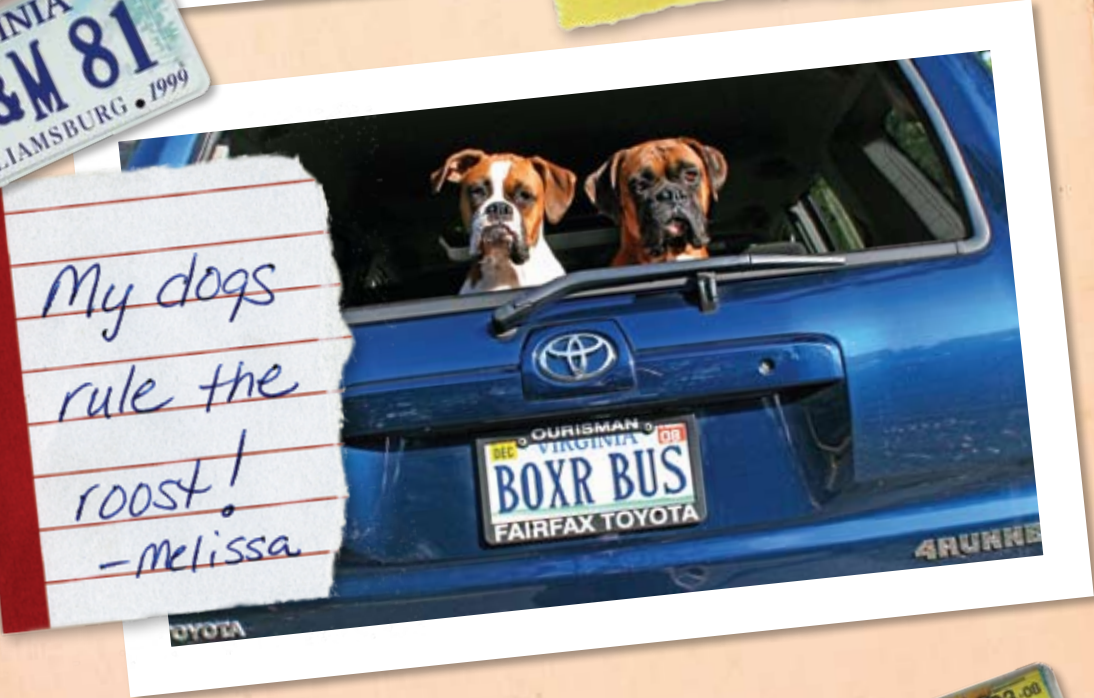




What can I say? I Love my yellow car!
-Lauren



My dogs rule the roost!
-Melissa



I SPENT 20 YEARS IN THE AIR FORCE AND MY WIFE HAS BEEN A CIVIL SERVANT FOR ALMOST 30. WE'VE OFTEN USED THE PHRASE, "CLOSE ENOUGH FOR GOVERNMENT WORK!"
-GREG



WHZ SO VN?

[WHO'S SO VAIN?]

They are fun for motorists and moneymakers for DMVs. They are pop culture icons. Now we know, for the first time, how many there are in the United States and Canada.

BY STEFAN J. LONCE

They tell millions of personal stories, many of them hopeful or humorous, in a new kind of shorthand. They are minimalist poetry in motion. They are fun. They are almost everywhere in North America. They are resolutely public, yet frequently enigmatic. And, until now, no one knew how many of them there are in the United States and Canada.

"They" are vanity license plates. I was so intrigued by the many clever—and sometimes puzzling—vanity plates I see each day that I decided to write a book about them. The book will be entitled *LCNS2ROM – License to Roam: Vanity License Plates and the Stories They Tell™*. *LCNS2ROM* will tell, in photography and prose, the compelling or funny stories that inspired the intriguing American and Canadian vanity plates that it will feature. Even if observers know what vanity plates say, they cannot know what they mean unless they know the motorists' stories that inspired the plates.

While researching vanity plates for *LCNS2ROM*, it quickly became obvious that I needed to find out how many vanity plates there are in the United States and Canada. I was surprised to find that no one knew how many vanity plates the DMVs have issued: not the Federal Highway Administration, not even AAMVA. Recognizing this information would be valuable to AAMVA members, the association offered to survey state and provincial members to find out how many vanity plates they have issued.

The *AAMVA-LCNS2ROM Vanity License Plates Survey* found that almost 9.3 million American motor vehicles, and 440,000 Canadian vehicles, are "vanitized" (which means embellished with vanity plates).

