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1,733 Miles from Where? Kearney, Nebraska's 1733 Identity

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Article Summary: Kearney has long promoted itself as the "Midway City" located halfway between the coasts, exactly 1,733 miles from both Boston and San Francisco. That mileage, however, long appeared to match no known historical route—until now.

Cataloging Information:

Place Names: Kearney "(Midway City"), Nebraska; San Francisco, California; Boston, Massachusetts; New York City, New York

Keywords: Lincoln Highway, 1733 Ranch (originally the Watson Ranch), railroad timetables, Midway Hotel, great circle distance

Photographs / Images: Fig. 1: postcard photo of the barn at the 1733 Ranch; Fig. 2: Lincoln Highway directional sign erected near the 1733 Ranch, early 1920s; Fig. 3: Midway Hotel stationery, 1889, showing the 1733 measurement; Fig. 4: front cover of a 1919 central Nebraska tourist brochure and map; Fig. 5: air mail envelope commemorating the dedication of the Kearney airport; Fig. 6: newspaper advertisement showing a recent promotional use of the 1733 measurement

Tables: Kearney to San Francisco, Kearney to Boston



1,733 Miles from Where?

Kearney, Nebraska's 1733 Identity

BY JOHN T. BAUER



n June 30, 2013, the Lincoln Highway Association, along with the rest of America, celebrated the 100th anniversary of the country's first booster highway. Although the festivities started nearly a week earlier and continued in cities along the Lincoln Highway route, nowhere were they larger than in Kearney, Nebraska. On June 21 twin automobile tours departed San Francisco, at the western terminus of the highway, and New York City, on the eastern terminus, and headed for Kearney. More than twelve thousand people crowded downtown Kearney to witness their arrival nine days later.¹

The association chose Kearney because the city has long been regarded as the highway's approximate midpoint. According to the 1915 Lincoln Highway guide, Kearney measured 1,752 miles from San Francisco and 1,632 miles from New York City, which placed the midpoint of the highway sixty miles west of town.² However, the centennial celebration promoters described Kearney's location not with mileages from the official guide, but by referring to 1,733 miles, a mysterious measurement that places Kearney exactly halfway across the continent and which is believed to be fact by many of Kearney's residents. A centennial brochure Figure 1: Postcard photo of the barn at the 1733 Ranch. Courtesy of the Trails and Rails Museum, Buffalo County Historical Society



Figure 2: Photo from the early 1920s showing the Lincoln Highway directional sign erected near the 1733 Ranch. Courtesy of Bob Puschendorf explains, "Why Kearney? Kearney is known for the 1733 Ranch, located 1733 miles from Frisco and 1733 miles from Boston, and 50 miles from the 100th Meridian. Razed in the 1930s, the 1733 Ranch's barn at one time was the world's largest, a block long and 3-stories tall."³

Indeed, the barn was a commanding presence at the ranch (see fig. 1). Built by H. D. Watson and originally named the Watson Ranch, the operation was broken up in 1917 and new owners renamed it the 1733 Ranch because of its presumed location 1,733 miles from either coast adjacent to the Lincoln Highway.⁴ A Lincoln Highway directional sign was even erected near the ranch to inform travelers of the ranch's curious location (see fig. 2).

For many years I have been fascinated with this measurement of 1,733 miles. Somehow, in my mind, the placement of Kearney exactly equidistant between San Francisco and Boston seems improbable. But, is it? Perhaps Kearney really is 1,733 miles from those two cities. After all, distance is measured along a route or path, so by changing the route or path, one can change the distance. Thus Kearney could arguably be equidistant between thousands of pairs of cities so long as a person chose the right route or path. But if this is so, what route or path provides the 1,733-mile measurement? Who measured it, and when and how was it measured? They certainly did not use the Global Positioning System (GPS). Why does the idea continue to be a part of Kearney's identity even now in 2015?

The Origin of 1733

When I first considered the question, I found myself staring at a map of the United States. Could the mileage from Kearney to the other two cities have been measured by great circle distance, which is derived from a straight line between two points on the globe? Kearney is near the center of the country, there is no question about that. But when the three cities are located on a blank map, Kearney does not appear to be equidistant between San Francisco and Boston. Measuring from Union Square in San Francisco and from Boston Common in Boston to Central Avenue and U.S. Highway 30 in Kearney, the great circle distance between San Francisco and Kearney is 1,263 miles and between Kearney and Boston it is 1,486 miles. So clearly 1,733 miles is not a measurement by great circle distance. It must be associated with something else.

