

1375

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
REGISTRATION FORM

RECORDED

NOV 01 1993

NATIONAL REGISTER

1. Name of Property

historic name: Bethany Lutheran Church

other name/site number:

2. Location

street & number: One quarter of a mile south of Gus Blaze Road

not for publication: n/a
vicinity: X

city/town: Oilmont

state: Montana code: MT county: Toole code: 101 zip code: 59466

3. State/Federal Agency Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1986, as amended, I hereby certify that this X nomination request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property X meets does not meet the National Register Criteria. I recommend that this property be considered significant nationally statewide X locally. (See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

Maurel Shuff Montana SHPO 10-25-93
Signature of certifying official/Title Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office
State or Federal agency or bureau

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

Signature of commenting or other official Date

State or Federal agency and bureau

4. National Park Service Certification

I, hereby certify that this property is:

- entered in the National Register see continuation sheet
- determined eligible for the National Register see continuation sheet
- determined not eligible for the National Register see continuation sheet
- removed from the National Register see continuation sheet
- other (explain): _____

Signature of the Keeper	Date of Action
<u>Raf. R. Luiguan</u>	<u>12/14/93</u>
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

5. Classification

Ownership of Property: Private	Number of Resources within Property	
	Contributing	Noncontributing
Category of Property: Building		
	<u>1</u>	___ building(s)
Number of contributing resources previously listed in the National Register: 0	<u>1</u>	___ sites
	___	___ structures
	___	___ objects
Name of related multiple property listing: n/a	<u>2</u>	___ Total

6. Function or Use

Historic Functions:

RELIGION/religious facility
FUNERARY/cemetery

Current Functions:

VACANT/not in use

7. Description

Architectural Classification:

OTHER: Gable front church
with vestibule

Materials:

foundation: concrete
walls: weatherboard
roof: wood shingle

Narrative Description

The Bethany Lutheran Church is a single-story wood frame building. In style, the church is a vernacular gable-roofed form with a vestibule front. This simple rectangular building is dominated by a large square tower on the east end. A single interior chimney of red brick is centered on the gable toward the west end of the building. The design is strictly symmetrical and simple to the point of sparseness. The building sits on a concrete foundation; the exterior is clad with clapboard and finished with cornerboards, and wooden shingles cover the roof.

On the east elevation, the facade is dominated by a large, square tower/vestibule which projects from the front. The central main entrance is marked by double, panelled wooden doors having a narrow, rectangular light across the top portion. Originally, a tri-pane transom spanned each doorway; presently, the south door transom has a single fixed pane replacement unit. Above the doors, a single double-hung window is centered on the upper level; it is currently boarded over. The tower terminates in a square steeple, skirted and capped by a pyramidal roof, crowned by a tall, knobbed finial. Each side of the steeple has a louvered vent.

On the north and south elevations, a series of three windows are symmetrically placed along the main body of the building. These windows are double hung, 1-over-1 wooden sash units; a single wooden shutter swings to cover each window. There are no openings on the west elevation.

On the interior, the church is separated into two spaces, a small vestibule which opens into a single large room for services. The church proper is separated from the vestibule by a pair of glazed wooden doors. Walls of the interior are plastered and painted. The original wooden altar remains in place.

8. Statement of Significance

Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Areas of Significance: ARCHITECTURE
EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT
ETHNIC HERITAGE

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): A, B

Period(s) of Significance: 1916 - 1943

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1925

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: unknown

Narrative Statement of Significance

Bethany Lutheran Church is a local landmark on the prairies of northcentral Montana. This modest church, established by the original homesteaders to the area, reflects distinctly the boom and bust patterns of Montana's dryland farming era, as well as the cultural longevity of traditions and beliefs brought by immigrant settlers to this country. It is also a well preserved example of the simple architecture of necessity, employed by those who moved the building here and converted it to a church. The church qualifies for the National Register of Historic Places under Criteria A & C. A religious property, significant both for its associations with local history and for its architecture, the church meets Criteria Consideration A. The church also meets Criteria Consideration B for moved buildings. The move to its present location in 1925 marks a significant date and milestone in the history of this rural Norwegian community.

