

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places  
Continuation Sheet

Section number \_\_\_\_\_ Page \_\_\_\_\_

SUPPLEMENTARY LISTING RECORD

NRIS Reference Number: 97000501

Date Listed: 6/4/97

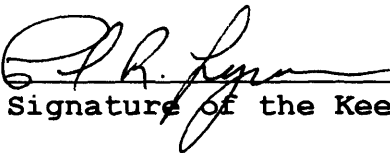
Ismay Jail  
Property Name

Custer  
County

MT  
State

N/A  
Multiple Name

-----  
This property is listed in the National Register of Historic Places in accordance with the attached nomination documentation subject to the following exceptions, exclusions, or amendments, notwithstanding the National Park Service certification included in the nomination documentation.

  
Signature of the Keeper

6/4/97  
Date of Action

=====  
Amended Items in Nomination:

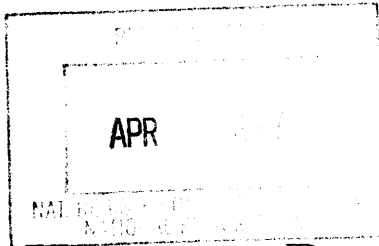
Location:  
The corrected county code is: 017-Custer County.

Significance:  
The correct areas of significance are: Government (A) and Architecture (C)

This information was confirmed with Chere Jiusto of the MT SHPO.

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DISTRIBUTION:  
National Register property file  
Nominating Authority (without nomination attachment)

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service



# NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES REGISTRATION FORM

## 1. Name of Property

historic name: Ismay Jail

other name/site number:

## 2. Location

street & number: Jailhouse Road

not for publication: n/a  
vicinity: n/a

city/town: Ismay

state: Montana      code: MT      county: Custer      code: 063      zip code: 59336

## 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 X statewide X locally.

4-22-97

Signature of certifying official/Title

Date

Montana State Historic Preservation Office

State or Federal agency or bureau

(    See continuation sheet for additional comments.)

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:

Signature of the Keeper

Date of Action

6/4/97

- 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): \_\_\_\_\_

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**5. Classification**

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

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**6. Function or Use**

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<b>Historic Functions:</b>	<b>Current Functions:</b>
Government: Correctional Facility	Vacant/Not in Use

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**7. Description**

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<b>Architectural Classification:</b>	<b>Materials:</b>
Other: Square block jail	foundation: concrete
	walls: brick
	roof: concrete
	other: n/a

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**Narrative Description**

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The Ismay Jail was completed in September 1909. It is constructed of local red brick on a concrete slab. The roof is a barrel form of poured concrete. A 12' 8" false front of brick extends above the 11' 2" concrete roof (top of the arc). The building measures 20'2" by 12'. The wall height to the eave is 8'2". The west wall has one 26" x 18" window five feet from the front and five feet from the ground. The north end has one centered window of the same size and distance from the ground. Each window is topped with a brick arch and has a brick window ledge. The windows both have 3/4" diameter bars in a grid pattern. The east wall has no windows. The door is located centered on the south wall. It measures 3'4" x 7' and is a reproduction of the original door. It is laminated wood with large metal hinges and bar latch.

The interior is divided equally into two cells with a common partition. The partition is 3"x3"x3/8" inch thick metal grate. A 2'9" wide by 7' high door of the same metal construction connects the two cells. A similar door, 3'4"x7' is on the interior of the outer wooden door.

Originally, there was a sink and porcelain toilet with a drain pipe to the outside. Only the toilet survives. At the time of construction this was considered state of the art. An Imp wood stove is in the northwest corner of the south cell. The brick chimney for it has been repaired.

The building remains virtually unchanged and all elements are original except for the wooden front door and the Imp stove which are as close as possible to original. Renovation of brick and concrete and replacement of the wooden door was done by Ray Lilienthal in 1994.

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## 8. Statement of Significance

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Applicable National Register Criteria: A, C

Areas of Significance: Government

Criteria Considerations (Exceptions): n/a

Period(s) of Significance: 1909 - 1946

Significant Person(s): n/a

Significant Dates: 1909

Cultural Affiliation: n/a

Architect/Builder: W.T. Perham

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### Narrative Statement of Significance

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The Ismay Jail is a significant building that qualifies on a local level for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, for its associations with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history. Connected with the heady period of railroad expansion and homesteading in Eastern Montana between the years 1908 and 1930, the Ismay Jail reflects settlement era efforts to establish governance and civic institutions in this tiny rural community.

