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THE LINCOLN HIGHWAY IN NEBRASKA: THE PIONEER TRAIL OF THE AUTOMOTIVE AGE

By Carol Ahlgren and David Anthone

The idea of the Lincoln Highway was conceived when a group of automobile manufacturers and businessmen met in 1912 and formed an association to establish the nation's first transcontinental highway. The goal of this Lincoln Highway Association was to develop a paved, marked, toll-free highway that would provide the most direct route between New York and San Francisco.

When the Lincoln Highway was officially dedicated in October of 1913, it was only a red line on paper delineated along existing roads through thirteen states. For over a decade until it became part of the federal numbered highway system, the Lincoln Highway was promoted by a network of state and local boosters called counsels. Headquartered in Detroit, the association solicited donations, sold \$5 memberships, and encouraged the construction of concrete sections called seedling miles. Cities and towns on the route were encouraged to rename streets and boulevards "Lincoln Way." Guidebooks were published which described road conditions, highway markings, towns, garages, and hotels.

The 450 miles of the road in Nebraska followed the Platte River

Valley, a major transportation route. The valley, which has been called the "Great Platte River Road," forms a relatively narrow corridor through the state where nineteenth-century routes were located: the Mormon and Oregon-California trails; the Pony Express route; and the Union Pacific mainline, the nation's first transcontinental railroad. The Lincoln Highway in Nebraska represents a twentieth-century addition to the Platte River Road; as the nation's first transcontinental highway it too was a pioneer trail.

On October 8, 1913, over 200 delegates of the Platte Valley Transcontinental Route Association met at the Merrick County courthouse in Central City. A month earlier the proposed route of the highway had been determined. Representatives at the meeting included local good roads boosters, state and local counsels, and the vice-president of the Lincoln Highway Association, A. C. Pardington. The delegates unanimously endorsed the highway, and Central City became the first city in the country to ratify the Lincoln Highway Proclamation.¹

A few weeks later the association launched its first major promotional event: the official dedication of the route. On October 31, 1913, celebrations occurred from New York to San Francisco. H. E. Fredrickson, Nebraska's counsel, described the preparations in Omaha:

I have eight large loads of old [wooden] street car tires and three barrels of good burning oil for our bonfire, 100 dollars worth of fireworks and the

mayor and others for short speeches. Most of our retail stores will be decorated in red, white, and blue.²

At eight o'clock that evening, Fredrickson lit the oil-soaked wood before a crowd of 10,000 people; simultaneously, whistles were blown throughout the city. The most impassioned speech was by Omaha businessman Rome Miller:

The Lincoln Highway is nearer the Lincoln idea than anything ever suggested. Lincoln came from the people. He belonged to the people. The Lincoln Highway will be a memorial which can be seen, employed, and enjoyed by all the people.³

From the Missouri River to the Wyoming border, Nebraska towns — Valley, Fremont, Kearney, North Platte, and Ogallala — had fireworks, parades and bonfires.

Near Kearney, farmers placed torch lights along a twenty-mile stretch into the city. In Valley Counsel William Whitmore, owner of the local stockyards, backdated his diary to include mention of the celebration. Between brief entries concerning weather and crops, Whitmore noted, "We had a big celebration, bonfire, speeches, lunch and parade."⁴ In western Nebraska Ogallala's Symphony Club performed, and speeches were given about the highway's namesake. Fredrickson sent a telegram which advised area residents to watch the sky for a reflection of Omaha's bonfire.⁵

After the 1913 celebrations, automobile enthusiasts continued to boost the road for almost fifteen years. Through its national publicity campaign, the association tried to keep the highway in the front page news. Press

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releases were sent to newspapers in towns along the route. To encourage donations, newspapers were provided with reproductions of the Lincoln Highway membership certificates sold to Woodrow Wilson and Thomas Edison.⁶

The certificates were one way to promote the highway and meet the goal of ten million dollars set by the association. Pennants, cigars, paperweights, and radiator emblems depicting the route from coast to coast were also available. In Central City local boosters claimed that they wanted to place a radiator emblem on every car in Merrick County, and paperweights on the desks of people who did not own cars. The *Central City Nonpareil* claimed:

Whether you are an auto owner or not, you are entitled to have a certificate and the road means as much to you as it does to the man with the big touring car.⁷

