

License Plates as We Know Them Are No Older Than the Motorcar

The City of Mackinac Island and the Mackinac Island State Historic Parks have both contributed to the rich history of bicycle and carriage license plates on Mackinac Island.

It is virtually impossible to go anywhere on Mackinac Island without crossing State Park boundary lines. Parcels of State Park land adjoin Mackinac's Grand Hotel (part of The Jewel golf course is leased from the park) and cover a patch of downtown's Main Street (Marquette Park is part of the State Park, too). As a result, Island carriage owners tend to assume they will be entering State Park land every day as a matter of course, no matter what route they may be driving on that day.

The owners and operators of hotel omnibuses, two-horse tour buggies, three-horse tour wagons, hourly buggies, taxicabs, and drive-yourself carriages all buy license plates from the State Park. These plates are made out of stamped metal, just like the license plates on our motor vehicles on the mainland. However, you will find that the Island's carriage license plates have smaller numbers stamped onto them than do most car plates.

License plates as we know them are no older than the motor car. The stamped-metal license plate was invented in 1906 by the state of West Virginia, and



A Look at History

BY FRANK STRAUS

License Plates

improved in 1910 by Maryland: the state hired someone to paint numbers on the embossed metal by hand. Michigan joined the stamped-metal license plate era in 1915. At that time no licenses existed on Mackinac Island, and it was only after World War II that anyone thought of raising money by requiring everyone to buy license plates for their bikes and horse-drawn vehicles.

Today, congestion can be an issue on Mackinac Island in the height of summer, and both the State Park and the City carefully restrict the numbers of licenses issued to carriages and rental bicycles. The City's private bike license plates used to be made of metal, too. In the early 1970s, the big switch took place from metal to a kind of decal made from plastic film and pressure-sensitive adhesive. Today's Islanders simply peel off the decal's backing and stick it onto their bikes. Longtime Islander bikes can sometimes be picked out from the crowd by counting the number of prior-year decals stuck all

over them. Snowmobiles bear similar decals, printed by the State of Michigan.

Carriage license revenues to the State Park have been used to help build two heavily used roads in the Island's interior, Carriage Road and Rifle Range Road. These two public ways, part of the route used by the interior portion of Mackinac Island's Carriage Tours, were opened in stages from the 1960s to 1980. They form a relatively direct route from the Surrey Hills carriage tour staging area to Arch Rock.

Money has come from a variety of sources to build Mackinac Island's other State Park roads. Lease fees from the first crop of cottagers on the Island's West and East Bluffs helped to build winding Leslie Avenue, north of Arch Rock. These lease fees also led to the construction and improvement of West Bluff Road and Huron Avenue, the streets that run along both cottage bluffs. A turn-of-the-century loan, paid about 1900, from the



A Pfeiffelman family collection of bicycle license plates and decals. (Photograph courtesy of Tom Pfeiffelmann)

State of Michigan to the State Park helped to construct popular Lake Shore Boulevard.

Today, revenues from the license programs continue to be used to maintain the municipal database of Island bicycles and to build and maintain Mackinac Island's roads and streets. Because of the horse manure situation, Mackinac's public rights of way require a lot of continual maintenance.

The State of Michigan sells license plates to the owners of motor vehicles registered in the state, too. In January 1997, the state's main multicolored license plate was redesigned to center on a sight familiar to Islanders, the Mackinac Bridge with the sun in the background. Many visitors to the Straits of Mackinac drive toward the bridge with a car bearing a license plate that shows their destination. The state recently asked citizens to submit ideas for a license plate redesign. The Mackinac Bridge will begin to disappear from standard Michigan license plates next year, 2007.

Michigan, like many other states, also sells special license

plates designed to help motorists display their support for various good causes. The "Save Our Lights" license plate benefits Michigan's Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL), the umbrella organization over Mackinac State Historic Parks and many other state offices. Last November, HAL was able to allocate \$40,000 from Michigan's "Save Our Lights" license plate to repair the foundation of the 1895 Round Island Lighthouse.

The office of the Michigan Secretary of State has posted a year-by-year look at Michigan license plates on a segment of their Web site. A few people who are especially interested in this subject may want to find out more by looking up the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (ALPCA), the chief U.S. affinity group of plate collectors. The ALPCA has about 20 gatherings every summer, at various points throughout North America. As far as I know, no one tries to collect the flimsy license decals. Maybe they will be extremely rare someday.



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