Ismay, Montana is today the smallest incorporated town in Montana (with a population of twenty-two in 1996). Located in Custer County in southeastern Montana, it is about 50 miles east of the county seat of Miles City (population approximately 8500, and the only other incorporated town in the county). "Enclosed between the rimrock and the cottonwood flat on O'Fallon Creek,"<sup>1</sup> Ismay is situated on the second flood plain just northeast of O'Fallon Creek. The townsite lies in a generally flat valley, surrounded by hills. Cottonwood and ash trees create a green oasis in the spring and summer.

#### Historical Background and Significance

After the Laramie Treaty of 1868, the U.S. Army used the site that is now Ismay as a cantonment, known as Camp Custer. It was on the military route from Bismarck, North Dakota to Fort Keogh, near Miles City, Montana. The butte northeast of town where the soldiers did their target practice is still known as Bullet Butte. During the cantonment years, there were many tent establishments. Later, a tent saloon was replaced by Mr. Levitts' "Nigger Bob Saloon," featured in a well known 1906 Huffman photo. The military trail was abandoned in 1881. In the 1880's, cattle and sheep ranching were established in the region around Ismay.

Construction of the Chicago, Milwaukee and Puget Sound Railroad across Montana in 1908-09 led to the birth of many towns along its route, including Ismay. In February of 1908, the Post Office opened under the name of Burt, but this was changed to Ismay in March of the same year in honor of Milwaukee Railroad official George Peck's daughters Isabelle and Mary. The movement of people into the area significantly increased as the city was surveyed, lots were terraced, and went on sale May 19, 1908<sup>2</sup>. Buildings sprang up to service the growing population -- hotels, a school, churches, banks, doctor's office, grocery, clothing and hardware stores, bakery, meat market, restaurants, creamery, wool sheds, grain elevators and, of course, the inevitable saloons. The growing town hosted railroaders, ranchers and sheepherders, as well as homesteaders, who began to arrive in earnest in 1910.

In 1912, the Yellowstone Trail began to be used. It closely followed the Milwaukee Railroad tracks and contributed to the growth of Ismay by bringing commerce and tourists through town. Ismay was incorporated in 1916 and boasted of center intersection street lamps in 1919. The city fathers established a tourist campground promoting more local trade. It was located near the jail, across the tracks from the center of town.

Railroad promotion of dryland farming and homestead settlement drew many hopeful farmers to Montana's central and eastern plains during the 1910s. Crops were generally good from 1910 until 1918, and Ismay and the surrounding agricultural community grew steadily. However, the drought years of the late 1910s and early 1920s decimated the farming economy, and homesteaders by the droves began to abandon their lands. The town of Ismay may have absorbed some of these ex-homesteaders, for its population continued to creep up until 1928 and 1929, when it peaked at approximately 400. The economic crash of 1929 and the ensuing depression years had some effect on business decline, but the building of Highway 12, six miles south of Ismay in 1931 and 1932, was probably the most primary cause of devastation to town businesses. (This history replayed itself in other small Montana towns in the 1960s and 1970s with the building of the interstate highways.) Closing the school in 1960 was the last straw for the remaining businesses.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

## National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 8

Ismay Jail  
Custer County, Montana

Page 1

In 1909, the year the Reformed Homestead Act passed, bids were taken for the construction of a local jail. The contract was awarded to W.T. Perham for \$675, to build a jail at Ismay. He contracted as well to build a jail of similar design at Baker in neighboring Fallon County, for the same cost.<sup>3</sup> The Milwaukee Land Company surveyed and platted a town lot for the jail the following year.<sup>4</sup>

During its heyday, Ismay earned the nickname "Little Chicago" for its bustling business and wicked ways, catering to a fairly transient local population of itinerant cowboys and railroad workers. The jail was used by town law enforcement as a holding facility, mostly for drunks and honeymooners. More serious offenders were generally sent on to the county jail in Miles City.

Of the public buildings erected during Ismay's period of community building, including the school and a community hall, the town jail is the only one remaining (the others were the victims of fire, a 1923 tornado, demolition, neglect and relocation). As such its link to the town's founding history gains significance.

### Architectural Significance

In emerging communities on the frontiers of Montana, local city and county jails were among the usual array of buildings constructed to house public institutions and services. In small or early settlements, the jails which resulted were commonly small buildings of blocky masonry construction, often housing one or two cells. These square block jails are a common form built purely for the utilitarian purpose of incarcerating individuals who broke the law. Squat and sturdy, the buildings are generally of heavy masonry construction, square in mass, fortified with iron bars, and having small window openings. Many such buildings have been demolished or were replaced by larger facilities over time.