The route was quickly marked from coast to coast by red, white, and blue bands painted on telephone poles and metal signs with Lincoln's profile or the letter "L."⁸ After a transcontinental journey in 1915, Effie Gladding described the experience in *Across the Continent by the Lincoln Highway*. She and her traveling companions were guided by the markers:

sometimes painted on telephone poles, sometimes put up over garage doors or swinging on hotel signboards . . . We learned to love the red, white and blue and the familiar big L which told us we were on the right road.⁹

A character in Sinclair Lewis's 1924 novel *Free Air* was also guided by the road markings. Claire Boltwood, a wealthy young woman from New York City, makes a transcontinental journey. As she crossed the Great Plains she was exhilarated by the motion and space:

Nothing, it seemed, could halt her level flight across the giant land . . . guided by the friendly trail signs . . . L's on fence post and telephone [poles], magically telling the way from the Mississippi to the Pacific.¹⁰

John Romasdal of Lincoln, Nebraska, vividly remembers traveling on the highway in 1917; he was eleven years old, and it was his first automobile trip. He and his brother, in the back of the



Red, white, and blue markings on a telephone pole guided the traveler along the Lincoln Highway in Gothenburg. (NSHS-D272-01E3)

family's 1916 Buick, looked for the red, white, and blue markings. They spotted them on telephone poles, fence posts, and even rocks, and called out to let their parents know that they were on the right road.¹¹

While the route was easy to follow through rural areas, in larger towns and cities it could be more difficult. Automobile bluebooks provided assistance with directions based on local landmarks and buildings. To take the Lincoln Highway through Schuyler, Nebraska, in 1923, motorists were instructed:

At banks. Right 1 blk., then left at city hall 2 blks. 4-cor.; right. End of road at barn; left. Right-hand road; right.¹²

Travellers during the early years also passed existing landmarks that would become even more well-known on the transcontinental route. One of these, a large sign near Kearney, was located at the Watson Ranch, nicknamed the "1733 Ranch" because of its equidistant location from Boston and San Francisco. The sign was featured on the cover of an early Lincoln Highway guide book and in 1915, Effie Gladding stopped to take a picture. A woman living across the highway informed her that "almost every motor party . . . stopped to photograph the sign."¹³

The enormous barn, orchards, and fields of the 1733 Ranch are gone, as is the later 1733 dance pavilion. However, the sign remains, and the name continues with the new housing development named "1733 Estates." One mile west, the Covered Wagon tourist attraction, built in the mid-1930s, features its own "1733" sign. Additional landmarks were created by local businesses and towns that realized the potential financial benefit of the route. Hotel owners incorporated the name into their advertising or even the building itself, like Kear-

Lincoln Highway in Nebraska



About 100 Lincoln Highway Association members met in Grand Island in November 1913. (NSHS-C663-430x) . . . (right) The Lodgepole building with Lincoln Highway marker in front was constructed in 1911 as a garage, with an opera house on the upper floor. Lodgepole's Stone Hotel is at right. (NSHS-C531-01K2)





A "seedling mile" was paved in October of 1915 on the Lincoln Highway near Kearney. (NSHS-LC-Otto Klima)

ney's Midway Hotel, which soon had an electric "L" on its tower. Others such as the Lincoln Courts and several Lincoln Highway garages, were renamed or new businesses.

Seedling miles proved to be one of the association's most successful promotional devices. With cement donated by the Portland Cement Company and funds raised by local sponsors, one-mile concrete sections were constructed in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Nebraska.¹⁴ On November 3, 1915, Grand Island became the first Nebraska city to complete a seedling mile. As the association had hoped, other cities soon followed. Kearney's seedling mile was finished two weeks later. Instead of the recommended ten-foot width, it boasted pavement fifteen feet wide, located on Kearney's main boulevard (renamed the "Lincoln

Way"). One of the most remarkable seedling miles was near Fremont where not one but six miles of concrete highway were built as a result of a \$5,000 contribution by George Wolz, the city's Lincoln Highway counsel. The six-mile stretch was not only the longest seedling "mile" in Nebraska, it was the longest in the country.¹⁵

The seedling miles were only a small portion of the route; in Nebraska hundreds of miles were surfaced only with dirt or gravel. By 1929 only sixty out of 450 miles were hard-surfaced.¹⁶ John Romsdal recalled his auto travels through western Nebraska in 1917:

The road eventually got to be no more than a track. You wouldn't have considered it a highway ... you just had to do like the pioneers — follow a trail.¹⁷

