

VANITY OF VANITIES

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I happened to be driving down the road recently when a bright red sports car went by bearing the vanity license plate 4 MY EGO. Then and there came a dazzling revelation: the whole subject of vanity license plates as a vehicle for wordplay has received very little attention from logologists. As far as I am able to determine, only one book has ever addressed the subject - David Grahams's Those Crazy License Plates, published prior to 1980 and now out of print. The time is ripe for someone to develop a typology of vanity plates, but be warned - once you start collecting them, you will find it habit-forming, and it helps to have a passenger in the car to jot them down, else you may find yourself driving off the road as a rare gem whizzes past you in the opposite lane.

Typically, states allow only six to eight characters on their plates. It is, therefore, somewhat of a challenge to get your message across fairly unambiguously. And if someone else already has the plate you want, you may have to be unusually inventive.

By far the most common type of vanity plate bears the name of the car's owner: full name, abbreviated name, or initials. Examples abound in any parking lot. Plates that bear the short-wave radio call letters of the owner are also fairly common. There are many company cars which carry the name of the business in full or abbreviated form, such as VIP TVL, but we will not discuss them further except to mention a couple of outstanding examples: PORKY 1 on a deli truck, and Y WALK on a driving school car.

If your names are short, you can display both first and middle name, FAITHANN, or first and last names, TOM LAMB. Or maybe you'd like one name and an initial: D CHEE, JOE OH, or LOIS D. If your family has only one car you can still indicate multiple usage with HM GM, E & J ENT, BOB SUE, ME NM1KEY, or E BUNCH.

You can convey your marital status with MS RUBY, MLLE EN, MR EXUM, MRS RAT (actually Rathbun; is there a MR RAT to go with it?), M WIDOW, MY BRIDE, OMANOPA (a divorcee or widow). You can proclaim your lineage with JOHN JR, RTS SR, SPUD SR, CW ONE, CDS 3RD, THB IV, or tell the world something about your relationship to other members of the family: MOM, MUMSY, MAOMA, HO DAD, PAPA 59, POPPY H, MOM-LAU, NANA JO, or TIM BRO.

You can give us your name (or initials) and occupation: MD SN, KC MD, HOLT RN, JSP ATTY, FHT ESQ, PBA DDS, HLM CPA, CHEF CH. But why so formal? Use your nickname: BN EYES, SUGRKANE, WILD 11 (ones), PUTZ1, FE POOH, JHN REB, SUZ E Q, B-Z BEE.

Supposing your name has already been issued. How about IM JD, EMCEE J, AMLOID (am Lloyd) or IMLeni.

While your name is the most obvious thing to put on your license plate, there is a great deal of other information about yourself that you can convey:

Place of origin: ME TEXN, IRISH MA, CIN C, NJ NH, ZE FROG

Education: YES UVA, UVA YES, GHL UVA, PITT 67, DUKE 80,

PENN 62, NAVY 85, USNA 43, 61 VPI, VPI W&M (to show that both you and your wife attended college), COLG8 37 (over 70 and still proud of his college degree), MOM PHD (just to show up those other mothers on the block), WFU 76

Occupation: I PSYCH, PEDO (a pediatrician), MD MAN, FOOT DR, RETINA, GUMS OK, NO DCAY, MOLAR 1, USN RET, I REF, A TEECH (someone else has TEACH), THREE R, RR ENG, PR LADY, BY SELL (a broker), FUZZ 2, BILDER, CLIPRS (a barber?), WRITE, PENCIL, I NSR U (telephone operator?), PLANO (a piano tuner), EAT OUT (a restaurateur), SALES 1

Hobbies: RUNERZ, SKI FLO, SKI 18, X PIN, MUZYK, JAZD, NJ SHOR (surprisingly, on a Connecticut plate), BASS, TUNA 7, I CAVE, CAVE 1, HOCKY 1, KAR BUF, CORGIS, SHPDOG, T 2 GRN (a golfer), CHEVAL, LUV OWLS, SKI GOLF (for those with two bies), HIKE, QUILT, HI ROLA (a gambler?)

Your husband's hobby: PC WIDOW

Important dates in your life: MAR 14, MAY 13, SEPT 22, 41 DEC 7 (Pearl Harbor)

Favorite recording artists: WHO FAN, AY JUDE, LED ZEP, TWITTY

Favorite sports teams: NETS 1, RD SOX, GOOHIO, COALTS

Favorite cartoon characters: BUGGS B, P RABIT, MIS PIG, BG BIRD

Lifestyle: I WORK, I RELAX, I LOAF, I GRIN, WISE A

Pet political cause: REZONE

You can even tell the world you've kicked the bottle with SOBERONE though last year 81 PROOF might have been more accurate. And if you're still on the sauce, how about TIE ION?

