

ELK CREEK BRIDGE  
Spanning Elk Creek at Milepost 0.2 on Montana Highway 21  
(Augusta-Sun River Road)  
Augusta vicinity  
Lewis and Clark County  
Montana

HAER MT-151  
*HAER MT-151*

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD  
INTERMOUNTAIN REGIONAL OFFICE  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
12795 West Alameda Parkway  
Denver, CO 80228

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

ELK CREEK BRIDGE

HAER No. MT-151

**I. INTRODUCTION**

Location: Elk Creek Bridge  
Spanning Elk Creek at Milepost 0.2 on  
Montana Highway 21(Augusta-Sun River Road)  
Augusta Vicinity  
Lewis and Clark County  
Montana

Quad: Gilman, Montana (1987)

UTM: 12/397181/5261839

Date of Construction: 1935

Present Owner: Montana Department of Transportation  
Helena, Montana

Present Use: Highway Bridge

Significance: The Elk Creek Bridge is significant for its association with the federal New Deal work relief programs initiated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt to combat the effects of the Great Depression in 1933. Although the Montana Department of Transportation primarily built timber bridges during the New Deal, a substantial number of reinforced concrete bridges were also constructed on Montana's highways where conditions warranted during that period. The Elk Creek Bridge is a representative example of the standard MDT-designed reinforced concrete T-beam structure with the typical open guardrails and recessed concrete girders. It represents the type of reinforced concrete T-beam bridges built on Montana's highways between 1933 and 1941.

Historian: Jon Axline, Montana Department of Transportation  
May 2014

## II. HISTORY

The Elk Creek Bridge is located within the aboriginal territory of the Piegan tribe of the Blackfeet Confederacy. The Blackfeet migrated to the Great Plains from the forests north of the Great Lakes about 400 years ago. The tribe split into three distinct groups, the Piegan, Kainah and Siksika, in the late seventeenth century. The Piegans were firmly ensconced in their aboriginal territory in Montana by the late eighteenth century and were trading with the British-Canadian Hudson Bay Company and North West Company by the early nineteenth century. By the time of the Lewis and Clark Expedition (1804-1806), the Blackfeet had a reputation as a proud and warlike people who ranged from the northern Great Plains south into today's western Wyoming and eastern Idaho, and into the southwestern valleys of Montana.<sup>1</sup>

Meriwether Lewis, George Drouillard, and brothers Joseph and Reuben Fields passed through the Augusta area on July 8, 1806, as they scouted northward into the Marias River country. Lewis called Elk Creek Shishequaw Creek and described the future site of Augusta as "an extensive beautifull [sic] and level bottom." The Augusta area was included in the Blackfeet Reservation after the Judith River treaty in 1855. Although the area was undoubtedly (and infrequently) visited by fur trappers from the Hudson Bay and American Fur companies prior to the treaty, it wasn't until the late 1850s that it was extensively explored by James Doty as part of Isaac Stevens' mission to survey a route for a northern transcontinental railroad.<sup>2</sup>

Jealously protected by the Blackfeet, Euro-American settlement of the Augusta didn't begin until after the massacre of nearly two hundred Blackfeet on the Marias River north of the future site of the bridge by the U.S. Army in January 1870. The Baker Massacre was followed by a reduction in size of the Blackfeet Reservation to a line north of the Sun and Missouri rivers in 1871. Prior to this, non-Indian presence in the region was small, limited to a few trappers and traders and traffic on the Benton Road.<sup>3</sup> With the removal of the Blackfeet, however, huge tracts of what had been prime bison grazing territory were opened up to American cattle and sheep ranchers. Deer Lodge rancher Conrad Kohrs drove the first cattle herd into the Sun River Valley east of Augusta in 1869. Other ranchers, including David Auchard, the Clemons Boys, Warren Gillette, Bob Ford, and Stephen Mosher, followed him in the mid-1870s. Through preemption, desert,

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Ewers, *The Blackfeet: Raiders on the Northwestern Plains* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Gary E. Moulton, ed., *The Definitive Journals of Lewis & Clark: Over the Rockies to St. Louis*, volume 8 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 97; Bernard DeVoto, ed., *The Journals of Lewis and Clark* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1953), 421; Michael P. Malone, Richard B. Roeder, and William L. Lang, *Montana: A History of Two Centuries*, rev. ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991), 117; John Mullan, *Report on the Construction of a Military Road from Fort Walla-Walla to Fort Benton* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1863), 145-146.