Following the trail was not difficult once the highway had been marked and guidebooks were available. But as Anton Kracl, a ninety-nine-year-old man who owned a garage on the highway near Rogers, Nebraska, said, the problem for early travelers was the road itself.¹⁸ In the spring of 1919 a

Nebraskan who had traveled from Grand Island to Omaha in his Cadillac sedan, found the road so bad that he wrote to the governor:

Although I have travelled from here to California twice and all over the Middle West by automobile, I have never in my seventeen years experience with automobiles tackled such impassible road conditions as we have in the state of Nebraska on the Lincoln Highway. This road ought to be named the Lincoln No-way.¹⁹

Early motorists also had to find a place to spend the night; often they pitched tents and cooked outdoors. For some, this was an economical way to travel; for many, however, it was part of the adventure. Warren Belasco in *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel*, referred to the early decade of automobile travel — 1910 to 1920 — as the "gypsy years," when motorists pitched tents, carried camping equipment, and slept outdoors.²⁰ In 1915 *Travel* magazine ran a series which described the Lincoln Highway from coast to coast. Writer Norman Fuessle promised that travelers would find "a superb, swift trail, gleaming before them, the world's greatest open road."

Lincoln Highway in Nebraska

Part of the Lincoln Highway in Nebraska, 1917. (NSHS-A939-57)
(below) The Lincoln Highway in Nebraska. Map by Dell Darling.

He also claimed that camping could prove to be one of the "chief attractions" for travelers on the Lincoln Highway, then modified his statement.

Camping equipment, cooking utensils, and water become necessary factors, once the tourist leaves Omaha, for the remainder of the journey west.²¹

However, travelers like Effie Gladding did not find that sleeping or even cooking outdoors was required. But she seemed to have regretted that she had not "gypsied" across the country when she recommended:

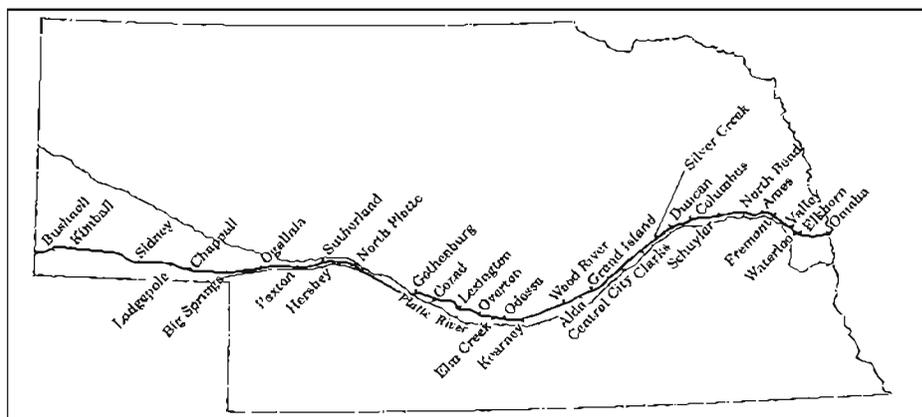
If I were crossing the Lincoln Highway again I should take with me a spirit lamp, a little sauce pan, some boxes of biscuits, some excellent tea, some cocoa and other supplies. Not that this is a necessity. But it would be very pleasant to have a luncheon or a cup of afternoon tea al fresco, now and then.²²

For those who chose not to camp, existing hotels in cities and larger towns along the route were the only accommodations. However, new ones soon developed, such as the "tourist home," a private residence in which rooms were rented to travelers. Other accommodations included the auto-camp or tourist camp which soon developed into the cabin camp. In Nebraska alone, by about 1930 almost every town on a numbered highway advertised at least one tourist or cabin camp.

Initially an area for pitching tents, these camps soon included a group or row of simple frame, one-room cabins. A tourist who stayed at one in the mid-1920s at Lexington, described it by postcard:

Dear Mother: This is a sample of the camping grounds we find Only some places charge 50 cents. We have traveled close to 150 miles so far today We are so dirty. It has been so warm and dusty. The tiny black flies are as bad as the mosquitoes.²³

In Ogallala there were at least four cabin camps by the late 1920s. Ed Launer of North Platte remembers



them because he and his parents lived in one from 1928 to 1929. "We were Depression people," he said, "[and] that was the only place we could afford to live . . . we had no place else to go." The Launers' temporary home included a space for the car, some furniture, and a stove.²⁴

Although it had been an original goal of the Lincoln Highway Association to provide the most direct route across the country, the road varied from state to state. In Nebraska, the original highway changed several times particularly in the western part of the state, as railroad rights-of-way were leased or purchased, and as state and federal highway funds became avail-

able. The most direct route was parallel to the Union Pacific mainline, along the Platte River. Because of railroad ownership of the corridor, in many places the original highway jogged along section lines, sometimes five or six miles north or south of the tracks, then turned at right angles to continue along section lines.