The Ismay Jail fits this profile, and is the first to be formally listed in the National Register of Historic Places. Representative of a disappearing building form which once proliferated statewide, in rural towns, it is eligible for the Register according to Criterion C.

### Conclusion

Residents of Ismay and the surrounding area have a strong sense of community and refuse to see their town die. In a public relations stroke of genius, they received national publicity when they changed the town's name to Joe, Montana, effective July 3, 1993. Although Joe Montana, the football player, has not honored them with his presence, the town was featured in the national media and they all attended a Kansas City Chief's football game in 1993. Proving that their entrepreneurial spirit is still alive, the sale of Joe, Montana merchandise has netted the town enough money to erect a new fire hall in the former Ismay. They also used these funds to restore the 1909 jail. Today it continues to be a focus of community fundraising and identity.

Though the population of Ismay (or Joe) is now only twenty-two, residents join with their neighbors in the region in wanting the town to survive. Listing the jail on the National Register is a way for them to recognize the importance of their history and of the Ismay Jail. It stands today, a visual reminder of the booming days when Ismay was growing and thriving and becoming a complete community, the hub of a vast ranching region. They might have changed Ismay's name in order to survive, but they have not forgotten the rich history of "Little Chicago," and the years when the town of Ismay was crowded with railroaders, ranchers, sheepherders, businessmen, and even tourists.

Ismay Jail  
Name of Property

Custer County, Montana  
County and State

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## 9. Major Bibliographic References

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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: History Office, City Hall, Miles City

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## 10. Geographical Data

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Acreage of Property: less than one

UTM References:	Zone	Easting	Northing
	13	515900	5149200

Legal Location (Township, Range & Section(s)): Located in the SW  $\frac{1}{4}$ , SW  $\frac{1}{4}$ , SW  $\frac{1}{4}$  of Section 27, T9N, R55E.

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### Verbal Boundary Description

The surveyed boundary for the historic Ismay Jail is depicted on the accompanying map drafted in February of 1994 by C. Madler.

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### Boundary Justification

This boundary takes in the jail and a portion of the surrounding land which lies adjacent to the railroad tracks and depot area in Ismay, Montana. The setting remains virtually unchanged since the historic period.

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## 11. Form Prepared By

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name/title: Kathy Doeden, Historic Preservation Officer  
organization: Miles City Historic Preservation Program      date: February 1996  
street & number: PO Box 1297      telephone: (406) 232-6733  
city or town: Miles City      state: MT      zip code: 59301

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### Property Owner

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name/title: Town of Ismay  
street & number: PO Box 329      telephone:  
city or town: Ismay      state: MT      zip code: 59336

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 9

Ismay Jail  
Custer County, Montana

Page 2

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Askins, Berdette Interview with Mary Haughian. March, 1984.
- Custer County Clerk and Recorder Deed Records, 1887 - 1920. Miles City.
- Custer County Records Commissioners Journals. Miles City, 1909-1911.
- Garber, Gene Interview with Kathy Doeden. January, 1996.
- Haughian, Mary (compiler) Ismay Montana. Little Chicago of the West. 1985.
- Ismay Community Club Ismay, Montana: An Opportunity for You. 1922.
- McCarter, Steve Guide to the Milwaukee Road in Montana, Montana Historical Society Press, Helena, Montana, 1992.
- Raban, Jonathan Bad Land. Pantheon Books, New York, NY, 1996.
- Security Abstract & Title Company Chain of Title, SWSW Sec. 27, T9N, R55E.