What about the Lincoln Highway? I already mentioned that 1733 was used to promote the highway, so perhaps the measurement is an early highway distance. This might be plausible between San Francisco and Kearney. According to the 1915 Lincoln Highway guide, Kearney was 1,752 miles from San Francisco via the early road alignment.⁵ But going east, this explanation breaks down because the Lincoln Highway did not go to Boston! It went to New York City. The 1915 guide lists the Kearney to New York distance as 1,632 miles. So 1733 must not have been taken from the Lincoln Highway.

At this point I decided to find out when the 1733 measurement first entered the public's consciousness. How old is this idea? When did it originate? During Kearney's early years, the city was known as "Midway City," a nickname which is nearly as old as the city itself. Kearney acquired it because early residents recognized the city's location midway between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. "Midway City" was even suggested in 1872 as a possible name for the infant town.⁶ For this reason, early prominent businesses

such as the Midway Land Company and the Midway Hotel used the word in their names.

I searched for 1733 in two prominent period newspapers. The Kearney Hub archive is available online at the Kearney Public Library website, and the Omaha Daily Bee archive is available through the Library of Congress's website. After eliminating all the references to the date 1733, I found a Daily Bee article from April 22, 1889, which mentions Kearney's midway location and the 1733 measurement. The article tells of a recent trip to Kearney by George Rudio, a traveling soap salesman. During his visit, Mr. Rudio stayed at the Midway Hotel, and was puzzled "by the fact that the Midway has signs on it '1733 miles to Boston' and '1733 miles to San Francisco."7 In the Kearney Hub, I found an article from August 11, 1890. At the top of the column is a short poem: "All hail: thrice welcome, Wolverines! Alas! How brief your stay; Farewell! And now 'mid other scenes God speed your homeward way."8 Wolverines? Well, the paragraph at the bottom of the column explains:

When our Michigan guests alighted from their Pullmans this morning they were just 1733 miles east of San Francisco. When they re-embarked in the afternoon they were exactly 1733 miles west of Boston. This may be considered a remarkable coincidence, but it isn't. It is simply a distinction of geographical location that no other city in the world enjoys.

An article from August 9, two days earlier, tells about the Michigan guests.¹⁰ A group of newspaper editors and their companions from the Michigan Press Association visited Kearney on Monday, August 11, 1890, as part of a western tour. They arrived in the city via the Union Pacific Railroad and stayed only a few hours.

These two newspaper articles, the *Omaha Daily Bee* one from 1889 and the *Kearney Hub* one from 1890, were the earliest that I found mentioning 1,733 miles. I believe that together they record the approximate origin of the 1,733 measurement. Apparently, someone associated with the Midway Hotel figured out the measurement sometime prior to the spring of 1889.

Measuring 1,733 Miles

So 1733 has a specific origin and is associated with the railroad, but how did its discoverer at the Midway Hotel measure that many miles? And again, is the mileage really accurate? To answer those questions, I turned to old railroad timetables. In 1890 railroads were the most advanced form

TABLE 1 - Kearney to San Francisco

Union Pacific Railroad		
Kearney, NE to Ogden, UT	838 miles	36 hrs, 57 min
Central Pacific Railroad		
Ogden, UT to San Francisco, CA	895 miles	42 hrs, 10 min
Total	1.733 miles	79 hrs. 7 min

Kearney to Boston

Union Pacific Railroad		
Kearney, NE to Omaha, NE	196 miles	8 hrs, 53 min
Chicago, Burlington, Quincy Railroad		
Omaha, NE to Chicago, IL	502 miles	21 hrs, 25 min
Michigan Central Railroad		
Chicago, IL to Buffalo, NY	536 miles	19 hrs, 25 min
New York Central & Hudson Railroad		
Buffalo, NY to Albany, NY	298 miles	13 hrs, 55 min
Boston & Albany Railroad		
Albany, NY to Boston, MA	201 miles	8 hrs, 0 min
Total	1,733 miles	71 hrs, 38 min

of transportation and everyone who rode them, including the Michigan Press visitors, understood how to read a railroad timetable. These large tables showed the stops along the route, the scheduled times for these stops, and the mileage between them. Typically timetables were distributed by railroad companies as small folded pamphlets that could easily fit in a vest pocket. Publishing companies such as Rand McNally, however, gathered timetable information for railroads across the country and issued them as big, thick, railway travelers' guides. On Google Books I found a Rand McNally railroad guide from 1886 and studied its timetables, looking for a connection to the 1,733 measurement.¹¹