To measure the popularity of vanity plates, the *AAMVA-LCNS2ROM Vanity License Plates Survey* ranks American and Canadian jurisdictions by their percentages of registered motor vehicles that are vanitized.

According to the Federal Highway Administration, there are almost 243 million "privately owned and com-

mercial automobiles, trucks and motorcycles" in the United States; the survey defines the total of these vehicles as "Registered Motor Vehicles" (RMVs). In the United States, 3.82 percent of registered motor vehicles are vanitized. The ten states with the highest "vanity plate penetration rates" (defined as the percentage of RMVs that are vanitized) are Virginia, followed by New Hampshire, Illinois, Nevada, Montana, Maine, Connecticut, New Jersey, North Dakota and Vermont.

According to Statistics Canada, there are almost 15 million "Canadian Registered Motor Vehicles" (CRMVs) in the provinces and territories that issue vanity plates; the *AAMVA-LCNS2ROM Vanity License Plates Survey* defines CRMVs as "all registered motor vehicles, excluding buses, trailers, and off-road, construction and farm vehicles." In Canada, 2.94 percent of CRMVs are vanitized. The Canadian jurisdictions with the highest vanity plate penetration rates are Ontario, followed by Saskatchewan, Manitoba, the Yukon, and Northwest Territories.

Based on the survey results, it is estimated that American DMVs earn more than \$200 million annually from vanity plates, and Canadian DMVs earn almost C\$90 million. Those numbers reflect the fact that vanity plates can be profitable for DMVs. According to Illinois Vehicle Services Department Director Ernie Dannenberger, "There is a minimal difference in production cost as far as processing vanity plate applications than processing standard license plate applications."

DMVs can do more to promote vanity plates. DMV Web sites could include an interactive feature that allows motorists to see if the vanity plate they want is available. Virginia currently offers this function at www.dmvnow.com. In addition, promotion materials like brochures and posters can stimulate interest in personalized plates. Other creative marketing tactics include offering vanity plate gift certificates, currently available in Ontario, and online plate contests.





PHOTO BY NANCY NEY



PHOTO BY NANCY NEY

Want to know the story behind these plates? See sidebar on page 23.

WHY VANITY PLATES MATTER

Pennsylvania issued the first vanity plates in 1931, but limited their messages to the vehicle owners' initials. Connecticut issued the first true vanity plates in 1937, allowing motorists to create messages of up to four characters; soon the Nutmeg State's roads were replete with such vanity plates as MAMA, PAPA, STOP, and HELP. Today, all American states (and the District of Columbia), and all Canadian provinces (except for Quebec, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador) issue vanity plates.

It is uncertain who coined the term "vanity plate," but it appears to have originated in the U.S. in the mid-1960s. *The Britannica Book of the Year 1967* included vanity plate in its new words and meanings entries. On Sept. 17, 1967, the *Los Angeles Times* published a story about a Californian who had a Massachusetts vanity plate, without defining the term, suggesting that it was commonly understood. Today, many dictionaries define vanity plate, but most North American DMVs call them personalized plates, as do British and Australian DMVs.

Vanity plate is an appropriate moniker, however. License plates are the most public form of identification. Motorists with personalized plates express their "vanity" by creating messages designed to draw attention to themselves—or at least their motor vehicles. Those motorists tell their stories in the most abbreviated way possible, in the six, seven or eight characters allowed

on vanity plates (depending on the jurisdiction). They tell their vanity plate stories using the same kind of 21st century shorthand used in electronic messages (e-mails, instant messages and text messages): letters are omitted, words are spelled phonetically, numbers are substituted for words, and acronyms are used. LCNS2ROM is a paradigm of this new form of abbreviated electronic spelling, which we call SHRTSPL™ [Shortspell]. Less time = fewer letters.

Vanity plates are pop culture icons. They have been featured in such movies as "Back to the Future," in which Michael J. Fox's time transporter DeLorean had an OUTATIME vanity plate. On television, one of the funniest "Seinfeld" episodes centered around an ASSMAN New York vanity plate that was mistakenly delivered to Kramer, instead of the proctologist who ordered it. And vanity plates inspired a Canadian word puzzle game show, which later ran on American cable TV, called "Bumper Stumpers," in which contestants tried to guess the messages of contrived vanity plates.