United States Department of the Interior  
National Park Service

# National Register of Historic Places Continuation Sheet

Section number 10

Page 1

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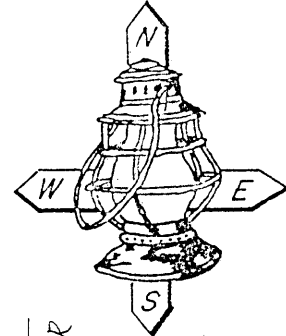
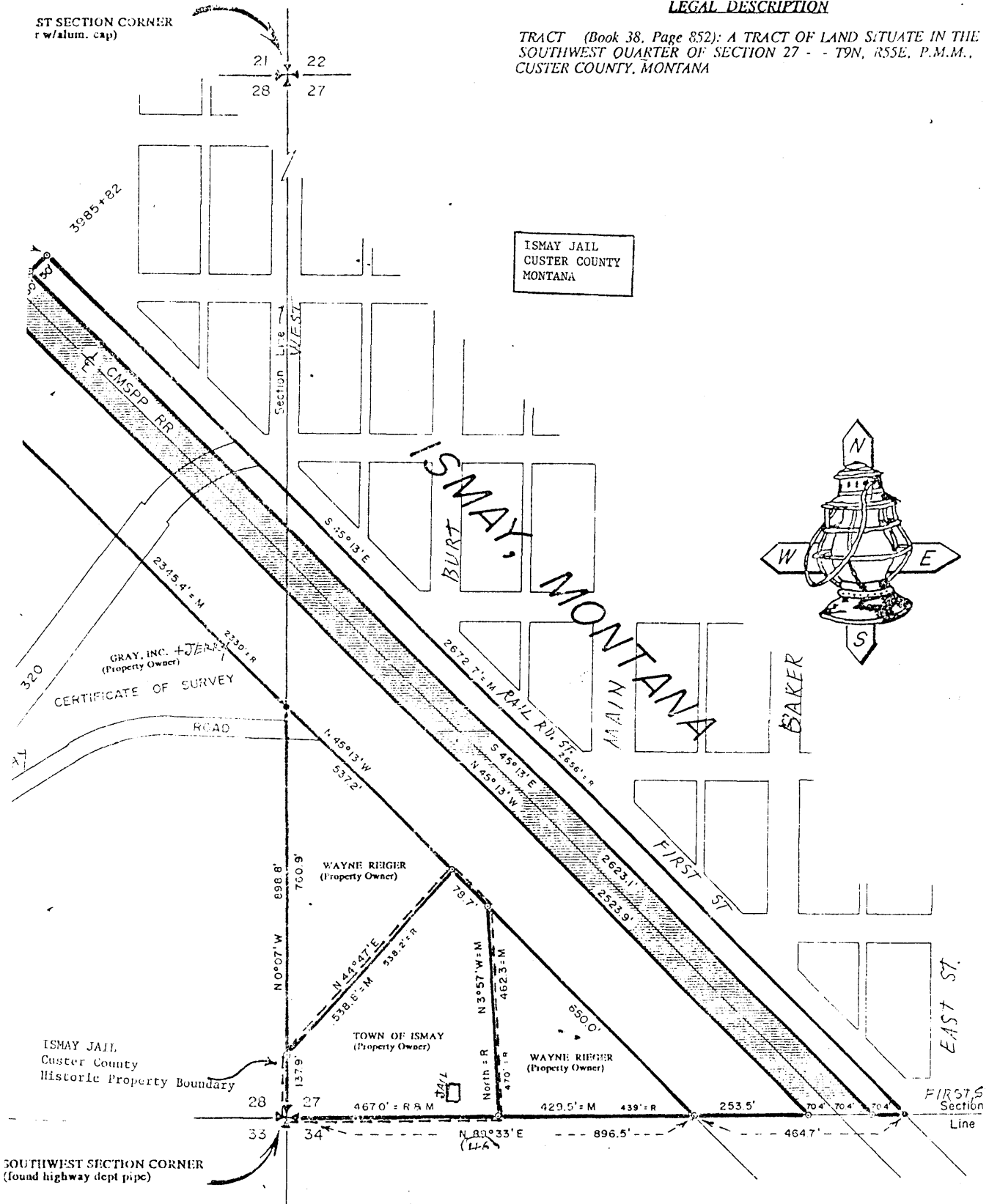
## ENDNOTES

1. Is may Community Club, 1922
2. Haughian, Mary, 1985.
3. Journals of the Custer County Commissioners, March 4, 1909.
4. Journals of the Custer County Commission, June 14, 1910.



**LEGAL DESCRIPTION**

TRACT (Book 38, Page 852): A TRACT OF LAND SITUATE IN THE SOUTHWEST QUARTER OF SECTION 27 - - T9N, R55E, P.M.M., CUSTER COUNTY, MONTANA



LEGEND	
Set Section Corner	[Symbol]
Found Section Corner	[Symbol]
Set Quarter Corner	[Symbol]
Found Quarter Corner	[Symbol]
Set Property Corner	[Symbol]
Found Monument	[Symbol]
Computed Position (no monument set)	[Symbol]
Highway R/W Monument	[Symbol]
Record Distance/Bearing	[Symbol]
Measured Distance/Bearing	[Symbol]
Computed Distance/Bearing	[Symbol]

1/4	SEC	TWP	RGE.	P.M.	COUNTY
[Symbol]	27	9N	55E	MT	Custer



DRAFTED BY	C Modler
DATE	2/09/94
HORIZ SCALE	1" = 200'
VERT SCALE	n/a
BASIS OF VERTICAL DATUM	n/a
REVISIONS	None
NOTEBOOK	Bk 36, Pg. 15

BASIS OF BEARING: CMS (N)