Table 1 summarizes what I found. According to the railroad guide timetables, a traveler departing Kearney for San Francisco would first ride the Union Pacific Railroad to Ogden, Utah, a distance of 838 miles. Then he would continue to San Francisco on the Central Pacific Railroad, a distance of 895 miles. The sum of those two distances equals 1,733 miles. So the 1,733 measurement from Kearney to San Francisco is real.

The mileage between Kearney and San Francisco was easy to determine from the railway guides because the Union Pacific and Central Pacific systems formed the obvious shortest route between the two cities. To the east, however, I found it more difficult because there were many more railroads. After much trial and error, this is what I found. Heading east, a traveler departing Kearney for Figure 3: Midway Hotel stationery from 1889 showing the 1733 measurement. Courtesy of the David Cole Collection, Santa Maria, California

Boston would first ride the Union Pacific Railroad to Omaha, a distance of 196 miles. At Omaha, he would transfer to the Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy Railroad, which would take him to Chicago. That is 502 miles. At Chicago, the Michigan Central Railroad would carry the passenger through southern Michigan and southern Ontario to Buffalo, New York, 536 miles. The New York Central and Hudson Railroad would connect Buffalo with Albany, New York, a distance of 298 miles. The final leg would be from Albany to Boston, 201 miles, on the Boston and Albany Railroad. The sum of those distances equals 1,733 miles. So a claimed distance or measurement that today seems mysterious and far-fetched was at one point actually true, if one traveled on circa-1886 railroads. Make special note of the total time in Table 1. It took nearly 150 hours (almost six and one half

days) to cross the United States in 1886. Today this seems painfully slow (an average of twenty-three miles per hour), but compared to the alternatives of the period, it was a dream come true.

Promotion

In its August 11, 1890 article, the *Hub* wrote that the 1,733 measurement "may be considered a remarkable coincidence, but it isn't. It is simply a distinction of geographical location that no other city in the world enjoys."¹² Although I disagree and contend that the measurement was a remarkable coincidence (and is now irrelevant), back in the booming booster environment of 1890s Nebraska, the curiosity was seen as perfect propaganda. Kearney was in the midst of its greatest period of growth and civic pride was high.¹³ Business and city leaders understood the advantages



that came with their location at the junction of two major railroads. Shortly after its discovery, they were using 1733 for self-promotion.

Not only did the Midway Hotel place signs in its windows promoting the measurement, it used it prominently in the company's identity. An 1889 copy of the hotel's envelope and letterhead shows an engraving of the hotel with the words "1733 miles from Boston 1733 from San Francisco" written below on ribbons (see fig. 3).¹⁴ The *Kearney Hub* also did its part to propel the promotional bandwagon. On October 4, 1890, the words "Boston 1733 miles. KEARNEY. 'Frisco 1733 miles" appeared in a box at the top of one of the serial fiction stories popular in nineteenth-century newspapers.¹⁵ Kearney and the 1733 idea had nothing to do with the story. The box was placed there simply to fill column space and advertise the "geographical distinction." A few days later, on October 10, the Hub ran another article containing a 1733 promotion. This time the paper described a new logo design that had been purchased by the Midway Land Company:

At the top in ornamental letters is the name of the company. Below the words 'Kearney, Neb.' are two railroad trains facing each other. Under one is 'San Francisco, 1733 miles' and under the other 'Boston, 1733 miles.' Between the two, a small hub represents Kearney's position.¹⁶

It is easy to see why, in 1889 and 1890, businesses were eager to incorporate the 1,733 measurement in their materials. After all, it served to "prove" what people had long suspected about the "Midway City's" location.