The association's official history claimed that Nebraska had obtained the longest realignment in the nation through an agreement with the Union Pacific in 1922. Credit was given to Counsel William Whitmore of Valley who had influence with the Union Pacific due to his stockyard operation.²⁵ However, complete realignment

The Midway Hotel

KEARNEY, NEBRASKA

ON LINCOLN HIGHWAY WHERE YOU SEE THE
ELECTRIC "L" SIGN IN THE TOWER

One hundred rooms with or without bath. AMERICAN plan
with everything entirely modern. Nice day's run from Omaha.

Midway Garage in Connection with Hotel.

RATES: \$2.00, \$2.50, \$3.00

L. A. DENISON, Prop.

J. L. CHAPMAN'S GARAGE

KEARNEY, NEBRASKA

The best of service for Lincoln Highway Tourists.

Supplies and Accessories

We are building our business by satisfying our customers.

From The Complete Official Road
Guide of the Lincoln Highway
(1916).

was a gradual process that occurred county by county and required the construction of completely new sections of highway.

Walt Meier, former Nebraska Department of Roads engineer, stated that the most significant road improvements in the state's history occurred between 1932 and 1940. In 1930 Meier drove across Nebraska on the Lincoln Highway, by then renamed Route 30. He recalled that there were still Lincoln Highway signs and markers in towns and in rural areas. In western Nebraska the road still followed section lines and crossed and recrossed the Union Pacific Railroad tracks.²⁶

The changes in the route with the greatest impact occurred when towns were bypassed. Sometime in the mid-1920s the route south of Big Springs, Nebraska, and Julesburg, Colorado, was abandoned. The greatest change occurred in 1930, when Omaha, Nebraska's largest city, was bypassed. At Blair, a small town on the Missouri River, the Abraham Lincoln Memorial Bridge was completed in the summer of 1930; unlike the Omaha bridge, it was toll-free.

Omaha residents were outraged by the rerouting, or at least by the way it was conducted. In July 1930 during the middle of the night, several crews of workers removed the Lincoln Highway signs from Omaha and placed them

along the new route. An article in the Blair *Enterprise* claimed that Omaha could no longer "hog" the Lincoln Highway. "Come on, Omaha," another article gloated, "if you are going to be a suburb of Blair, do it gracefully."²⁷

The Lincoln Highway was called the "Main Street of the Nation" by its early promoters, but to farmers and ranchers along the route, it was simply the road to town. The highway was literally in their front yard; farm families watched the traffic and had memorable encounters with motorists. A farmer near Cozad who lived near a mud hole was suspected of "watering it" if it got too dry.²⁸

Florene Betts, who was raised on a ranch in western Nebraska, recalled meeting tourists while she herded cattle across the road:

Many times as a child I moved 20 to 30 registered Herford [sic] cattle from one pasture to another across the highway. My, that was a daring thing to do! . . . Many times an eastern tourist would stop me to take a picture of the "first Indian" then go happily off not realizing that they had made my day as I only wished I was an Indian.²⁹

Hilda Vasey, ninety years old, remembers the concrete marker that was placed at the edge of their farm on the highway near Cozad in the late 1920s.³⁰ As one of the last publicity efforts of the Lincoln Highway Association, Boy Scouts throughout the country dug holes and placed the markers on September 1, 1928.³¹ Although it had been renamed Route 30 two years earlier in 1926, the concrete markers were intended to be a permanent memorial to the highway. As guide posts, they were less visible than stripes painted on telephone poles or

buildings. Despite being anchored in concrete, markers were often removed through road widening or theft. In Nebraska many were thrown in ditches and buried, given away, relocated in city parks, or used by farmers as extra weight for disking fields.