Historical Significance

As early as 1869, efforts were made to recruit foreign born settlers to Montana. In Europe and at the port of entry in New York, Montana was promoted in hopes of drawing settlers. Germans and Scandinavians were strongly represented during the first waves of immigration to Montana. During the early years, nearly half of that population worked the mines, and by the 1880s, many Germans and Scandinavians were employed building the railroads.

Immigrants with specialized skills were often drawn by developing industries in the 19th century American West. Construction of large mineral smelters in Montana during the 1880s attracted skilled smelterworkers from Europe. In Great Falls an avenue of Scandinavian entry emerged as expert smeltermen, including a number from Haugesund, Norway, signed on at the Black Eagle smelter. Many of these smeltermen later took up land, and moved on to prosper as farmers and stockmen.¹

Drawn by the completion of the Great Northern Railway and railroad promotion of dryland farming in the west, homesteaders came to settle this northern country in Montana during the first decade of the 20th century. In 1910 and 1911, settlement of this area was particularly heavy, leaving a lasting imprint on the economic, social and governmental history of the area. Dry farming theories promoted by railroad boosters encouraged farming in the semi-arid Western Plains. In Montana, wheat production alone jumped 557.4% in the decade between 1909 and 1919, when total acreage planted in wheat was reported at 1,698,531.²

Booming homestead population on the Hi-Line resulted in a period of county splitting, resulting in the creation of several new counties during the 1910s, including Toole, in 1914. According to U.S. census figures for 1920 and 1925, the

See continuation sheets

¹Beltramo, "Language Profile of Montana" pp. 22-23.

²U.S. Bureau of the Census, Reports for States, 1910, 1920.

9. Major Bibliographic References

See Continuation Sheet

Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- preliminary determination of individual listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- previously listed in the National Register
- previously determined eligible by the National Register
- designated a National Historic Landmark
- recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey # _____
- recorded by Historic American Engineering Record # _____

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- State Historic Preservation Office
- Other State agency
- Federal agency
- Local government
- University
- Other -- Specify Repository:

10. Geographical Data

Acreage of Property: 3 acres

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
A	12	452500	5393440
B	12	452610	5393440
C	12	452500	5393320
D	12	452610	5393320

Verbal Boundary Description

The Bethany Lutheran Church is located in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 19, T34N, R1E. The legal description is as follows:

At a point on the Section Line 58 rods due South of the NE corner of the NE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 19, and said boundary continuing from the said point 58 rods from said corner, and running due South 24 rods on the said section line; thence due West for a distance of 20 rods; thence due North and parallel to said section line a distance of 24 rods; thence due East for a distance of 20 rods to the point of beginning; containing in all 480 square rods, or 3 acres.

Boundary Justification

These are the original boundaries as deeded to the United Lutheran Church of America by Hulda Sjulli in 1916.

11. Form Prepared By

name/title: Chere Jiusto	date: March 1993
organization: Montana SHPO	telephone: 406-444-7715
street & number: 102 Broadway	state: MT zip code: 59620
city or town: Helena	

Property Owner

name/title: North Toole County Cemetery District c/o Russell Johansen, Chairman	telephone: 406/937-2211
street & number: PO Box 247	state: MT zip code: 59482
city or town: Sunburst	

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The Bethany Lutheran Church is located on a gentle rise on a broad, open plain and is visible on the landscape for miles. Enclosed by a historic wire fence, metal-framed, wire gates open into the churchyard; a dirt path leads from one gate to the church steps. The Bethany Lutheran cemetery lies west of the church, to the rear and is encompassed by the historic fence.

The Bethany Lutheran cemetery contains approximately 25 graves, and is laid out on a rectilinear grid. The earliest graves date to 1918; the cemetery was used through World War II. Headstones of various kinds--carved stone and wood--mark the graves. Many graves are also protected with poured concrete covers to keep animals out.

Integrity

Today, the Bethany Lutheran Church and cemetery remain virtually undisturbed since the historic period; the original design and historic fabric are in a high state of preservation. Although most interior furnishings have been removed, the church building remains otherwise as it was when the doors closed about 50 years ago. Set in a vast landscape of windblown wheatlands, the setting, feeling and location of the property strongly convey the period of historic significance, and aptly demonstrate the relationship of this center of community and culture to the surrounding agricultural hinterlands.