As Nebraska entered the automobile age in the early twentieth century, the 1,733 measurement became associated with the Lincoln Highway. City leaders understood that the city's location along the nation's first transcontinental highway brought advantages similar to those of the railroads of twenty-five years earlier. Thus, the curious "geographical distinction" of Kearney's location was simply transferred from one era of transportation to another without ever questioning whether or not the 1,733 measurement referred to the Lincoln Highway. A second look at the 1733 Ranch's directional sign illustrates this (see fig. 2). The ranch was renamed 1733 Ranch in 1917, so the photograph was taken after that date. Notice that San Francisco and Boston are both indicated, as are two Lincoln Highway blazes, clearly giving the impression that motorists could reach either city after 1.733 miles of travel.



A 1919 road map and tourist brochure of central Nebraska illustrates this further and shows how early automobile tourism promoters co-opted the "geographical distinction" for their own use (see fig. 4). At the top of the map's front cover are the words "Frisco 1733 Boston." Here, the name Kearney is omitted, in a sense making the 1,733 measurement representative of central Nebraska in general. The inside, however, contains a very telling explanation:

Kearney acquired its *nome de plume* as the Midway City by virtue of its geographical location as related to the Lincoln Highway. The city is 1733 miles from Boston and an equal distance from San Francisco, along the route of the National John T. Bauer is an associate professor of Geography at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. His article "The Gliddenites are Coming! Nebraska and the 1909 Glidden Tour" appeared in the Fall 2012 issue of Nebraska History.

Figure 4: The front cover of a 1919 central Nebraska tourist brochure and map. Courtesy of the David Cole Collection, Santa Maria, California

Paul Fern, KEARNEY BRASKA UNICIPAL AIRPORT TO TO 3803 Floral Ave.. San Francisco miles Boston LEDICATED BY OF KEARNEY Norwood, Ohio. ANT CHAMEER OF COMMERCE JUNE 2 7.

Figure 5: 1930 air mail envelope commemorating the dedication of the Kearney airport. Author's collection road. To tourists from coast to coast, Kearney is consequently known as the Midway City or the City Beautiful, having been referred to in the above manner on scores of occasions by writers of national fame.¹⁷

Here, the brochure writer wrongly attributes the 1,733 measurement and the nickname "Midway City" to the Lincoln Highway.

The misappropriation of the 1,733 measurement even extended to air travel. Figure 5 shows the front of an airmail envelope sent from Kearney on June 27, 1930. The red stamp commemorates the dedication of the Kearney municipal airport on that date. Notice that Kearney's location is shown as 1,733 miles equidistant from Boston and San Francisco. By this time, the 1,733 measurement had become such a powerful promotional tool and such an accepted part of Kearney's identity that Nebraskans never questioned whether or not it was actually true. The "geographical distinction" remained part of Kearney's identity even as the transportation technology that connected the city to distant places evolved.

Conclusion

The 1,733 measurement continues to live-on in the twenty-first century. It remains a strong part

of Kearney's identity and many residents regard the measurement as fact, even though they are unsure about its origins. I learned about it on only my second visit to Kearney. Shortly after accepting a faculty position at the University of Nebraska at Kearney in 2006, my wife and I returned to Kearney to look for housing. On our visit, we stayed with a friend who lives west of the city in the 1733 Estates. (Part of the old 1733 Ranch was eventually developed into a large-lot subdivision.) Our friend told us about the history and significance of 1733, and much of it I now know is based on misconceptions. The numbers 1733 are so well-known among Kearney residents that a local shoe store occasionally runs 17.33 percent-off sales (see fig. 6).¹⁸ If a customer did not know the significance of 1733, he or she would consider 17.33 percent as an odd discount. But I regard it as a clever, lighthearted acknowledgement of local history.

Among Kearney boosters and promoters, however, the 1733 "geographical distinction" is quite serious business and remains alive and true as ever, even if it continues to perpetuate misconceptions. I will use two recent examples to conclude this article. In 2013 to commemorate the centennial of the Lincoln Highway, the *Kearney Hub* published an entertaining and attractive photograph book about Lincoln Highway landscapes. The book traces the highway, county by county, across the state. In the introduction to the Buffalo County section, the author writes "One of the best known attractions from Kearney's past, the 1733 Ranch, was so named because Kearney is 1,733 miles from both the east and west ends of the Lincoln Highway."¹⁹ Although it is correct to tie the ranch's name to the 1,733 measurement as I have shown, that measurement had nothing to do with the Lincoln Highway.