Vanity plates are also pop culture icons because they take mundane objects—license plates—and turn them into art, using words. Vanity plates thus resemble the work of pop artists like Andy Warhol and Jasper Johns, who turned ordinary commercial products—soup and beer cans, steel wool boxes, and flags—into pop culture icons by painting them as realistic, yet impressionistic, still life portraits. Indeed, many states' and provinces' license plate designs are themselves expressions of pop art.

SURVEY SNAPSHOT

In the United States, 9,292,843 registered motor vehicles are vanitized (see *Vanity Plates Survey Results sidebar*). The ten states that have issued the most vanity plates are, in descending order, Illinois, California, Virginia, Ohio, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Connecticut.

In Canada, 440,148 registered motor vehicles are vanitized. Ontario has issued the most vanity plates, followed by Alberta, Saskatchewan, British Columbia and Manitoba.

EXPLAINING THE PHENOMENON

According to AAMVA President & CEO Neil Schuster, "Vanity plates are fun. I enjoy seeing them while driving and trying to figure out the clever ones."

But to have fun with vanity plates, motorists must pay additional fees. Virginia tops the survey (by vanity plate penetration rate), in part, because it charges the lowest fee in the United States: \$10. "The low fee helps make vanity plates extremely popular in Virginia," said Virginia DMV Commissioner D.B. Smit.

Even where vanity plates are inexpensive, however, they aren't necessarily popular. New Mexico calls its vanity plates "prestige plates," and they cost \$17, but only 1.69 percent of its RMVs are vanitized. In Minnesota, vanity plates cost \$100 (the highest fee in the United States), but 1.5 percent of RMVs are vanitized. Illinois charges a minimum new personalized plate fee of \$47—only six states charge more—but has the largest number

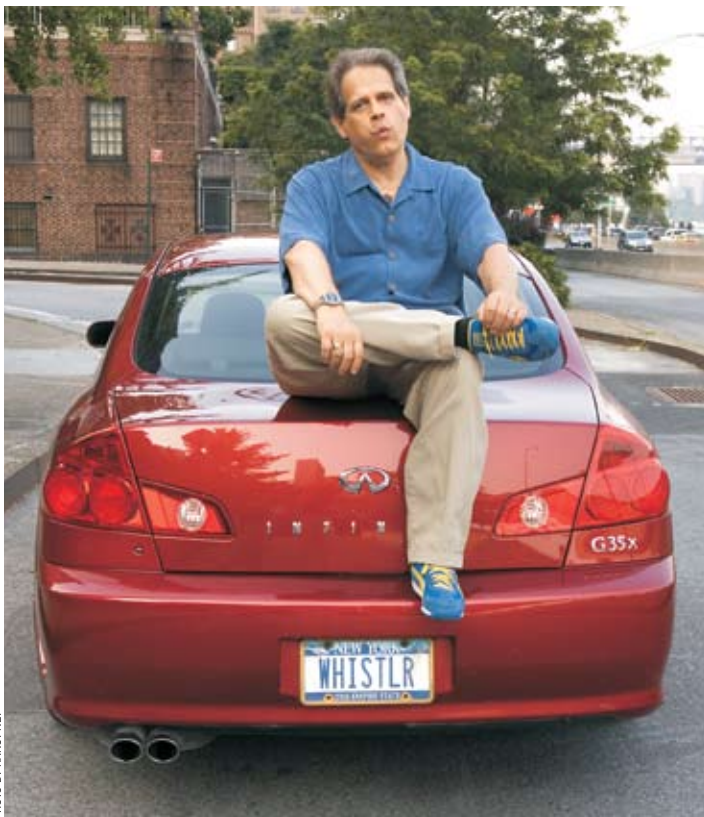


PHOTO BY NANCY NEY

The Stories Behind the Plates

When *LCNS2ROM* is published, it will include profiles of Americans and Canadians who have intriguing vanity plates.

The compelling or funny stories that inspired the vanity plates featured in the book will be told in prose and photographs. We are looking for other American and Canadian vanity plate holders to profile in *LCNS2ROM* (candidates should apply by completing a form that appears by clicking on the VNTYPL8 button at www.lcns2rom.com).

Following are excerpts from *LCSN2ROM*; complete profiles are posted under sample profiles at www.lcns2rom.com.

DONOR/DONEE

Allison Masry is always with her husband, Rudolph, even when they're miles apart. That's because, in 2003, Ally donated one of her kidneys to Rudy, who suffered from end stage renal failure. Ally's vanity plate is DONOR, and Rudy's is DONEE.