<sup>3</sup> The Benton Road provided a connection between Fort Benton on the upper Missouri River and Helena, a mining camp in southwestern Montana. The road between Fort Benton and Helena was actually a part of the Mullan Road.

and timber homestead entries, they were able to amass huge tracts of land over which to run their cattle and sheep. Although isolated from the southwestern Montana mining camps, these ranchers found lucrative markets for their animals in Helena, Fort Benton, and Virginia City. They raised large horse herds for sale to the freighting and stage companies that crowded the Benton Road to the south.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1879, Fred Walrath filed on a 160-acre homestead encompassing the future site of Augusta; he obtained the patent to the property in July 1884. A native of New York, Fred and his wife, Alvira, came to Montana in 1873 and settled at Sun River Crossing where he worked as a blacksmith repairing wagons damaged on the Benton Road. In 1884, Walrath divided up his property and sold lots to potential settlers in the area. Walrath's venture was the basis of the community of Augusta, named for local rancher D. J. Hogan's daughter, Augusta. Walrath operated a blacksmith shop, hotel, and livery stable in the fledgling community. Other businesses soon followed, including a second hotel, meat market, and a saloon called the Pioneer. Michael Leeson wrote in 1885 that "Augusta, located on the headwaters of the Sun River, has many advantages which promise to make it one of the important towns of the territory. It has fine agriculture surroundings and extensive ranges for cattle grazing." When Augusta obtained a post office in 1884, the community seemed poised to become one of the important agricultural trade centers in northern Lewis and Clark County.<sup>5</sup>

A year before his death, Walrath hired James B. McDonald to survey the Augusta townsite. McDonald filed the plat at the Lewis and Clark County Courthouse in Helena in December 1893. The town encompassed one hundred acres at the confluence of Elk Creek and the South Fork of the Sun River. Upon Walrath's death, his widow, Alvira, assumed the responsibility of selling her late husband's property within the townsite. Augusta continued to grow, claiming a population of 186 in 1900. Augusta prospered into the twentieth century. In April 1901, a fire devastated most of the community's business district in a little more than two hours. The fire, however, spared Augusta's churches while razing all of its saloons. For a time, Augusta had a reputation of being the most moral town in Montana. Like other frontier communities ravaged by fire, Augusta quickly rebuilt its business district. By 1914, there were 22 businesses operating on the main street.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Malone, et. al., *Montana*, 120-121, 150, 173; Dearborn Homemakers, *Dearborn Country: A History of the Dearborn, Wolf Creek, and Craig Areas* (Wolf Creek: Dearborn Homemakers, 1976), 55-56; *In the Shadow of the Rockies: A History of the Augusta Area* (Augusta: Augusta Heritage Committee, 1978), 142.

<sup>5</sup> Land Patent Records, viewed at [www.glorerecords.blm.gov](http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov); *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (Chicago: A. W. Bowen & Co., 1902), 1857; M. A. Leeson, *History of Montana, 1739-1885* (Chicago: Warner, Beers & Company, 1885), 757; Federal Writers' Project, *Montana: A State Guide Book* (Helena: Montana Department of Agriculture, Labor and Industry, 1939), 267; *In the Shadow of the Rockies*, 9-10.

<sup>6</sup> *Progressive Men of the State of Montana* (Chicago: A.W. Bowen & Co., 1902), 1857; *In the Shadow of the Rockies*, 9.

The community suffered another setback in 1912 when the Great Northern Railway (GN) constructed a branch line toward the front range of the Rocky Mountains, terminating it two miles northeast of Augusta at a new settlement called Gilman. The railroad was part of an ambitious plan by Great Northern President James J. Hill to extend his Montana Eastern Railway westward over the Rockies to connect with the GN's main line at Essex. Many businessmen and residents believed that Gilman would eclipse Augusta, eventually turning the older community into a ghost town. The owner of the Augusta State Bank, Abram Lincoln Bradley, left the town and opened a new bank in Gilman. He became the new town's biggest promoter, luring people and businesses away from Augusta to Gilman. Not to be deterred, Augustans lobbied the GN and the State Legislature to have the line extended to their town. Their efforts succeeded and the legislature passed a law in 1921 that empowered the Montana Railroad Commission to force the railroad to construct spur lines to towns that were within two miles of the main line. Augusta obtained its railroad in December 1922. Thereafter, Gilman began to wane as drought and economic competition from the older, more established Augusta increased. Businesses and residents began to move back to Augusta beginning in 1923 after the Gilman State Bank closed.<sup>7</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century, Augusta's fortunes had also faded as improved highways and economic depression cut into its prosperity. In 1939, the Federal Writers' Project wrote of Augusta that it was situated on a "cut-off" between Choteau and Helena and that "a fairly prosperous farming community surrounds the town." Indeed, in the early twenty-first century, farming and ranching remains an important part of the area's economy. Increasingly, however, tourism and recreation has played an important part in Augusta's economy as the community cashes in on its rich ranching history, surrounding dude ranches, its proximity to the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat wildernesses, and the area's breathtaking scenery along the front range of the Rocky Mountains. Augusta promotes its annual American Legion Rodeo as the "Wildest One Day Show on Earth."<sup>8</sup>