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first available for this new county, 18.6% of Toole County's population was listed as foreign-born, white. Prominent among these settlers (second only to Canadians) were Norwegians who brought with them the customs and traditions of their homeland. Other Scandinavian groups were strongly represented as well.³ Like other ethnic groups drawn westward during the homestead era, Norwegians settled along the railway lines across the Plains states. In Montana, during the early 20th century, Norwegian immigrants came to comprise the largest foreign born farming population in the state.⁴

Settlers in this area of Toole County first worked into Dunkirk, a nearby stop on the Great Northern Railway. At the time, the town boasted 3 livery barns, 2 banks and several businesses. This shipping point was soon eclipsed by Shelby, however, which grew rapidly at the juncture of the Great Northern line and a shortline between Lethbridge, Alberta and Great Falls. Farm producers began working into Shelby, and the town quickly became an important hub of transportation and agriculture.⁵

As Norwegians settled and formed agricultural communities on the Montana Plains, they kept their traditions alive. Churches became a center of culture, binding new communities in remote locations. For Scandinavian settlers, growth of Lutheranism in the west was a critical factor in recruitment of more settlers. The national faith of the Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, and Finns, and prominent among the Germans, Lutheranism became an anchor stone in immigrant communities.

Scandinavian Lutherans were organized under the Rocky Mountain District of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. Expansion of the Lutheran Church in Montana patterned the history in mid- and western-America: rooted in Lutheran European countries, the church followed agricultural frontiers, carried along by the expansion of the western railroads. There was no centralized effort to missionize in the west; rather, churches were formed as congregations organized in remote locales, arranged for pastors to visit periodically and lead services, and finally established churches.⁶

Montana's first Lutheran congregation was established at Melville by a Norwegian Lutheran pastor in 1885; the first services held were in Norwegian.⁷ By 1900, over 30 Lutheran congregations were active in Montana; between 1910 and 1916, at the height of Montana's homesteading boom, 111 more congregations were organized, especially along the route of the newly built Great Northern Railway.⁸

The history of Bethany Lutheran Church reflects these patterns of settlement and religious tradition. Norwegian settlers in the area gathered regularly for church services as early as 1911, with Reverend Hvale, pastor from nearby Conrad, who routinely rode the circuit to this area to hold church services. On December 30, 1912, local worshipers met at the home of Hans Peterson for services, and the Bethania Norsk Evg. Luthersk Menighed was organized. Reverend H. E. Haugland was the first pastor.

³Ibid, 1920, 1925.

⁴Ibid.

⁵Johansen, Russell, Personal communication, May 3, 1993.

⁶Burlingame & Toole, A History of Montana, p. 335.

⁷Beltramo, p. 23.

⁸Burlingame & Toole, pp. 336-337.

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During the years that followed, the congregation met in homes and the local Grandview schoolhouse. Interest grew in a permanent church, and in 1916, three acres of land were donated to the United Lutheran Church of America by Hulda Sjulli of Litchville, ND.⁹ A cemetery was plotted and plans laid for building a church, but economic depression resulting from crop failures and World War I appears to have delayed construction. However, the cemetery was used; among the oldest burials in the cemetery is the grave of the Sevotski's, a couple who succumbed to the widespread flu epidemic of 1918.

On December 1, 1923, the church's Ladies Aid chapter approved plans to fund a permanent church building. Later that month, Ladies Aid purchased a building to be moved in to serve that purpose.¹⁰ The building was moved on-site during January or February of 1924. Construction plans and fundraising for finishing the church occupied the Ladies Aid through the remainder of the year. A number of men in the congregation pitched in to help finish the church and by mid 1925, construction was completed. The church and cemetery were dedicated on September 12, 1926. Community support for the church remained strong--Ladies Aid purchased such items as furnishings, fencing, "hymnaries," communion set, silverware and carpeting for the church, while local families provided labor, the organ and the collection plates.¹¹

Later history of Bethany Lutheran Church reflects the boom and bust nature of the homestead era in Montana. Farming populations in the homestead regions peaked between census years, about 1916-1917, so exact figures are not available, but a massive exodus from dryland farms occurred widely throughout Montana. This is generally attributed to a collapse of grain markets as World War I drew to a close, and to years of prolonged drought beginning in 1917.

