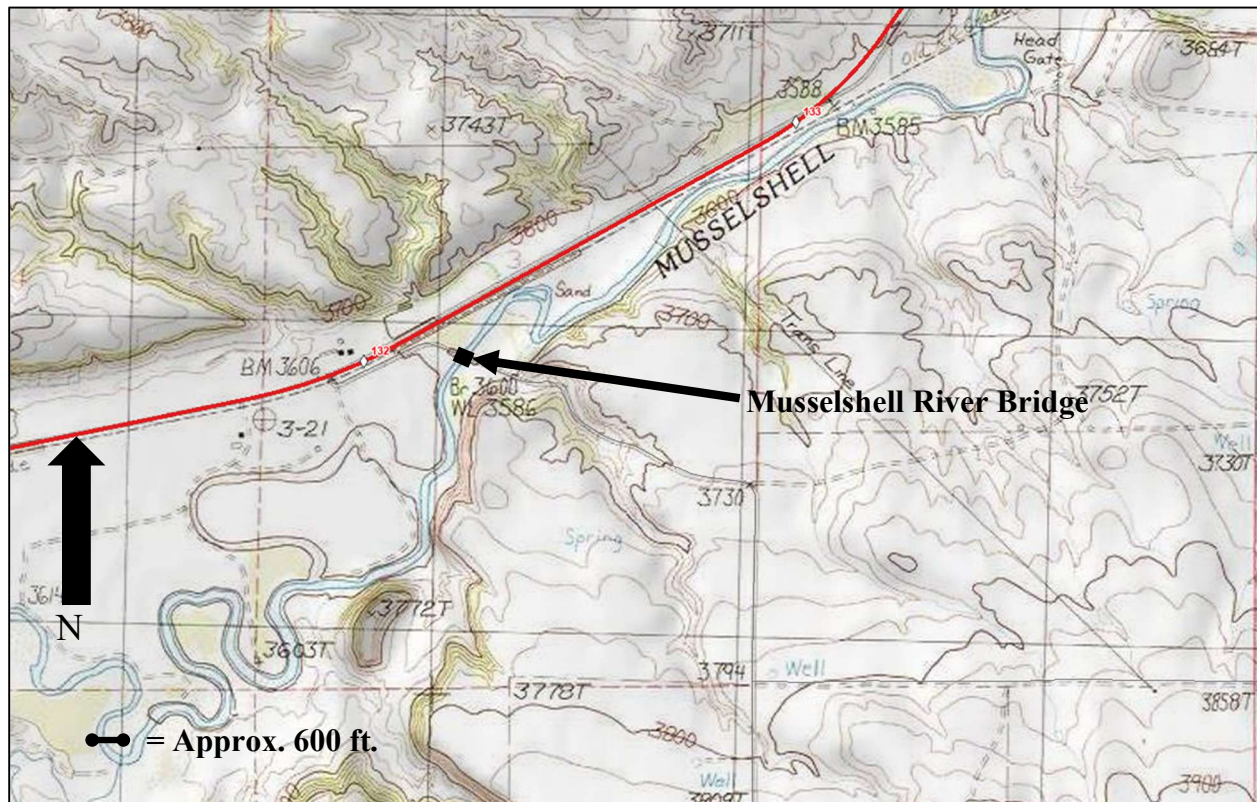


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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 25



Location of the Musselshell River Bridge. Found on the Harlowton 7.5' Quadrangle map.  
Center point = Latitude: 46.301454 Longitude: -109.2077885.

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 26



Map created using the Digital Atlas April 26, 2025  
<http://msl.mt.gov/GIS/Atlas>

Montana State Library - Digital Library  
(406) 444-5354 | [geoinfo@mt.gov](mailto:geoinfo@mt.gov) | <http://msl.mt.gov>