### **The New Deal and the Montana Highway Department**

The eight-year period from March 1933 to December 1941 marked a profound change in how the Montana Highway Department financed, built and maintained roads and bridges during the Great Depression. During that time, the department reconstructed or improved 6,563 miles of primary roads and built 673 bridges, including 114 bridges in 1935 alone. The New Deal programs also included the establishment of a feeder or secondary road program in 1933 to improve approximately 723 miles of farm-to-market roads that were not on the Federal Aid primary

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<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey L. Cuniff, "A Tale of Two Towns: Gilman and Augusta," *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, vol. 24, no. 2 (Spring 1976), 43. 44-45. 51. 52-53; Donald B. Robertson, *Encyclopedia of Western Railroad History*, vol. 2 (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1991), 323; Don Spritzer, *Roadside History of Montana* (Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1999), 263.

<sup>8</sup> Federal Writers' Project, *Montana*, 267.

system. The Elk Creek Bridge was located on Montana Highway 20 between Augusta and Great Falls when the route became part of the Federal Aid primary system in May 1926.<sup>9</sup>

Because of the Great Depression, Montana, like most western states, was unable to provide matching money for federal funds to build roads. Consequently, the State Legislature had to devise a new method to provide funding to match federal allocations. Montana relied primarily on debentures to do that throughout the decade. Fortunately, much of the federal money appropriated for Montana was in the form of grants that did not require matches. To get the money, however, the highway commission had to agree to certain conditions involving employment, labor unions, and types of roads improved – all of which it was more than willing to do. By the eve of World War II, the New Deal had exhausted itself and the federal government again required state matching funds to receive federal appropriations. Despite the grants, though, the highway department struggled through much of the late 1930s to raise money to keep the highway program solvent.<sup>10</sup>

Three months after his inauguration, FDR pushed through the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA), the first sweeping federal legislation to combat the effects of the Great Depression on the nation's unemployed. Title I of the Act appropriated \$400 million for the construction of public highways. Unlike the usual Federal Aid Road Act, the money constituted a federal grant to the states, which did not need to provide matching funds. Importantly, FDR intended the legislation to provide work for the thousands of unemployed by putting them to work on highways. The NIRA also set minimum wage scales for unskilled and skilled labor, gave hiring preferences for veterans of World War I and local labor, stipulated a thirty-hour work week, and focused on pick and shovel work rather than the use of machinery. The Act required that 25 percent of each state's apportionment be spent on secondary or feeder (farm-to-market) roads, 25 percent on municipal roads, and 50 percent on Federal Aid highways (Forest Highways included). States could use NIRA (commonly referred to NRH – National Recovery Highway) money to finance their unfunded matching money obligations. The formula for which NRH money was allocated to the states was based on the ratio of population and the number of acres of federally-owned lands and Indian reservations in the state. Because the federal government classified Montana as a "Public Lands State," it received a relatively high federal appropriation under NIRA guidelines.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Statewide Highway Planning Survey, *History of the Montana State Highway Department, 1913-1942* (Helena: Montana State Highway Commission, 1943), 49, 54D, 55; Malone, et al. *Montana*, 296.

<sup>10</sup> Malone, et al. *Montana*, 296.

<sup>11</sup> Carl F. Wohlgenant, Jr., "Development of the Federal-Aid System Highway System in Montana" Master of Arts Thesis, University of Montana, 1954, p. 60; Statewide Highway Planning Survey, *History of the Montana State Highway Department*, 30, 137-39; T. H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 142-43; Federal Highway Administration, *America's Highways, 1776-1976* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1976), 125, 246-47; Montana State Highway Commission Meeting Minutes [hereafter MSHC], book 5, pp. 298-99 (13 June 1933).