Faced with farm failure, large numbers of homesteaders in northcentral Montana simply "pulled up stakes and left the country"¹² altogether. Others moved into nearby towns, such as Shelby and Cut Bank. Others from faltering farmsteads may well have sought employment in the oilfields, for oil was discovered in the vicinity in 1922. That first strike was made in the Kevin-Sunburst field, destined to be one of the largest in state history. However, some families clung tenaciously to the land, and over the years although population density in the agricultural regions declined, farms were consolidated into larger tracts able to support viable, more stable farming operations.

Bethany Lutheran Church was actively used for approximately 25 years, and was the only Lutheran church in the area during that time period. Through the 1920s and 1930s, as local population declined, population in nearby Shelby grew. By the 1950s, membership dwindled and services were discontinued. The decision was made in 1960 to merge the congregation with that of St. Luke's parish in Shelby.¹³ The church has been vacant ever since, although local individuals and groups have kept the building and cemetery in good repair.

⁹Deed Record #12352, Barnes County, North Dakota.

¹⁰Local lore has it that the building was originally constructed by a man who sold it to the Bethany Lutheran congregation after his fiancée died, to move onto this site.

¹¹Thompson, Leonard, Personal reminiscence of early Bethany Lutheran Church history; Minutes of meetings, Ladies Aide Ledger, December 1, 1923 to February 5, 1931.

¹²Selma Sundby Midboe, Personal Communication, May 5, 1993.

¹³Echoes From the Prairie, p. 105.

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Architectural Significance

Standing stalwart and unadorned, the Bethany Lutheran Church assumes a monumental quality in this windswept landscape of wheatfields and rolling prairies. The architecture of Bethany Lutheran Church is significant as a representative of a broad body of vernacular architecture which emerged on Montana's agricultural and homesteading frontiers. These vernacular buildings were not representative of high style nor the work of master builders; rather, they exemplify the architecture of necessity and were often the result of communal building efforts.

A simple building, Bethany Lutheran Church symbolizes the austerity and simplicity which the cultural and economic constructs of the era dictated. The steeple front, gable church form became a hallmark of fledgling communities throughout Montana. Limited by funds and scarce materials, rural Montana settlers none-the-less erected church buildings which conveyed an ecclesiastical intent, imparting that sense by encouraging the steeple and a vertical emphasis to dominate. A signal of growing community stability, churches in these young settlements symbolized a level of culture and a commitment to future.

Criteria Considerations and Period of Significance

The Bethany Lutheran Church meets the requirements for listing on the National Register in accordance with Criteria Considerations A and B. In keeping with Criteria Consideration A, the church is a religious property; however, its significance rests both with the merits of its well-preserved vernacular architecture, and the church's strong historic associations with the settlement and ethnic history of northcentral Montana.

The period of significance for the Bethany Lutheran Church has been defined here as beginning in 1916, the year the property was donated to the church and the cemetery was established. The cemetery existed here for nine years until the church was situated here. The movement of that building onto this site and subsequent construction to create the church occurred in 1925, well within the period of significance for the property. The church itself added to the values and significance of this property after that year, and achieved significance subsequent to its location on this site. In fact, that event marks a most significant date in this historic property's period of significance. For these reasons, the Bethany Lutheran Church meets the requirements for Criteria Consideration B.

Today, Bethany Lutheran Church commemorates many threads of local history. Now a place to stage community gatherings and reunite the descendants of homesteading families who settled this area, the church is one of the most lasting expressions of the time when immigrant settlers made their way to an unknown land, and sought a new and better life on the high Montana plains.