License plates are a good place for a little self-advertisement (though how somebody who wants to meet A TEN is going to catch up with her is unclear): DEBBIE X, MR TEN, RACER X, BARB OK, GAYS 7, A CATCH, ME BEAR, THE MAN, MOON MAN, BRAIN C, BEST MAN, CUTY PI, A QT, I AM XTC, XTACI, A FUN 1, TOP HAT, MYT ONE, MR SPIN, HOT STUFF, SCORE, IR8 NO 1 (I rate number one).

A fairly large class of vanity plates describe the car rather than its owner:

Make: ARZ CAR, MY 83 ZX, JAN ZX, 300 ZXT, 63 PRIX, HO CHEV, MY PRSH, SUBARU, MY SURU, PINTO 7, LAND 4U (a Land Rover), 24TZ (Datsun), T FER 2, TO A TE

Color: RED TOO, RED NED, PURPLY, PURPLE 7 (though neither of these cars was purple!), LE BLEU

Style: KNO TOP (a convertible), LE CONV, LO HAUL (a pickup)

Character: O LINER (a big old boat), B MARIA, BARN D (as in "you can't hit the side of a barn door"), FINE NU, CHUGG

Ownership: MUM BUG, ROBS TK (a truck), 4 TONY, TONY'S V (a Volkswagen), DELSCAR, WAS HIS (divorce settlement?)
 Use: SKI BUS, FISH EN, FTD VAN, O NITE (a camper), GO BYBY
 How you came to be able to afford it: URND IT

A fair amount of philosophy finds its expression on license plates:

Religion: GOD LVZU, GLORY 5, X DIOS, RI BORN, SING PTL (sing Praise the Lord), ZEN 43, OM SHIV (Om is a Hindu mantra for the triple constitution of the universe, and Shiva is a variant spelling of the Hindu deity Siva), LAKSHMI (a Hindu goddess)
 Love: XOXOX 1 (hugs and kisses), LUV NKZ (love and kisses), LV ONE

Existentialism: 1XST, MABE, 1DA NO, MARV LS, FOLLY

Pacifism: PAX AMO

General outlook on life: NO CARE, ESPOIR, DLIGHT, JOYOUS, XCALIBUR, JOLLY 1, CLOUD 9, KLOUD 9, BFIT (seen both on NJ and VA plates), ONHOLD, JINXT, RATT'S, ROTT 10 (rotten), OH RATS, D OR D (do or die?)

If you are so inclined, there are also a number of things you can tell the guy who's tailgating you: GT DOWN, UDUTU, UR2 NEAR. Less antagonistically, you can say: EZ NOW, GET HOT, GO 4 IT, B WITTY, B USELF, GET HIP, U ANGEL, C YU.

Generally speaking, one sees only one of a family's cars at any one time, so any cleverness in having complementary messages on two license plates is lost on all but a very few relatives or close friends. Occasionally, one will see a matching pair in a driveway: NEZRO, MRS NEZ. My brother-in-law, a professor of biology at Dartmouth College, has for many years been studying the fungus *Phycomyces*. So what are his license plates? PHYCO and MYCES, of course, and he makes sure that his cars are always parked in the proper spot in his driveway, though what the casual observer makes of one of them on the highway I do not know. Living near my daughter in the D.C. suburbs are a man and a woman whose two cars are registered in Virginia and Maryland, respectively. The license plates on both are identical: YLO ROZ.

One assumes that people will only pay the extra money for vanity plates if they want to communicate some message to the world. Yet, many of the specimens in my collection mean very little to me. In fact, when the intended meaning is not clear, it's fun to make up one's own: KILLY 2 (surely not Jean Claude?), CLEW (British mystery fan?), 3X 6 (18?), SANDWICH (a deli owner?), WINDMILL (Don Quixote?), SEIRUP (a sugar bush owner?), SNIFFR (a drug user?), QUACKR (a duck?), ZIT Z (a teenager with acne?), NO 2 (we try harder?), EGRESS (let's get out of here). Try it yourself with TWO 3, TWO EEE, AG KOV, AEGIS EW, TKS ISIS.

It is interesting to speculate what is the longest message that can be clearly communicated in at most eight characters. Though not yet seen by me, a plate announcing the year of its owner's graduation from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology would probably take the prize. The best I've seen, and probably the

cleverest bit of letter play in the whole bunch, is 7NT XX, the bridge player's dream of seven no trump, doubled and redoubled, reducing 31 characters to 5!

I cannot conclude without mentioning an Associated Press story out of Denver. It seems that one Brad Thomas obtained Colorado plates saying OUIOUI, noting that this expressed his French attitude toward life. But he was forced to change them when someone found them phonetically objectionable.

The foregoing license plates, collected over several months of traveling up and down the East Coast - primarily New York, New Jersey, Maryland, the District of Columbia, and Virginia - do not exhaust my list, although they are among the best to date. Readers are invited to send me their favorites for a possible sequel at a later date.