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A bumper crop of licence plates

Bill Hobbis has amassed 10,000 auto plates since he first started collecting them at age 12

John Mackie

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Sitting in the back of his parents' car as a kid, Bill Hobbis became fascinated with all the different licence plates he saw on long drives. So he started collecting them.

"I'd leave a little piece of paper on the windshield of cars with plates from out of province," relates Hobbis, 54.

" 'I'm a 12-year-old kid, and I like your licence plate. When you're finished with it, could you mail it to me? Here's my address.' And I got dozens and dozens of plates from everywhere."

Dozens turned into hundreds, then thousands. Today, Hobbis estimates he has about 10,000 licence plates.

"That puts me in the eccentric category, right?" he laughs.

Maybe. But man, does he have some cool licence plates. Particularly plates from his native British Columbia.

Hobbis has handmade B.C. licence plates made of leather. He has porcelain B.C. licence plates from before the First World War. He has a 1956 B.C. licence plate with the number "1."

They all come with stories.

Leather licence plates, for example, were used between 1904 and 1912. But the government didn't make them: they issued you a number, then you went to a leather shop and got one made. Once you had the leather base, you went to somebody who made metal letters and numbers, and then attached them. Which is why leather licence plates don't have a uniform look -- they were all individually made.

In the early days, the number of your licence plate reflected how many licenses had been issued. You also got to keep the same number year after year -- and because there were no years on the plate, you could even use the same plate.

The first licence plate in British Columbia was issued on Feb. 29, 1904, to John Barnsley of Victoria, who drove something called an Orient Buckboard. (The Buckboard was a very primitive contraption, basically taking the design of an old horse and buggy carriage and substituting a gas engine for the horse.)

Barnsley kept the number one for his cars until he died in 1924, when it was passed to a government official. (When he died he was the general manager for the Union Steamship Company.) His great-grandson still has three of Barnsley's number one plates, from 1917, '18 and '19.

Hobbis paid \$2,200 for his number one plate from 1956, the most he has ever paid for a licence plate.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun
Bill Hobbis of the Cap's Cycles family has 10,000 licence plates, including many rare B.C. plates, some made of leather and porcelain.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun
Mike Barnsley with vintage licence plates that belonged to his great grandfather, John, a pioneer motorist who bought the first plate in B.C.

"A lot of guys are keen on low numbers," he says. "A single digit plate is worth 100 times what a common number is. A low number will drive the value exponentially."

But his number one plate isn't his most valuable one. That honour belongs to his two leather plates, numbers 333 and 2653. Hobbis figures there's probably only about a dozen leather plates left, which makes them worth up to \$3,000 apiece.

Some of his rarest plates were actually collected by his late father Tom, who was the driving force behind the legendary Cap's Cycles Museum in New Westminster. (Cap was Tom's brother.) The Hobbis family sold off most of the contents of the Cap's Museum a couple of years ago, but still run the Cap's Cycles stores -- and collect stuff.

One of Tom Hobbis's most unusual finds was a Pacific Coast Militia Ranger licence plate from the Second World War. It's made of cardboard, and bears the number 117, which was the PCMR code for New Westminster.

"At that time they thought the war was coming to British Columbia, they feared an invasion," says Bill Hobbis, who runs the Cap's Richmond store.

"There was about 130 cells or groups set up [in different areas] throughout British Columbia, like a militia or little guerrilla groups. They knew the lay of the land for their area, so if we were invaded they would basically be put into action."

Hobbis knows of only two PCMR plates left -- there were few of them made, and the cardboard didn't last. As such, they're a far cry from the porcelain licence plates the B.C. government made in 1913 and 14.

The porcelain plates were the first to be mass-produced, a byproduct of the growing number of cars on the road. (There were probably about 4,000 leather plates made, which means there were probably 4,000 cars on the road in B.C. in 1912.)

Porcelain is a tough material, and a lot of porcelain plates survive. A mint condition plate sells for about \$400, a beat-up one might sell for \$50.

"Cars weren't going real fast in 1913-1914, but you'll see plates that are really harshly chipped," Hobbis says.

"That was typically people taking target practice. A lot of the plates have been shot at, and big chunks taken out."

Many of the surviving porcelain plates can be traced to a garage near Oak and Marine Drive that was discovered in the 1950s by the late Buck Rogers. Unissued plates were supposed to be destroyed, but a government agent apparently took hundreds of porcelain plates home and put them to use.

"Buck went by and saw that the garage was shingled with licence plates," says Buck's friend, Rick Percy.

"The doors, the roof, everywhere. Not only that, the doors and the insides were lined with licence plates. And they were all in numerical order, approximately.

"There was a workbench that ran from one end to the other and underneath it there were a bunch of boxes, all the same size. The boxes had been there so long they'd corroded away. But inside them, stacked, wrapped in wax paper were hundreds upon hundreds more unused porcelain licence plates."

Rogers approached the owner of the garage.

"Buck said to the people, 'You're going to take all this to the dump, aren't you?' The guy said, 'Yes, gradually.' He said, 'I'll tell you what, you give me this stuff, and I'll take it away to the dump for you, if I can have it.' They said 'sure.' They thought he was nuts.

"Buck called me up and said, 'I've got to get all these home.' So I went up and looked at them and said 'Oh my God.'"

It took four days to haul all the porcelain plates away. If you see a porcelain plate with a bit of brown shingle stain on it, it's probably from the Rogers find.

The next material used to make licence plates was tin, from 1915 to '17. Because they're so flimsy, they're quite rare and expensive -- one in good condition can go for \$1,500.

"Those are actually the toughest ones to come across in any sort of reasonable condition," Hobbis says. "They were just a painted piece of tin, and were easily bent or damaged."

After 1918, licence plates went to the modern style, embossed with raised lettering. There is an excellent B.C. licence plate website (www.bcpl8s.ca) which has photos of virtually all the different styles of B.C. licence plates, from 1904 on.

The website is operated by 34-year-old Christopher Garrish of Penticton, a planner for the South Okanagan-Similkameen Regional District. He caught the licence plate bug when he was doing his master's thesis.

"While I was doing research, I'd occasionally stumble across articles on license plates," he explains. "It became a way to procrastinate while I was doing my master's thesis."

Garrish doesn't even want to think about how many hours he's put into the website. He figures he has about 1,000 licence plates himself, but can't afford any of the really rare stuff -- he has to be content with writing about them.

Still, even cheap B.C. licence plates have their charms. Plates in the 1950s and 60s, for example, are quite colourful. The 1958 centennial plate is gold with green numbers. The 1959 plate is blue on brown, the next year the colours were reversed. The most startling plate is 1961, which is pink.

Hobbis has a pink plate from 1961 that bears the number 579 -- one of a 40-year run of No. 579 licence plates he has.

"The person with number 579 lived in the Varsity Theatre area just off of West 10th," he says. "I remember going over there with my dad when I was about 14. The guy opened up his garage door and there was this wall of 579s."

"Let me tell you, that's like going to Las Vegas and pulling the lever and getting three sevens. That was the jackpot -- every plate collector dreams of finding that wall. The fact that they were low numbers, and all the same, was unbelievable."

Finds like this are rare. But Hobbis knows they're out there, somewhere.

"Just when you think there can't be any more sheds that haven't been looked inside in the province, you'll hear through the grapevine that somebody found a run of plates, and bingo they show up at a swap meet somewhere," he says.

"There's still stones to be turned over -- I don't think we've found everything yet."

jmackie@png.canwest.com

If you have an old licence plate and want to contact Bill Hobbis, e-mail him at: oldhusky@hotmail.com

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