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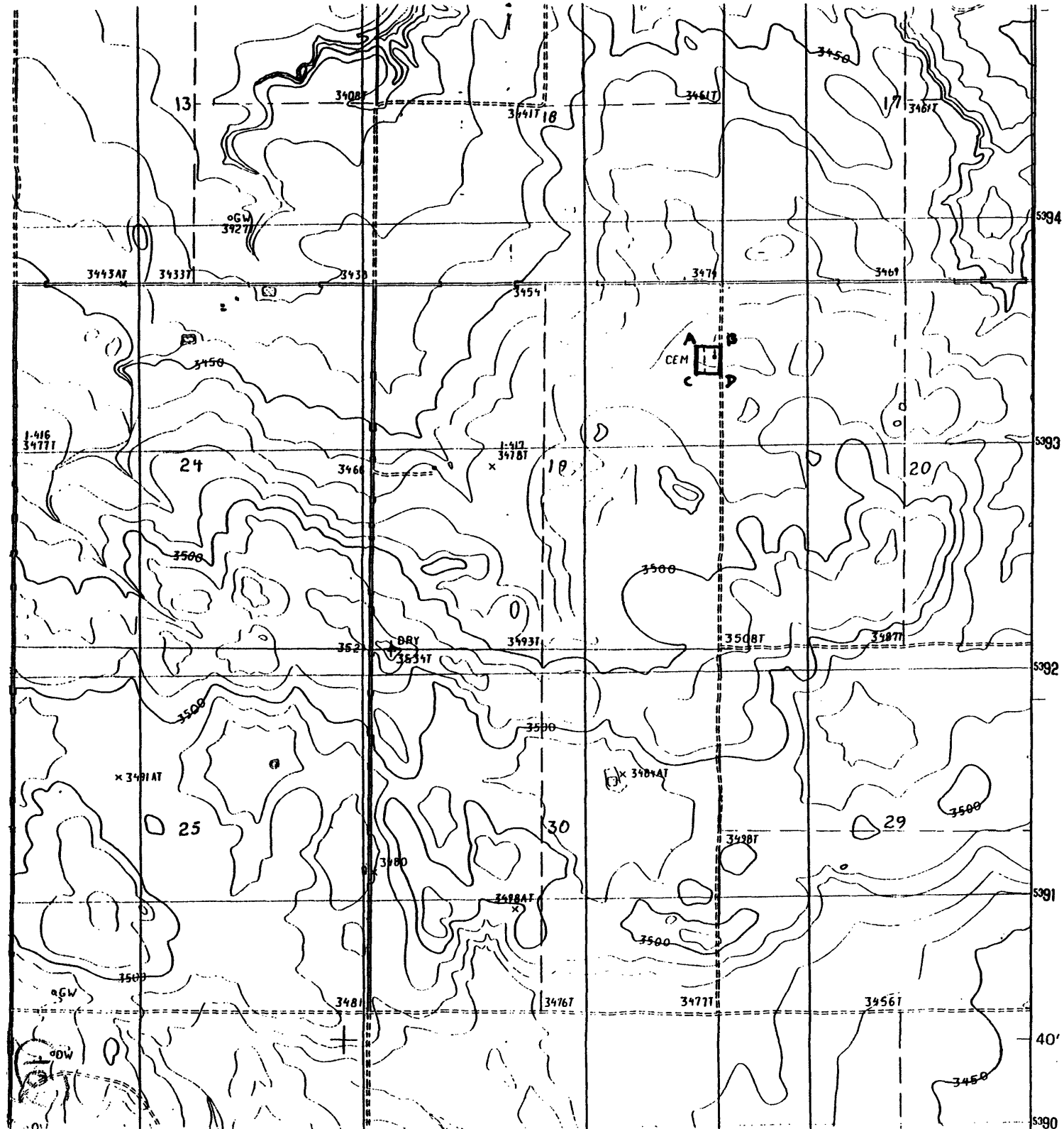
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Bethany Lutheran Church
 Oilmont vicinity
 Toole County, Montana

UTMs: All in zone 12

- A) 452500E/5393440N
- B) 452610E/5393440N
- C) 452500E/5393320N
- D) 452610E/5393320N

Located in the NE $\frac{1}{4}$, NE $\frac{1}{4}$ Sec. 19,
 T34N, R1E.