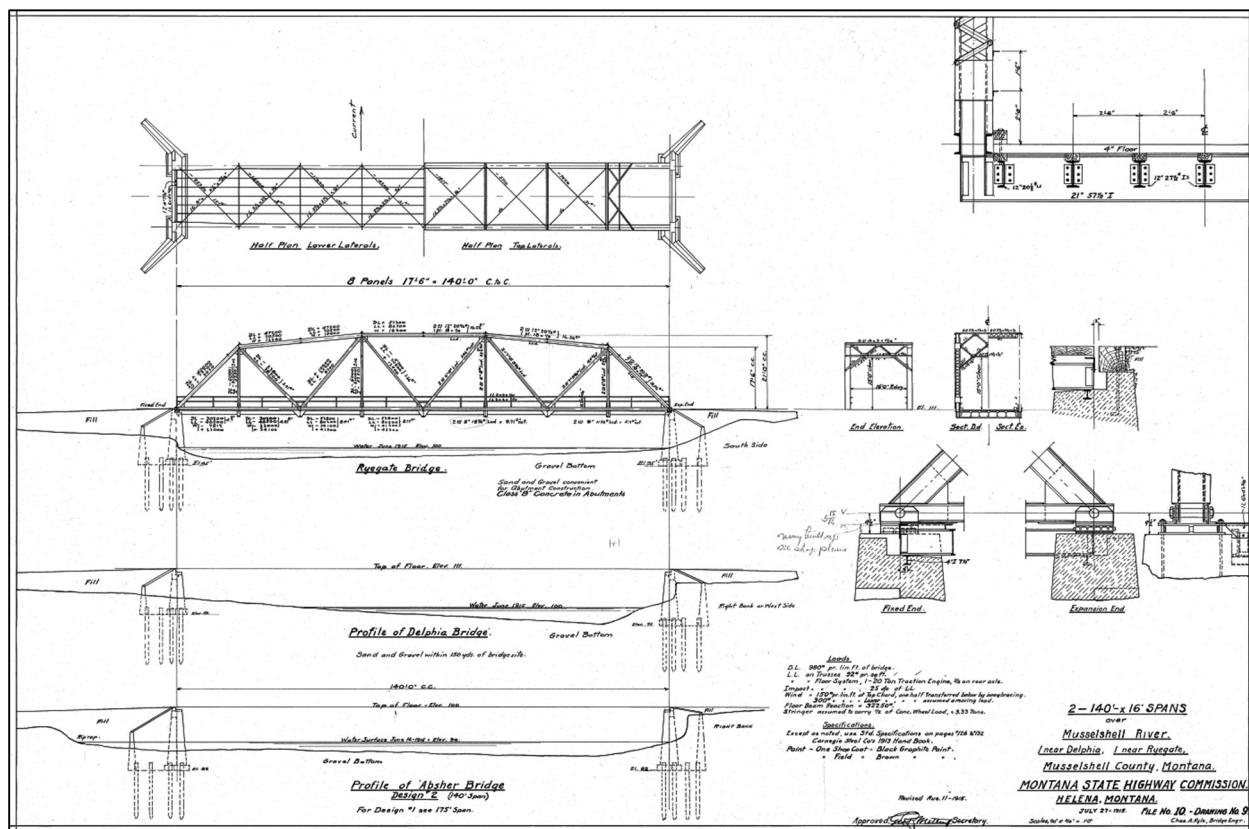
Aerial image showing location of the Musselshell River Bridge. Center point = Latitude: 46.301454 Longitude: -109.2077885.

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 27



Montana State Highway Commission. 2-140' x 16' Spans Over Musselshell River near Delphia/near Ryegate. Musselshell County, Montana. Drawing no. 9 (July 27, 1915).



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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 28

### Photo Log, All Photographs:

Name of Property:	Musselshell River Bridge	
City or Vicinity:	Ryegate	
County:	Golden Valley	State: MT
Photographer:	Rob Park	
Date Photographed:	May 2025	



**Musselshell River Bridge. Overview. View to southeast.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0001**

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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 29



**Musselshell River Bridge. Overview. View down.**  
**MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0002.**



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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 30



