

ALL IS VANITY

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The article on vanity license plates in the November 1986 **Word Ways** probably generated more reader response than any other article **Word Ways** ever published. Many readers wrote to send us their favorite specimens. John Henrick of Seattle, Washington sent us a whole published book by John and Barbara Dixon entitled *The Plate Book: "Puzzle Plates" The New American Hi-Way Graffiti* (Voller Publishing Company, Seattle; 1982), containing approximately 52,000 examples. In preparing this sequel to the first article, I am particularly grateful for the lengthy lists collected by Richard Lederer of Scarsdale, New York and Vernon MacLaren of Augusta, Maine. The latter pointed out that the subject is properly registration plates, not license plates, because they relate to the registration of the car, not the owner's ability to drive it.

It was gratifying to find that the taxonomy developed in the first article held up rather well. Very few new categories emerged from the material submitted, although there has been some refinement within them. New categories include:

Beverage Preference BEER BUFF, BEER 11, BUD LT, MICKLITE, WINE 1, MTN DEW, B AN B (although perhaps this refers to Bob and Barbara, or Betty and Bill)

Food Preference TXCHILI

Financial/Cost of Car BROWQ, PAUPER (on a \$40,000 car), PAID (on a Cadillac), MY HAUS (cost as much as his house?), SEL HAUS (how he got the money to pay for it, or maybe he's a realtor), ALIMONY (a Jaguar driven by a young blonde female)

Literary Allusions 1M LATE (on a white VW Rabbit), ML8 ML8, IAM L8 (Alice in Wonderland), HRAKA (rabbit droppings in Water-ship Down), PYWACKET (Bell, Book, and Candle)

Much-Traveled Route HYWAY 85 (Massachusetts), ROUTE 80 (New Jersey)

Destination OFF 2 OZ (accompanied by THE WIZ?)

New goodies have been added to the old categories; some of the best include:

Descriptive of the Car BBY CAR (Renault LeCar), LANDPUP (Land Rover), GAS HOG, ITS FAST, JAG WAHR, TUDOR CAR (on a two-door model), ES GEHT (on a Volkswagen), BUBKES (Yiddish for something trivial or absurd), CAD (on a Dodge, so it may describe the owner rather than the car)

Descriptive of the Owner B NANAS, HT SHOT, NYT OWL, THREESUM (husband, wife, and child), SCAEVA (Latin for left-handed; he was), IMALEO (which may go with a VERGO 1 who can't spell), CAPE CAD, RISK E 1, ADOOOZIE, FEMNST, NYC KID, JERQ, FRUMP, and the inspired XX XY (which presumably means his and hers)

Occupation of Owner BEETHOVEN (a music teacher), ABOGADO (Spanish for lawyer), EXECSEC, 2TH FARY (an orthodontist), IATROS (Greek for doctor), 1 SPY (really?), MKTGMAVN, OUTLAW (country music singer)

Philosophy BEA BAD, DO GOOD, HEDS UP, SW1DRFUL, SHO NUF, LUV LYF, LIVE NOW, WHY TRY, PEACE

Political Statement 55 IZ 2LO

There seems to be no end to the things - both polite and somewhat more crude - that you can say to the car behind you: TSK TSK, BE CALM, WOWEEZOW, BRAKALEG, WEARATIE, YAVBALL, UNEXT, AMUSME, VBCNU, 1 CAN 2, EYELUVU, LUV U 2, TRST ME (parked in front of a bank), UR 1 2, BUTNUP, LAFFF and CRIII (parked in the same driveway), OBUGOFF (on a Volkswagen bus), OGOTTOGO, and, if you want to deliver a gentle sales pitch, BUY STOX, EAT OUT, TRY MILK, GO MILK, ENSURE, and INSURE.

Every state keeps lists of words and combinations of letters which might have obscene or offensive connotations and hence are prohibited on license plates. Thus, Jay Ames's friends Mr. Cox and Mr. Fuchs are unable to obtain vanity plates with their names in Ontario. This prompted Ames to compose a poem based on three-letter Welsh words which might be off-limits:

TOR is belly, pus is GOR,
COR is dwarf or midget;
Spider's COP and ox is YCH,
And PIW's a cow's milk-widget.
MAB is boy and maid is BUN;
DOT means puzzled, giddy.
DIG's irate, and GWG's a frown;
HEN could mean old bidy.
TEW is plump, and CUL means thin;
CAS is odious, hateful.
PEN is head and TIN means arse,
NWy is gassy (plate full?)
GER means rubbish, nought is DIM,
And MAN reads blot or blemish.
SWM means bulky, COD's a bog
In Welsh, if not in Flemish.
BAR is greedy, BAW is filth,
And CWN's a do, CUR, trouble.
HYF is bold and tame is HOY -
Now don't that burst yer bubble?

Ames also wonders if the late Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau would have had trouble getting plates with his initials, PET, which spells fart in French Canadian. (And, speaking of hypothetical plates, Helen Gunn of Hamilton, New York has always wanted NLO-

LITS for "Nice Little Old Lady in Tennis Shoes.")

New York seems to be fairly lenient in what they will allow on license plates. It is reported that they receive approximately one thousand requests each day for vanity plates which are run through a computer programmed with an obscenity list. Apparently the computer doesn't have much imagination, for AIM PE was spotted by the author, and VET DREAM was noted by Richard Lederer.

The problem of deciding what a particular plate means is highlighted by the following computer dialogue generated by Henri Picciotti and friends in California:

BABAIAM - first name Ali?

Probably a Jewish grandmother; Baba (Ba-be) is from Yiddish.

No, no. It's when Meher Baba says to you "Don't worry; be happy" and you respond BABAIAM.

Ideally, vanity plates should not be specific to a particular car. Some states (all?) allow the transfer of plates from one car to another. So what happens when the owner of ATOYOT (read it in your rear-view mirror) upgrades it to a Cadillac? And some plates may rapidly grow out of fashion. One wonders if the owner of JOY PTL is now on the waiting list for a new plate.

Several readers sent clippings of humorous newspaper and magazine articles on license plates. The best of these was a column by Bob Levey of the Washington Post, who included a parody of "The Night Before Christmas" by Bruce Powers of Virginia, incorporating a number of vanity plates. A couple of readers also wanted to know if the plates we cited were invented or had actually been seen. All our specimens were seen either by the author or her correspondents.

Finally, you've seen those yellow diamond-shaped signs in the back windows of cars proclaiming "Baby on Board" or "Mother-in-law in Trunk." My daughter has one on her truck saying "Nobody on Board." This wry humor is paralleled by the wag driving on Interstate 95 in Maryland who has the ultimate answer to license plate mania: his plate says NO TAG.