

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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NOW UP FOR GRABS: Y7, 8L, 221!

There are two kinds of people in Massachusetts: those who see a license plate as a status symbol and those who view it as simple identification of the car. The status seekers go into action each year at this time for the low-number lottery.

Every year thousands of drivers enter to win one of these time-honored plates, and this year is no different. Once again the Registry of Motor Vehicles will hold its annual drawing for any returned or unwanted low number license plates. With over two thousand applicants already entered for the mid-September drawing, the lottery this year is sure to be as exciting as ever for winners.

Time is running short to sign up for this year's lottery. If you want a chance to win, you can find an application at a Registry branch or online at www.mass.gov/rmv. Your entry must be post marked by August 11, 2006. Postcard entries will not be accepted.

As a person who does not see a license plate as a status symbol, I had to do some research to find the origin of low numbered plates. The simple 3-digit plate is easy to understand – it is rooted in one of the first license plates ever issued. But what about one that begins with E or G?

Massachusetts manufactured the first license plate in 1903, starting with the number one, and other states soon followed. The numbers became higher as more cars were registered so letters were added to license plate numbers in 1911, allowing the numbering system to begin again and still keep up with the growing number of vehicles on the road. By 1917, the first six digit plate was issued.

During the early years, state officials would claim low numbered plates for themselves or friends, so you had to be an individual with clout to have a chance of obtaining one. When a big car in the neighborhood drove around with a low number, you knew the driver was somebody important. The attitudes of law enforcers favored low numbered plates. It was not uncommon for an illegal parking or a minor traffic violation overlooked if it involved a "111."

Low numbers still pass as inheritance among families whose automobile-owning history can be traced to the first licenses in Massachusetts. But they return to the registry if not claimed by an heir. Re-issue of those plates was another patronage plum for insiders until the lottery system changed all that.

All returned plates now go into the annual September lottery. This year, 239 plates are up for grabs, including Y7, 8L and the very desirable 221.

"The popularity of these plates continues to be overwhelming. We received 4,490 applications last year," said Registrar of Motor Vehicles Anne L. Collins. "If you don't win the first time, don't worry. We will again be giving 25 lucky people a second bite at the apple by holding a runner-up drawing."

Even though a low numbered plate no longer confers protection for road violations, it is still treasured by many Massachusetts drivers. If you are one of those drivers, get your lottery application in the mail immediately.