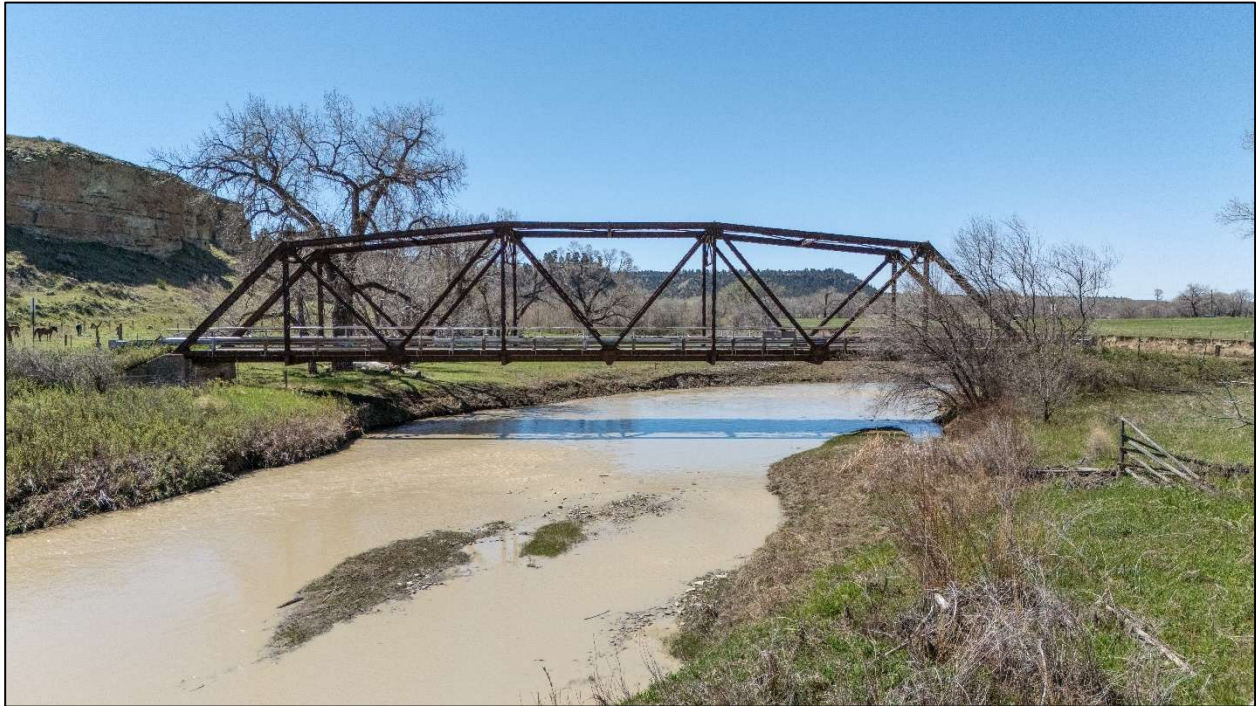
**Musselshell River Bridge. West side. View to east.**  
**MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0003.**

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National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 31



**Musselshell River Bridge. East side. View to west.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0004.**



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number Additional Documentation Maps and Historic Photographs Page 32



**Musselshell River Bridge. West side. View to the southeast.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0005.**



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number National Register Photographs

Page 33



**Musselshell River Bridge. Northwest approach. View to southeast.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0006.**



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

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

Section number National Register Photographs

Page 34



**Musselshell River Bridge. Southeast approach. View to the northwest.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0007.**



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Musselshell River Bridge
Name of Property
Golden Valley County, Montana
County and State
Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Additional Documentation National Register Photographs

Page 35



**Musselshell River Bridge. Portal braces, sway braces, top struts and upper lateral braces.  
View to northwest.**

**MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0008.**

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Musselshell River Bridge
Name of Property
Golden Valley County, Montana
County and State
Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Additional Documentation National Register Photographs

Page 36



**Musselshell River Bridge. Detail of diagonal and vertical members. View to east.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0009.**



United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

**National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet**

Musselshell River Bridge
Name of Property
Golden Valley County, Montana
County and State
Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Additional Documentation National Register Photographs

Page 37



**Musselshell River Bridge. detail of stringers and floor beams. View to the northwest.  
MT\_GoldenValleyCounty\_MusselshellRiverBridge\_0010.**

United States Department of the Interior  
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## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Musselshell River Bridge
Name of Property
Golden Valley County, Montana
County and State
Montana's Historic Steel Truss Bridges
Name of multiple listing (if applicable)

Section number Additional Documentation National Register Photographs

Page 38



**Musselshell River Bridge. Detail of abutment and truss. View to the south.  
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