RAFLPRIZ

"Your son has Down syndrome. You should institutionalize him and say that he died in childbirth."

That's what Emily Kingsley's obstetrician told her in 1974, when her son Jason was born. Instead, Emily and her husband, Charles, found opportunity in adversity, and raised Jason. Today, Jason is a high school graduate who holds a job.

Emily also found opportunity at a Special Olympics fundraiser. She won the raffle prize: a new BMW convertible, which she adorned with vanity plates that proclaim, RAFLPRIZ.

WHISTLR

When Steve Herbst whistles, people listen. When Steve whistles something classical, listeners who close their eyes and concentrate on the sounds think that they are hearing a fine woodwind instrument, being played by a master musician.

A retired ad man who is now a professional whistler, Steve has performed at Carnegie Hall, in national ad campaigns, on TV, and in the movie "Pucker Up." Entirely self-taught, he has worked hard to develop a whistling style that mimics instruments. But Steve struggles to have whistling accepted as music, as art. He has had his WHISTLR vanity plate since 1988.



Vanity License Plates Survey

Conducted between November 2006 and April 2007 by the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators and LCNS2ROM—License to Roam

U.S.		Vanity Plate Penetration Rate 1/	No. Vanity Plates	No. Registered Motor Vehicles 2/
State	Rank			
Virginia	1	16.19%	1,065,217	6,578,773
New Hampshire	2	13.99%	171,438	1,225,075
Illinois	3	13.41%	1,293,157	9,645,590
Nevada	4	12.73%	174,682	1,372,652
Montana	5	9.80%	100,975	1,030,169
Maine*	6	9.79%	107,000	1,093,341
Connecticut*	7	8.14%	250,000	3,072,562
New Jersey	8	6.88%	429,199	6,239,518
North Dakota	9	6.51%	45,793	702,888
Vermont	10	6.11%	31,818	520,518
Wisconsin	11	5.40%	267,051	4,948,758
Arizona	12	5.16%	207,875	4,027,534
Alaska	13	4.99%	34,068	682,892
Ohio	14	4.79%	514,996	10,755,809
Hawaii	15	4.07%	38,695	950,185
North Carolina	16	4.05%	248,405	6,137,578
Alabama	17	4.00%	183,508	4,584,413
Mississippi	18	3.87%	76,208	1,969,317
Idaho*	19	3.84%	54,000	1,406,338
Iowa	20	3.72%	130,011	3,493,728
Rhode Island	21	3.67%	30,341	827,712
California	22	3.49%	1,136,772	32,592,000
Missouri	23	3.45%	160,025	4,633,733
Kansas*	24	3.33%	80,000	2,403,176
West Virginia	25	3.19%	42,204	1,324,001
Oregon	26	3.16%	91,239	2,889,356
Nebraska	27	3.16%	53,497	1,692,587
Colorado	28	3.01%	56,707	1,881,368
Oklahoma	29	2.97%	110,797	3,724,320
Wyoming	30	2.94%	19,351	657,248
Pennsylvania*	31	2.80%	280,000	10,014,167
Florida	32	2.74%	435,452	15,881,147
Michigan	33	2.55%	212,809	8,354,659
District of Columbia	34	2.55%	5,697	223,841
New York	35	2.43%	287,382	11,802,755
Delaware	36	2.40%	17,803	741,031
Utah	37	1.99%	44,462	2,229,008
Maryland	38	1.89%	81,978	4,347,895
New Mexico	39	1.69%	26,075	1,543,091
Washington	40	1.53%	87,333	5,694,318
Arkansas	41	1.53%	29,972	1,960,315
Georgia	42	1.50%	121,536	8,081,145
Minnesota	43	1.50%	72,050	4,787,646
South Dakota*	44	1.39%	12,200	878,667
South Carolina	45	1.35%	45,213	3,345,346
Massachusetts	46	1.19%	65,238	5,485,319
Kentucky	47	1.08%	37,013	3,434,687
Louisiana	48	0.98%	37,145	3,777,149
Indiana	49	0.96%	47,883	4,999,596
Tennessee	50	0.87%	43,258	4,999,211
Texas	51	0.56%	97,315	17,347,615
TOTAL		3.82%	9,292,843	242,991,747

1/ The "Vanity Plate Penetration Rate" is the percentage of registered motor vehicles, as defined in footnote 2, that are "vanitized" (which means to embellish a motor vehicle with vanity license plates).