Central City, Nebraska, had been the first city to ratify the Lincoln Highway Proclamation. Ironically, because of a constitution that prohibits excessive debt, construction of the highway had been gradual and Nebraska had the distinction of being the state where the final section was paved. In early November 1935 over 3,000 people gathered on Route 30 a few miles west of North Platte. In reference to the transcontinental railroad's Golden Spike, a golden ribbon was cut, signifying the completion of paving on U.S. Route 30. A caravan along the highway included automobiles, covered wagons pulled by oxen, horse-drawn buggies, a stagecoach, and a "plainsman" on horseback. President Franklin Roosevelt sent a telegram:

Completion of the last link of pavement on United States Route 30 is an event of such importance that I am happy to send my congratulations. The perilous trail of the pioneers is at last transformed . . . into a coast-to-coast highway.³²

The highway that began as a red line on paper was finished. An original goal of the Lincoln Highway Association was to provide the most direct route across the country. In Nebraska, this occurred in the 1970s when Interstate 80 was completed. I-80 is a new route that did not obliterate its predecessors; through most of the state it parallels the Union Pacific mainline, Route 30,

Lincoln Highway in Nebraska

and the old Lincoln Highway. Today the adventurous and determined traveller can still find the old road; a few markers and other clues remain. A one-mile, brick-paved section near Elkhorn was listed on the National Register and protected by resolution of the Douglas County Board.³³ And on October 31, 1992, the seventy-ninth anniversary of the route's dedication, a new Lincoln Highway Association was formed to promote the highway through a network of state and local representatives.

NOTES

¹Central City Nonpareil, Oct. 9, 1913.

²Ibid., Nov. 3, 1913.

³Ibid.

⁴William Gunn Whitmore, "Journals 1876-1914," unpublished, William Gunn Whitmore Papers, MS3742, State Archives, Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁵Keith County News-Ogallala Nov. 6, 1913.

⁶Lincoln Highway Association, *The Lincoln Highway: The Story of a Crusade That Made Transportation History* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company), 92.

⁷Central City Nonpareil, Dec. 4, 1913.

⁸Nebraska had about twenty-five "name" highways in the early automobile age. For a partial list with major towns along routes and distinctive highway signs and markings, see "Marking State Highways for Motorists," the May 26, 1982, "Out of Old Nebraska" newspaper column distributed to state newspapers by the Nebraska State Historical Society.

⁹Effie Price Gladding, *Across the Continent by the Lincoln Highway* (New York: Bretanos, 1915), 111.

¹⁰Sinclair Lewis, *Free Air* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1924), 50.

¹¹John Romsdal, interview by Carol Ahlgren, Lincoln, Nebr., Sept. 24, 1989.

¹²Official Automobile Blue Book: *Standard Touring Guide of America*, vol. 4 (Chicago: Automobile Blue Book Company, 1923), 236.

¹³Gladding, *Across the Continent*, 195-96.

¹⁴Lincoln Highway Association, *The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway* (Detroit: Lincoln Highway Association, 1916), 39.

¹⁵Association, *Story of a Crusade*, 132-35.

¹⁶"Miscellaneous Data, Highway 30" (Lincoln: Nebraska Department of Roads, 1935).

¹⁷Romsdal interview.

¹⁸Anton Kracl, interview by authors, Rogers, Nebr., Oct. 1, 1989.

¹⁹Letter to Nebraska Governor Charles Bryan, July 21, 1924. Files of Nebraska Department of Roads, Lincoln.

²⁰Warren James Belasco, *Americans on the Road: From Autocamp to Motel, 1910-1945* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1979), 3-5.

²¹Newton A. Fuessle, "The Lincoln Highway - A National Road," *Travel 24* (Mar. 1915):30-32.

²²Gladding, *Across the Continent*, 260.

²³Postcard, ca. 1925, in David Anthone collection.

²⁴Ed Launer, interview by authors, North Platte, Nebr., Nov. 12, 1989.

²⁵Association, *Story of a Crusade*, 240.

²⁶Walter Meier, interview by authors, Lincoln, Nebr., Sept. 29, 1989.

²⁷*The Enterprise* (Blair), July 3, 24, 1930.

²⁸Roger Menke, interview by authors, Cozad, Nebr., Nov. 11, 1989.

²⁹Florene Betts to authors, Hershey, Nebr., Oct. 1, 1989.

³⁰Hilda Vasey, interview by authors, Cozad, Nebr., Nov. 10, 1989; Apr. 6, 1990.

³¹Association, *Story of a Crusade*, 220-21.

³²*North Platte Daily Telegram*, Nov. 6, 1935.

³³Historic Places, The National Register for Nebraska," *Nebraska History 70* (Spring 1989):37.

Lincoln Highway route from east to west through Sidney. (NSHS-W724.1:2)