A similar example comes from the *Kearney*, *Nebraska*, *Community Profile* data sheet that is produced and distributed by the Buffalo County Economic Development office. The sheet's written description of the city begins:

Kearney, the county seat of Buffalo County, is located near the banks of the Platte River at its southern most point as it dips in a great arc across Nebraska. Located squarely at the nation's mid-point, 1,733 miles to Boston and 1,733 miles to San Francisco along US Highway 30 and Interstate 80, Kearney is a crossroads for commerce and culture.²⁰

The data sheet even contains a location chart showing Kearney's distance from Boston, San Francisco, Omaha, Chicago, New York City, Denver, Kansas City, and Los Angeles. The distances to Boston and San Francisco are indicated as 1,733 miles. The distances to the other six cities are close to the distances returned by the Google Maps website. Apparently, the Economic Development Office did not need to consult Google Maps for its Boston and San Francisco measurements. The office already knew what those distances were.



Figure 6: Newspaper advertisement showing a recent promotional use of the 1733 measurement. *Kearney Hub*, Nov. 10, 2011, Bravo Section p. 5

NOTES

¹ Mike Konz, "Lincoln Highway's 100th Birthday Party Continues Today," *Kearney Daily Hub*, June 30, 2013; Mary Jane Skala, "Historic Cars, Huge Crowds Jam Downtown for Lincoln Highway Centennial Celebration," *Kearney Hub*, July 1, 2013.

² The Complete Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway (Detroit Mich.: The Lincoln Highway Association, 1915), 105.

³ This quote was taken from a Lincoln Highway centennial promotional brochure published and distributed by the Lincoln Highway Association and the Kearney Visitors Bureau in 2013. Copy in possession of author. The approximate dimensions of the barn were 500 feet long, 100 feet wide, and 56 feet high, though one end was built into a hillside and was effectively only one story at that end. Philip S. Holmgren, Kearney State College, to Marvin F. Kivett, Mar. 4, 1975, in Nebraska State Historical Society historical marker file.

⁴ Philip S. Holmgren, "The Watson Ranch – Part 1" and "The Watson Ranch – Part 2" in *Buffalo Tales* 2, nos. 9 and 10 (Buffalo County Historical Society, 1979).

⁵ Official Road Guide of the Lincoln Highway, 105.

⁶ See L. B. Cunningham, "Early Reminiscences of Kearney" in *Samuel Clay Bassett, Buffalo County, Nebraska, and its People* (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1916). I want to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing me towards this source.

7 Omaha Daily Bee, Apr. 22, 1889, 5.

- 8 Kearney Hub, Aug. 11, 1890, 2.
- ⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Kearney Hub, Aug. 9, 1890, 4.

¹¹ *The Rand McNally Official Railway Guide and Handbook* (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1886).

¹² Kearney Hub, Aug. 11, 1890, 2.

¹³The 1880 Federal census, 1885 state census, and 1890 Federal census reported Kearney's population as 1,782, 3,601, and 8,074, respectively.

¹⁴ Although the letter's author took a shortcut when writing the year, I know it was 1889 because that year July 24 fell on a Wednesday. Also, the engraving depicts the original Midway Hotel, which burned to the ground on March 24, 1890. A rebuilt hotel was completed in 1893. See Margaret Stines Nielsen, "The Hotels of Kearney – Part 1" in *Bulfalo Tales* 10, no. 8 (Bulfalo County Historical Society, 1987).

¹⁵ "Alone in a Great City," *Kearney Hub*, Oct. 4, 1890, 2.

¹⁶ "A Novel Envelope," Kearney Hub, Oct. 10, 1890, 3.

¹⁷ Central Nebraska Road Map, publisher unknown, 1919, 2.

¹⁸Redman's Shoes and Ranchwear advertisement, *Kearney Hub*, Nov. 10, 2011, Bravo section, 5.

¹⁹Mike Konz, The Lincoln Highway: *Nebraska's Longest Main Street Celebrates 100 Years* (Kearney: Kearney Hub, 2013), 73.

²⁰Buffalo County Economic Development Office, *Kearney Nebraska, Community Profile*, January 2014. Accessed April 21, 2014 at: http://www.ci.kearney.ne.us/community_profile.pdf