2/ Privately owned and commercial automobiles, trucks and motorcycles in 2005. Source: Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics 2005, Table MV-1 (<http://fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/htm/mv1.htm>)

* DMVs from these states reported estimated or rounded numbers of the vanity plates that they have issued.

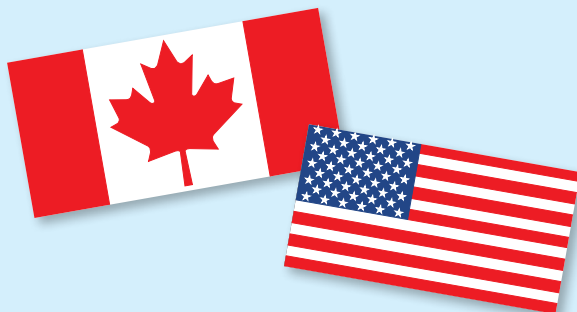
1/ The following jurisdictions do not issue personalized ("vanity") plates: New Foundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Quebec and Nunavut.

2/ The "Vanity Plate Penetration Rate" is the percentage of registered motor vehicles, as defined in footnote 3, that are "vanitized" (which means to embellish a motor vehicle with vanity license plates).

3/ All registered motor vehicles, excluding buses, trailers and off-road, construction and farm vehicles. Source: Statistics Canada, Motor vehicle registrations, by province and territory [2006]. (www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/trade14a.htm?)

* DMVs from these provinces and territories reported estimated or rounded numbers of the vanity plates that they have issued.

CANADA		Vanity Plate Penetration Rate 2/	No. Vanity Plates	No. Registered Motor Vehicles 3/
Province/Territory 1/	Rank			
Ontario	1	4.59%	334,121	7,271,566
Saskatchewan	2	2.69%	19,751	735,024
Manitoba	3	1.96%	13,074	668,370
Yukon	4	1.79%	511	28,522
Northwest Territories*	5	1.75%	400	22,828
Alberta*	6	1.73%	45,000	2,605,063
New Brunswick	7	1.42%	6,931	487,761
Nova Scotia*	8	0.90%	5,000	553,651
British Columbia	9	0.59%	15,360	2,607,261
TOTAL		2.94%	440,148	14,980,046



of vanitized motor vehicles, and has the third-highest vanity plate penetration rate of any state.

In Canada, Saskatchewan charges the lowest fee (C\$79.50), and has the second highest vanity plate penetration rate (2.69 percent). Ontario charges the highest fee (C\$237.30), but has the highest vanity plate penetration rate (4.59 percent).

So what explains the popularity of these plates? Americans and Canadians who are computer literate are probably more likely to be vanity plate holders, since vanity plate messages resemble the way people spell in electronic communications. The Old Dominion State's dominance in vanity plates could be due, in part, to the many computer and Internet businesses in Northern Virginia, where AAMVA is also headquartered. "A great many of us communicate with Blackberrys and shorthand," Schuster said.

But DMVs have been issuing vanity plates for 76 years, while most people have been using e-mail for only about a decade. It appears that in the states and provinces with the highest vanity plate penetration rates, a "tipping point" has been reached: vanity plates are numerous enough that they're really noticeable. In those states and provinces, a "vanity plate consciousness" has developed, which stimulates more motorists with standard plates to consider vanitizing their vehicles.

According to Virginia DMV spokesperson Pam Goheen, "Many DMV employees have personalized plates. Our parking lots are peppered with creative slogans highlighting hobbies, nicknames, sports teams and more."

Goheen has a vanity plate, as does Illinois's Ernie Dannenberger. So does Melissa Ferrari (managing editor of *Move*). Pam Goheen's vanity plate celebrates the year and month she married. Ernie Dannenberger's vanity plate recites his initials. Melissa Ferrari, whose vanity plate is BOXR BUS, honors her cherished "K9Z" [canines].

Vanity plates allow Americans and Canadians to express themselves, in virtually the most public way possible. Many businesses—particularly car and limousine services—use vanity plates as an inexpensive form of advertising; the plates also help their customers find their vehicles.

But most of all, vanity plates are fun! Working on LCNS2ROM, I am meeting so many interesting and clever people, who have told great stories on their vanity plates. And when I travel by car, it is usually in a vanitized vehicle embellished with a New York plate that proclaims, LCNS2ROM. ☑

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Want to learn how to promote vanity plates in your jurisdiction?

Visit Move online at www.aamva.org for more sidebars on vanity plates.