

THE 'VARA' AS A UNIT OF MEASUREMENT

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In the United States of America, most of us are familiar with inches, feet, yards, and miles. Somehow, the metric-system never caught-on to any great extent in this nation. Granted, we have two-liter cola bottles of soda pop; yet most measurements are by ounces, pints, quarts, and gallons. It would be a little cumbersome to make our home improvement projects, such as buying pieces of lumber or stone, by referring to centimeters. While some of our automobiles do have miles and kilometers shown on almost any car or truck's dashboard; it would equally be a bit cumbersome to ask ourselves how many kilometers between our home and our destination. When we think of efficiency: we often say our vehicle consumes "x" number of Miles-per-Gallon of gasoline {or diesel}.

Colonial Spanish surveying was done with the Cordel, which was BOTH an object and a unit of length = 50 Varas long.

In those times ---and extending for many years --- even including the early days of the United States ---especially in the "Southern US States," **the 'Vara' was the customary unit of length.** It was a tradition carried over from Spanish colonial traditions. And 'the Vara' was even used in land descriptions on real-estate Deeds in Texas as recently as the late 1900s.

Spanish-speaking surveyors differed slightly from English-speaking surveyors. James Kerr, a surveyor of DeWitt's and DeLeon's colonies made the Vara exactly 33 and 1/3 inches long; and this equivalence was adopted around the year 1830 by the surveyors of Stephen F. Austin's Colony.

In the later "Republic of Texas" and even in "The U.S. State of Texas," as previously noted--- as recently as the mid to late 20th Century: a 'Vara' was used on some real-estate Deeds. As noted above, a Vara is defined as 33 and 1/3 inches. Varas are a surveying-unit. It literally means 'rod' or 'pole'. As previously noted, the Vara and corresponding units of area **were required by Stephen F. Austin in issuing early-day land-grants in Texas.**

A "punto" in English is a "point"... consisting of .0063483070866142 inches.

A "linea" is a "line" ... consisting of .0762 inches.

A "pulgada" is an "inch" ..consisting" of .9142 inches.

A "pie" is a "foot"...consisting of 10.969 inches.

A "vara" is a "yard"...consisting more precisely of 32.909 inches.

A "milla" is a "mile" ...consisting of 4570.9 feet.

And a "legua" is a "league"consisting 2.597 miles.

Before electronic calculators, converting Square Varas (at 1 Vara equal to 32.8748 inches) to acres was a tedious process. But if 1 Vara = 33 and 1/3 inches, then 3 Varas are exactly 100 inches, 36 Varas are exactly 100 feet, and 108 Varas are exactly 100 yards. This made for an "easy division method" by simple shuffling of the decimal-point to do the job.



The Texas Vara was legally set at 33 and 1/3 inches in Article 5730, Acts of the year 1919 {revised in 1925} -- effective June 17, 1919.

To convert Varas to Feet: Divide Varas by 0.36.
To convert: Feet to Varas: Multiply Feet by 0.36.

A person may think that "The Vara" was confined solely to Texas and Southern States. **However, The Leila Stahl Buffett Genealogical Center at the J.A. Stahl Library at West Point, Nebraska, notes "INFORMATION FOUND ON PLAT MAPS."** It tells of The Vara being used as a Unit-of-Measurement mostly in USA areas once settled by Spain. However it notes that a Vara in Florida as "being somewhat larger, and the southwestern Vara being smaller." That Genealogical Center and Library also notes a few other unique terms:

- "Arpent" = similar to an Acre, used in French sections of the USA. The side of an arpent equals 191,994 Feet. And in Missouri, an Arpent was 0.8507 Acres or 192.5 Square Feet.
- "The Chain" was invented by Edmund Gunter in the year 1620. A Chain is 66 Feet long with 100 Links. One Mile is 80 Chains.
- "A Degree" is 1/360th the distance around a CIRCLE; and used to measure direction. However, it blends-in with other surveying terms.
- "Metes & Bounds" which is a type of survey based on measurements (chains, rods, poles, etc.) and "County Markers" (trees, stakes, streams, etc.)
- "A Minute" is 1/60th of a "Degree".
- "A Perch" or "A Pole" was the same as a "Rod".
- A "Rectangular Survey" is most commonly used in the Midwest... Based on certain Longitude and Latitude Lines (Meridians and Base-Lines); usually described in terms of Range, Township, Section, Quarter-Sections or sub-portions thereof. The aforementioned system is widely used in Nebraska, Kansas and adjacent States.

One Square Acre = 43,560 Square Feet.
One Link = 7.92 inches.
One Rod 16.5 Feet.
One Chain = 100 Links = 4 Rods = 66 Feet.
One Statute Mile = 80 Chains = 5,280 Feet.

Acreage and property ownership has been a cherished American Right for generations. Many Americans hold the Ideal of Property Ownership as one of of most cherished Liberties. To own and/or to possess physical land enables a person to build his or her enterprise...or even a residential home or to till the soil for a farm which generates both food and industry for



Commerce, thereby stimulating the economy and prosperity of the individual, the local community, the national economy and even today's global economy.

Masonic Lodge Halls, by the same token, {many of them owned by local Masonic Organizations} stand on parcels of land. In California, the term "Fanega" is sometimes used. A Fanega is an old Spanish term originating from Castile. It was both an old measurement of 'volume' as roughly 12 Imperial Bushels or 55.5 liters ----but it was also a MEASUREMENT OF SURFACE-AREA equal to the subdivision of about 100 Varas, or the amount of 'area' that could be sown with a Fanega {bushel} of seed. So, it is interesting how Units-of-Volume have interlaced with units-of-Land-Measurement.

Whether it is an individual, a business, a Church, a school or even a Masonic Lodge Hall: Each entity prizes its land description as a means of identification and protection. We can be thankful for the 'Vara' as a Unit-of-Measurement which makes it clear where farmers can plant crops or where 'builders' can build buildings or dwellings. "Description of Title of Ownership" is clearly described so everyone can know their due bounds. Indeed, "The Vara" has been helpful for the Builder's Uses for many generations.

Sources / References / Recommended Readings:

- Mackey's Encyclopedia of Freemasonry by Dr. Albert G. Mackey, M.D., 33^o and a Knight Templar.
- Telephone conversation between Frater James A. Marples, VIII^o and the Upshur County Clerk's Office in Gilmer, Texas, on 26 August 2014. County Clerk stating that the 'vara' as a unit of measurement appears on Upshur County, Texas, real-estate deeds as far back as the 1840s and examples still exist in their courthouse records as of now (2014).
- Texas Land Measurement CAD.
- The Vara in Texas.
- Archives: Leila Stahl Buffett Genealogical Center, J. A. Stahl Library, West Point, Nebraska.
- Archives of The Masonic Grand Lodge of British Columbia and Yukon, Canada.
- Macoy's Masonic Manual by Robert Macoy, 33^o and a Knight Templar. Fifteenth Edition, New York. Published in New York, Year 1861 by Clark, Austin, Maynard & Company located at 3 Park Row & 3 Ann Street, New York, New York. "A Pocket Companion for the Initiated".

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