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## Doug Moe: Vanity plates allow poetic license

Doug Moe  
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WHEN I heard that the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA) had just released a survey, by state, on the "penetration rate" of vanity license plates in the United States, I figured Wisconsin might be pretty far down the list.

In fact, we rank pretty high -- 11th, with 267,051 personalized plates, or 5.4 percent of all licensed vehicles. The leader was Virginia with 16.19 percent; the least vain state -- and this seems weird -- was Texas, with just 0.56 percent.

The AAMVA began gathering the data about a year ago after hearing from **Stefan Lonce**, an author who felt there might be a book in the stories behind all those personalized plates -- or "minimalist poetry in motion," as Lonce refers to them.

Lonce's forthcoming book is titled "LCNS2ROM -- License to Roam: Vanity Plates and the Stories They Tell." You can find out more about the book and the AAMVA survey by going to his Web site.

On Monday I spoke with Lonce, who has written an article for the fall issue of *Move*, the AAMVA magazine, that gives some interesting history on vanity plates. I asked Lonce how long he'd been interested in the subject.

"Since God was boy," he said, and laughed.

Actually, it couldn't pre-date 1931, when the first vanity plates were introduced by Pennsylvania, though the messages were limited to their owners' initials. Connecticut was next, in 1937, and allowed messages of up to four characters. Today they're available in all 50 states and the District of Columbia and generate an estimated \$200 million annually for state DMVs.

Lonce had not heard of Wisconsin's place in vanity plate lore, so I filled him in. It's the reason I thought the state might rank pretty low in percentage of vanity plates.

I think it probably started in February of 2001, when a story was widely circulated in state newspapers about a northern Wisconsin railroad worker who had bought a used hearse and gotten a vanity license plate on it that read: "1 ON ICE."

The story included the reaction of a few funeral home directors, who were not amused, and it was around this time that a mischievous Web site, The Smoking Gun, filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation to see if any other motorists had been offended by the minimalist poetry of the guy in the next car.

Enough Wisconsinites were offended -- Smoking Gun put a dozen or so letters up on its site -- that Smoking Gun was offended. They editorialized: "What could possibly motivate these snitches to try and stifle artistic expression? It's time to change the Wisconsin state bird from the robin to the canary."

One example cited by Smoking Gun, and I used to see this plate around Madison, read: "IH8GOP." The letter writer noted: "My reason for requesting the recall of this plate is that the message is obscene to those of us who are members of the Republican Party (GOP), and who subscribe to the conservative principles of the party."

As I noted earlier, despite our snitches, Wisconsin just missed making the top 10 in percentage of licensed vehicles that have been -- to use another of Lonce's terms -- "vanitized."

One factor may be that it is relatively cheap in Wisconsin to get a vanity plate -- \$15 on top of the usual license plate fee, as compared with \$40 in Texas and a whopping \$100 in Minnesota.

Lonce said he would welcome fun or inspirational vanity plates (along with their back story) for possible inclusion in his book, and you can send them to the Web site noted above.

"Do you have a vanity plate?" Lonce asked.

I had to admit I don't. I told him that when you write five columns a week, you don't want to have to try to be witty on your license plate. Then I asked if he had one. Of course, I should have seen it coming.

"LCNS2ROM," he said.

Heard something Moe should know? Call 252-6446, write P.O. Box 8060, Madison, WI 53708, or e-mail dmoe@madison.com

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