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We're so vain -- Ontario tops for personal plates They give drivers a platform to express themselves.

By DON PEAT, SUN MEDIA

Cathy Gibson was tired of people asking her husband about her '65 Corvette.

"Everybody kept saying it was Steve's Corvette," Gibson said. A quick trip to the MTO in 1988 fixed that.

The plate, ITS HRZ, told the story from then on.

To avoid any confusion when she bought her red 2001 Corvette, Cathy ordered the plates as soon as she left the dealer. ITS HRZ2 was born.

The plates get noticed. Most of the time, it's a girl who reads them, laughs and then nudges the guy she's driving with, Cathy said.

Now it's her husband who has to do the explaining when people see him driving either one of his wife's cars.

"They ask him, 'If it's hers, why are you driving?'" she said with a laugh from her Pickering home. "Usually I say, 'Because I let him.'"

Steve has his own Corvette with his own plate, L72, a nod to the big block engine only a car aficionado would know sits inside the '66 classic car.

The Gibsons' Corvettes aren't alone. A survey released by the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators last month found 440,148 Canadian vehicles have vanity plates along with more than 9 million American vehicles.

Ontario is the province with the highest percentage of vanity plates on its vehicles.

'EVERYONE'S GOT A STORY'

Maybe that's why it shouldn't be surprising that the topic of what a licence plate says to other drivers got so much attention in the last few weeks.

Just ask Rev. Joanne Sorrill of Whitby and Russell Henry of Peterborough. It took intervention by Premier Dalton McGuinty on Wednesday to ensure Sorrill could renew her REV JO plate and Henry his HVF8TH plate. Suzanne Fitzgerald of Sarnia is still fighting to get plates with BUTCHY39 as a Christmas present for her dad, Tom "Butchy" Cooper.

But why do drivers feel the need to say something with their licence plates?

Author Stefan Lonce, co-sponsor of the study, is writing a book, LCNS2ROM- License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the Stories They Tell, chronicling the personalized plate phenomenon.

"Vanity plates are minimalist poetry in motion," Lonce said. He thinks "vanitizing" your vehicle is so popular because it's one of the few platforms people have to express themselves.

"Everyone's got a story they want to tell," Lonce said.

One legend in personalized plates that must have a story is the WAS HIS plate. Often spotted on a nice car driven by a beautiful woman, it's a hard plate to track down.

MTO records show there is a WUZ HIZ and a WAS HIS out there, somewhere, but they appear to no longer be in use.



Cathy Gibson shows off her 1965 and 2001 Corvettes at her home in Pickering. Gibson got tired of people thinking the Corvettes were her husband Steve's, so she purchased personalized plates that read ITS HRZ and ITS HRZ2. Steve has his own Corvette with the personalized plates L72, which denotes the engine size. (Veronica Henri, Sun Media)

Huron University College history professor Doug Leighton says personalized plates have been playing on people's vanity for a long time.

'SOURCE OF REVENUE'

"Originally they were seen as an American phenomenon," said Leighton, who teaches an automobile history course at the school in London. "The Ontario government discovered it was a potential source of revenue."

Personalized licence plates have been available in Ontario since 1973. Now they'll cost you around \$237 for two to eight letters, almost \$100 more if you want one of 40 available graphics ranging from the Toronto Maple Leafs logo to the Knights of Columbus.

Leighton said personalized plates seem to come down to one of three reasons:

People seeing the car as an extension of themselves; people advertising themselves or their qualities; and people advertising their business or profession.

He said that although the plates' messages are generally harmless, there is a darker side to them.

"You do get some in plain bad taste," he said. "I'm not sure how you balance that in a multicultural society."

Sometimes the bad taste is by chance.

Sun reader Ruth Koheil, 66, called in amid the plate brouhaha with an interesting story from Niagara Falls. About a year ago, the retired physiotherapist found herself sitting behind a car with a plate that started with ARSY, followed by three numbers.

"I thought, man, that person must be really up in your face," Koheil said. "But I saw a few more of them and then I realized they are government-issued plates!"

Koheil thinks it is strange the government objects to certain phrases they think could offend while inadvertently issuing others that may offend.