The highway commissioners awarded the first NRH-funded projects on August 23, 1933. At \$1,671,543, it was the largest contract letting in the commission's history and the largest made with NRH funds in the state. The sixteen projects included the grading and surfacing of just over 147 miles of the state's primary highways and the construction of 51 bridges, including the much-anticipated Missouri River Bridge at Culbertson. Over the next 22 months, until the US Supreme Court declared the NIRA unconstitutional in May 1935, the commission awarded 229 contracts that utilized \$136,000 more than the state's NRH appropriation (the overrun was made up from future federal relief appropriations to Montana). In all, contractors graded and surfaced, either with oil or bituminous pavement, 721 miles of primary highway in the Treasure State. The NRH also funded the construction of 237 bridges and 322 miles of secondary highways. The commission let the first "feeder" highway contracts in November 1933 for projects near Stanford, Malta, and Harlowton in central Montana.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Elk Creek Bridge**

The Montana State Highway Commission awarded a contract to John Coverdale and Elmer Johnson to construct a concrete bridge and five treated timber bridges on the Augusta "end" of the Augusta-Sun River Road (Montana Highway 21) on September 21, 1934. One of seven firms that bid on the project, Coverdale and Johnson won the contract with their low bid of \$15,615. The contract specified that the bridge be completed by April 30, 1935. The contractors obtained the labor for the project from the Helena office of the United States Employment Service as stipulated in the federal New Deal regulations. The contractors began work on the project shortly after the highway commission awarded them the contract in September. The final cost of the Elk Creek Bridge was \$5,795. Coverdale and Johnson completed the project by the April 30, 1935 deadline specified by the highway commission.<sup>13</sup>

## **III. THE BRIDGE**

### **A. DESCRIPTION**

The Elk Creek Bridge is a two-span reinforced concrete T-beam structure. The bridge crosses Elk Creek on Montana Highway 21 about one mile northeast of the community of Augusta. The bridge is 79 feet long and 25 feet wide with a roadway width of 22 feet. The structure rests on concrete abutments with concrete wing walls and an open pier.

### **Substructure**

The bridge has two solid concrete abutments with wingwalls and a concrete pier.

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<sup>12</sup> MSHC, *Ibid*, pp. 347-48, 352 (23 August 1933); MSHC, book 6, pp. 8, 10 (27 November 1933).

<sup>13</sup> MSHC 6, pp. 187, 190 (21 September 1934); Bridge Construction File: U.S. Public Works Highway Project No. NRH 176E, Unit 2: Augusta-Sun River Highway, Microfilm copy held at Environmental Services Bureau, Montana Department of Transportation, Helena, Montana.

Abutment No. 1 (west) is 32' in length and extends 2' 9" beyond the guardrails. The abutment is 7' 2" deep and 1' 6" thick. The columns are 2' x 2' and rest on 5' x 5' x 2' concrete footings. The two columns are each 7' 0" feet in length. The head of the abutment is 7' 2" deep and tapers to 2' 6" at the ends.

Pier. The open pier consists of two concrete columns and connected by a concrete web wall. The pier is 14' 6" in height and 2' wide. The columns are 2' x 2' and rest on concrete footings that are 5' 9" x 5' 9" x 2'. The columns are 7' 5" in height and expand to 5' where they join the pier cap. The pier cap is 3' 7" in height and 2' wide with canted where it joins the columns.

Abutment No. 2 (east) is 32' in length and extends 2' 9" beyond the guardrails. The abutment is 7' 2" deep and 1' 6" thick. The columns are 2' x 2' and rest on 5' x 5' x 2' concrete footings. The two columns are each 7' 0" feet in length. The head of the abutment is 7' 2" deep and tapers to 2' 6" at the ends.

### **Superstructure**

The Elk Creek Bridge is a two-span reinforced concrete T-beam structure. The bridge is 79 feet long and 25 feet wide with a roadway width of 22 feet. The concrete deck is 7" thick and currently overlain with asphalt.

The bridge is supported by four reinforced concrete beams with the outer beams recessed 2' 6" under the deck. The beams are woven into the deck. Consequently, the superstructure has a total depth of 2' 11" with each beam approximately 16" wide and 2' 2" deep. The beams are spaced 4' 8" apart. The concrete deck is 6" thick.

