

## **They Can't Get Enough on Plates**

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By Ab Kent

Remember the dusty August doldrums of youth when you vied with your pals to collect the most car license numbers?

If your street was alternately gritty and muddy, as the graveled space in front of many depression-era homes, it was a dirty place indeed. Perfect for squishing or sifting between bare toes until the next car came by.

Then a frantic scribble in a two-for-a-nickle notebook as the dust billowed into a golden haze.

As a hobby it wasn't much. It was childish fun to fill an idle afternoon and more than a few notebooks, and kept you out of the house.

Today, some 40 years later, some of those numerical novices are kept at home in the basement through collecting not just numbers but also the plates.

Licence plate collecting is a recognized international hobby. But there are relatively few serious collectors in Canada.

Number plate collecting reaches its North American zenith south of the border because of the large number of legal jurisdictions – 51 American and 32 Mexican.

Canada has only 13 licence-issuing authorities not counting local issuers of taxi and commercial plates, and that may be the reason collecting is more exclusive here.

A journal published by the American License Plate Collecting Association lists pages of U.S. members and only a little more than one page of Canadian participants, of which about 12 reside in B.C. Rare are major collectors, like Len Garrison of Port Alberni, who is said to have 40,000 plates.

Roger Newbury, a dealer in antiques and various collectibles, has a fairly well organized assortment of Canadian licence plates numbering in the hundreds and representing all provinces and federal jurisdictions including the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

He sells them for as little as \$1 and as much as \$25, even for the rare porcelain enameled steel plates issued by B.C. more than 50 years ago.

But Ken Ballard, an antique car buff who used to be a serious plate collector, said the porcelain plates of the 1912-1920 period can bring anywhere from \$50 to \$100 each depending upon condition and rarity.

Just a few years ago, when the hobby was still in its infancy, a collector could go into practically any barn or garage on the Island and come out with plates anywhere from one year to 40 years old.

Today, said Ballard, most of these relics are in the hands of collectors. The junkyard and back lots still yield sought-after parts for vintage cars, but the licence plates are likely to have been the first parts scavenged.

Ballard and the province motor vehicle branch have one thing in common besides a lot of licence numbers: each has a complete set of plates issued by the province from the time when registration appeared to take precedence over plates.

The first ones (1906-1911) consisted of a piece of leather to which the car owner attached metal house numbers, or painted the numerals on.

Bob Miller, another collector whose main interest is old cars, said it is arguable as to which was the first B.C. plate. Because of the leather period in the first decade of the century, some collectors feel the first plate should be the 1912, which is the first metal one and the first standardized plate actually made by the provincial government.

Miller has a full set from 1913-17, a few extra B.C. plates for trading, some British and an Hawaiian plate for decoration. Anyone interested in Quebec plates is invited to have a look at Miller's 1933 example.

His collection includes registration plates from the First World War period, when they were made from a thin tin-plate to conserve on materials for the war effort. Because they were so light they have not stood up well and a specimen in good condition is hard to find and worth \$30-\$75 to a serious collector.

Probably the rarest Canadian plates are these wartime ones, except for 1916-17, and those from the NWT, which has relatively few motor vehicles.

The NWT plates are distinctively designed in the shape of a polar bear.

Newberry said Yukon plates are in fair demand, as well. He has one on his shelf from 1973 marked %4.

The 1913 porcelain marked \$25 has several chipped areas but is in generally good condition.

Ballard has a special porcelain plate issued by the city of Victoria in 1912 which is in excellent shape even though it was buried for an undetermined period and dug up about 15 years ago on what was Fairfield Farm Estates.

People often ask Newberry to find them a plate to match the year of an old car they are restoring, usually from the 1920s or 1930s.

They will collect by country, by provinces, by year of issue, numerical sequence, degree of rarity and combinations of these. Passenger car plates are generally collected, but motorcycle licences may also be sought.

Some people insist on pairs, which are harder to get and therefore cost more.

"B.C. 53s are hard to get because that was a tag year and only new car buyers had new plates," Newberry said.

Leather plates in reasonable shape are also rare: "I've seen them go for \$50 at auctions," he said.

In order to devote more time and money to his cars – a 1915 Model T roadster, a 1926 Model T, a 1940 Ford pick-up and a 1950 Meteor sedan – Ballard decided to sell much of his plate collection and netted a surprising \$700-\$800 by dealing directly with collector contacts across the country.

Purely Canadian collections tend to seem dull next to the infinite variety of American and overseas plates. The US. states used to express an individuality that has faded: bizarre colours and symbols, different shapes and sizes, and registration letters chosen to spell words and names.

The Georgia plate used to have a peach, Idaho a baked potato with a pat of butter, and Louisiana a pelican sitting on a stump. Arizona has a blazing sun and several states depict a wheelchair for handicapped drivers, but they seem tame next to older plates. And they are all the same size.

By comparison, B.C. plates for several years have had three-letter prefixes deliberately contrived to avoid spelling words. They also are valid for several years at a stretch, with annual decals attached, which will make it harder for collectors to fill gaps.

Some jurisdictions, to the delight of collectors, dispose of surplus plates in wholesale lots, providing trading material for years.

MVB superintendent R.G. Whitlock said any plates turned into the B.C. branch are destroyed for recycling, and none will be declared surplus until a new series comes out, perhaps next year. Then, they too, will be recycled.