

The Geographic Center of Attention: Lebanon, Smith County, Kansas

Lebanon, Kansas maintains a population of about 200 and is located in the Kansas northern tier counties, 200 miles west of the Missouri River. The present location, however, was not the original site. Lebanon was founded in Smith County about three miles southwest of the present-day town. The first buildings, including the post office, opened in 1876, were dugouts and soddies. When it came time to name the town site, early pioneer Jackson Allen was given the honor. After reading his Bible, he decided on Lebanon, from the verse describing “the cedars of Lebanon.” After nearly ten years of continued growth and settlement, the Rock Island Railroad began preparing to lay track to connect the county seats of Mankato and Smith Center; to help lure the railroad to Lebanon local settlers raised bonds. The Rock Island, however, decided that the shortest distance between two points was a straight line, and as a result, Lebanon was bypassed by the railroad. The citizens of Lebanon, many bitter, then moved the town site to its current location today, to connect with the railway line. Although Lebanon got off to a rocky start, the town’s luck soon improved. In 1898 the U.S. Geodetic Survey placed the geographic



Figure 1. Triplets Betty, Beth, and Jean Morrill participate in the dedication of the geographic center marker held on June 29, 1941. Source: Kansas State Historical Society



Figure 2. The welcome sign in present day Lebanon proudly displays its most recent title. Source: Photo courtesy of Steve Melby.

center of the United States near Lebanon. It was not until 1940 that citizens realized the impact tourism could have; at that time, they founded the “U.S. Hub Club.” In 1941, Lebanon held a ceremony officially dedicating a monument at the center of the United States; however, the new found prestige and tourism was short lived. In 1959 Alaska and Hawaii became states, which moved the geographic center to Castle Rock, South Dakota. Lebanon could now only claim the title of “The center of the 48 contiguous states.” Lebanon’s population has slowly declined ever since, as a result of phenomenon that the *New York Times* coined as “rural flight,” often better known as urbanization. Today Lebanon is a small place, but it continues to add to its long and eventful history. People still come to stand at the geographic center of the 48 contiguous states.

Sources: Kansas State Historical Society; *History of Smith County*; Geographic Center of the United States, United States Census Bureau; “The Middle of America” *Topeka Capital Journal*, and *History of Lebanon and Oak Townships*.