The feature that defined the standard MDT-designed reinforced concrete bridges between 1929 and 1941 were the guardrails. The curbs and guardrails were precast units that were added to the structure once the concrete had cured on the superstructure. The curbs are 9" in height and 1' 7" wide. Each curb on this bridge has five openings that function as drains. Each drain is 3' 3" in length and 4" in height; they are spaced 1' 7" apart. The curbs are surmounted by the guardrails. They are post-and-beam type rails that are anchored at the ends by flared reinforced concrete endposts. Each endpost is 2' in height, 2' 2" in length, and 4' 6" inches wide. Each has a 1' x 1' 6" recessed panel with decorative bush hammering. There are ten guardrail posts on each side of the bridge; each is spaced 6' 9" apart. The posts are 2' 8" in height and 1' wide at the base, tapering to 11" at the top. The beams are cast with the posts. Both beams are canted at 45° angles. Each beam is 5" x 5" and spaced 2' 6" apart.

### **Material**

The contractors, John Coverdale and Elmer Johnson, utilized 131 cubic yards of concrete for the structure and fifteen tons of reinforcing steel. The cement used for the bridge likely came from the Three Forks Portland Cement Company in Trident, Montana. The Pacific Coast Steel Corporation of Seattle, Washington supplied the reinforcing steel for the bridge.<sup>14</sup>

### **B. MODIFICATIONS**

Other than occasional asphalt overlays of the concrete deck, there have been no significant modifications made to the Elk Creek Bridge since its construction in 1935. The bridge is situated at its original location and the setting of the site is intact.

### **C. OWNERSHIP AND FUTURE**

The Elk Creek Bridge is currently owned and maintained by the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT). The MDT programmed the bridge for rehabilitation in 2012. The proposed work would involve the removal of the original concrete guardrails and their replacement with non-historic rails to accommodate the widening of the bridge. The MDT has mitigated the bridge under the terms of a Programmatic Agreement (PA) that was implemented in 2007. The Elk Creek Bridge will be widened sometime after 2015.

## **IV. BIOGRAPHICAL MATERIAL**

### **John Coverdale and Oscar Johnson**

Born in Northern Ireland in 1894, John Coverdale immigrated to the United States in 1898 and settled in Washington State. By 1925, he had gone to work as a road builder based in Anaconda, Montana. He and partner Carl Eiman obtained their first Montana Highway Department contract in 1929 when they widened two bridges on U.S. Highway 10-South between Butte and Anaconda. Between 1929 and 1935, Coverdale, either working on his own or with partners, won seven contracts from the highway department. All involved building timber, reinforced concrete or steel girder structures. Partnered with Charlo, Montana contractor A. R. Elliott in 1934, Coverdale and Elliott constructed a large steel girder bridge over the Northern Pacific Railway and Jocko River west of Ravalli in Missoula County.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bridge Plans & Quantities, U.S. Public Works Highway Project No. NRH 176E, Unit 2: Augusta-Sun River Highway. Drawing no. 1238Q (18 July 1934); Bridge No. 225-0210-0153, Bridge Condition Survey.

<sup>15</sup> 1930 U.S. Census, Deer Lodge County, Montana, Population Schedule, supervisor's district no. 9, Anaconda, enumeration district (ED) 12-12, sheet 9B, dwelling 217, John M. Coverdale household; digital images, ancestry.com (<http://interactive.ancestry.com>); "John Coverdale Illness Victim," *The (Butte) Montana Standard*, 28 March 1941; "Coverdale Services in Anaconda Attended by Many," *The (Butte) Montana Standard*, 30 March 1941; MSHC, books 4-6 (1928-1936).

In September 1934, Coverdale formed a business partnership with Helena contractor Oscar Johnson. Born in Montana in 1909, Johnson was living in Augusta in 1930 and working as a farmer for his father. By 1931, he had moved to Spokane, Washington and worked as a contractor there before moving to Helena in 1936. Coverdale and Johnson obtained three highway contracts together in 1934 and 1935. In December 1934, while working on the contract for this project, Johnson was involved in a fatal accident on Montana Highway 21 between the communities of Augusta and Simms. Details of the accident are somewhat vague, but evidence suggests that Johnson and Coverdale's timekeeper, George Bardon, were drinking heavily in an Augusta saloon and decided to drive to either Simms or Sun River to continue partying. Augusta sisters Roberta and Margaret Doheny accompanied the men. While headed east toward Simms on Montana Highway 21, Johnson's car left the highway and crashed into a tree at a high rate of speed. Bardon was killed instantly, and the sisters in a Great Falls hospital shortly afterwards. Only Johnson survived the deadly crash. Several months later, the mother of the sisters filed a suit against Coverdale and Johnson alleging that Johnson was driving the car when the accident occurred. Mrs. Doheny won the lawsuit. The accident spelled the end of Coverdale and Johnson's partnership. Coverdale went to work for the Anaconda Copper Mining smelter in Anaconda shortly after completing this project. He died in March 1941. Johnson left the contracting business and worked as a farmhand near Toston, Montana.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Polk's Helena City Directory*, (Butte: R. L. Polk & Co., 1931-1935); "Three Killed as Speeding Car Hits Tree," *The (Butte) Montana Standard*, 12 December 1934; "Car Crash is Cause of Death of Three," *The (Helena, Mont.) Independent*, 12 December 1934; 1930 U.S. Census, Lewis & Clark County, Montana, Population Schedule, supervisor's district no. 5, School District 45, Augusta, enumeration district (ED) 25-55, sheet 7B, dwelling 145, Nicklas Johnson household; digital images, ancestry.com (<http://interactive.ancestry.com>); 1940 U.S. Census, Broadwater County, Montana, Population Schedule, supervisor's district no. 1, rural Toston, enumeration district (ED) 4-14, sheet 5A, dwelling 4, Oscar D. Nilson household; digital images, ancestry.com (<http://interactive.ancestry.com>).

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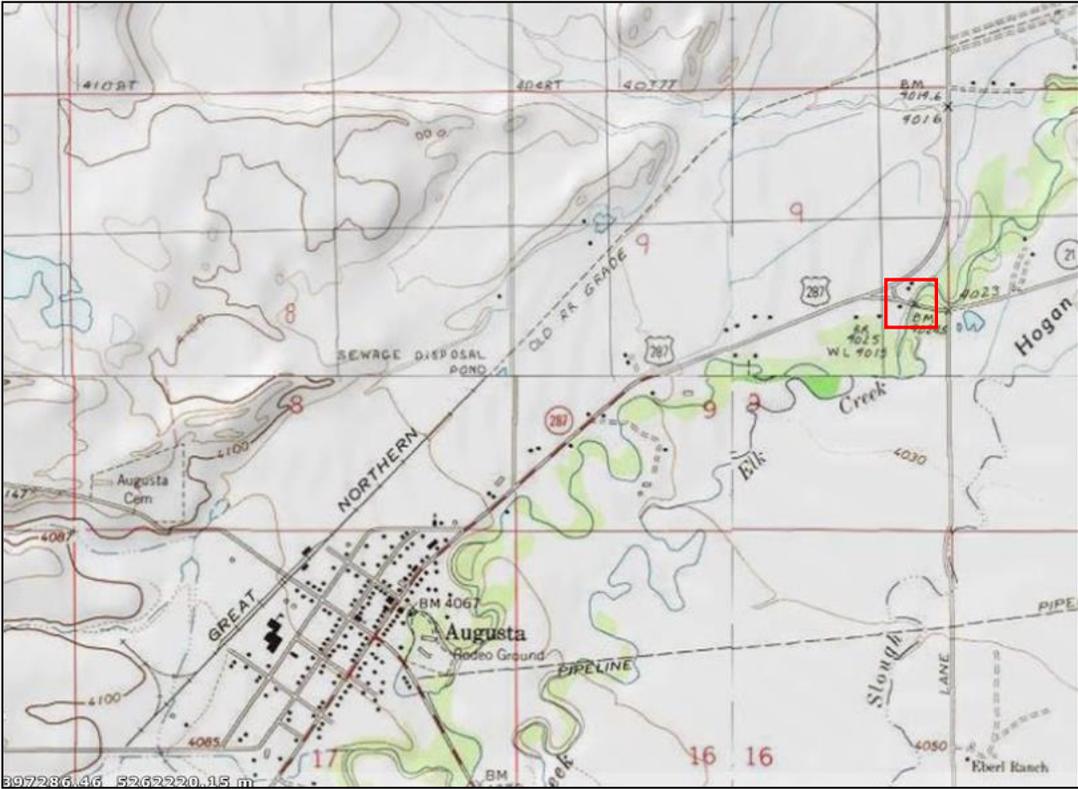
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