

Howard L. Burke (left), who donated his collection of Wyoming license plates to the Highway Department, speaks with Superintendent and Chief Engineer Leno Menghini in front of the displayed plates in the lobby of Department headquarters in Cheyenne. The collection includes an example of every plate issued by the state, and Burke keeps it current by adding his most recently used plate yearly.



## Unique plates' display shows all

**P**robably the most unique and complete collection of license plates is on display at the Highway Department headquarters in Cheyenne.

It is unique, because 62 of the 69 plates in the collection bear the same number and complete, because it contains a license plate for each year the state has issued them. In fact, there is a sample of the plates which were required before they were issued by the state.

Prior to 1913, the state required auto owners to make their own plates, and the collection is replete with a leathern plate upon which is mounted house numbers.

The collection is a gift to the Department from Howard L. Burke, a retired Cheyenne businessman, who gave his plates to the Department as a result of a conversation with then-Superintendent Ray Bromley in 1955. While Burke was in the process of moving the Department from the Capitol Building to the State Office Building, he asked Bromley if the Department wanted the plates.

Bromley said the Department not only wanted the collection, but would build an appropriate display for them. Since that time, Burke has continued to donate his personal plates with the number 2-977 after they've been used on his car.

Burke got the number in the early '50s when it was no longer used by Federal District Judge T. Blake Kennedy, its original holder. Judge Kennedy began using the number in 1917 and fortunately kept his plates each year and eventually gave them to Burke.

Burke's association with the Judge began when Burke bought Kennedy's used Cadillac. Throughout several years, the Judge drove Cadillacs because he thought the car befitting the stature of a jurist and Burke drove the hand-me-downs because the price was right.

The entire collection, dating from 1911 to 1982, has been used by only two people. Burke said when he gets down to driving only one car it will still bear the 2-977 license number and that the Department will continue to receive the used plate for the collection.

Burke's firm was also the contractor for moving the Department from the State Office Building to the new headquarters building in 1958.

When license plates were first required in 1913, the state did not issue them but insisted each operator make his own. That increased the business of the local blacksmiths and saddlery shops.

In 1913, the state issued a metal plate with red numbers on a white background. They were made by the

Grimm Company in St. Louis and about 1,600 were issued.

A rare collector's item is the 1916 plate which was porcelain covered and had blue numbers on a white background. That was the only year porcelain was used for license plates.

Multi-year plates were not invented in 1976. The 1920 plates had four slots on the left side, into which was inserted tabs for the 1921 plate, which was also slotted to insert yet another tab bearing the license number. Hence, cars which were licensed in 1920 carried the same plate into 1921 and that became the only three-piece plates ever issued.

New licenses issued in 1921 were of a different color from those issued the previous year.

From 1913 to 1917, the State Seal appeared on the plates as a second piece of metal except in 1915 when it was embossed on the plate and in 1916 when the seal was printed on the porcelain.

In 1930, the county designation first appeared on the plates, with Natrona being number one and Sublette 23. Assessed valuation was the basis for determining the respective numbers for each of the state's 23 counties.

Also in 1930, the sale of license plates was transferred from the Secretary of State's office to the counties.

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*The collection is unique because most bear the same number and complete because it contains a license plate for each year the state has issued them.*

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The bucking horse on the plates was initiated in 1936 at the behest of then-Secretary of State, Lester C. Hunt. He commissioned Allen T. True (brother of former highway superintendent James B. True) of Littleton, Colo.

Phil Roberts of the Archives, Museums and Historical Department writes, "The controversy has continued about the identity of the horse and cowboy on the plates. It was asserted that the rider was "Stub" Farlow of Lander but Hunt, then a U.S. Senator, wrote to Lola Homsher, then director of the Archives and Historical Department: 'Many stories have appeared in the press from time to time — their origin I do not know — saying that the bucking horse license plate was a certain horse and the rider was Mr. Farlow.

'Such is not the case, but I did have "Stub" Farlow in mind when designing the plate.' Nor was the horse the famous Steamboat, according to Hunt. The origin of the design is still a matter of debate. Did it originate with the Wyoming National Guard in France during World War I? Did it first appear on an airplane that flew against the Germans in that war? Or was the idea "entirely original" with Hunt who wrote that 'no other person had ever mentioned such a plate in my presence!'"

All the plates in the collection are metal, except the 1944 version. War-time metal demands caused states to choose other materials and Wyoming's plates were made of pressed paper. They held up remarkably well, except cows developed a taste for the paper plates and many were chewed up before they expired.

The bucking horse was embossed on the plates from its 1936 arrival until it was printed on the 1975-77 plate, except for the paper plate in 1944. It was again embossed on the '78-'82 plates, but printed on the car plates in 1983 and embossed on the '83 truck plates.

License plates were in a variety of sizes until the standard was made at 12" x 6" in 1956. For several years prior, they were 13 3/4" x 5 3/8" but sizes ranged from 12" long and as narrow as 4 1/2" deep.

Colors on license plates have been many and varied. Yellow numbers on a brown field first appeared in 1937 to mark the 50th anniversary of the University of Wyoming. That combination was again used in 1968.


The brown on yellow combination of the '83 plates was used in 1928, '43, '52, '57, '60 and '65. The most often used combination has been white numbers on a black background, that hav-

ing occurred in 10 different years. The only three-color tag used was for the bicentennial years, 1975-1977.

Wyoming was abbreviated WYO on the plates from 1913 to 1929 and again from 1957 to 1974. In all other years, it has been spelled out. The year designation first appeared on the plates in 1918 and until 1957 all four digits were used. From '52 to '74, only the last two numbers of the year were on the plates.

Placement of "Wyoming" and the year has been variable, with each having appeared at each corner of the plates, both top and bottom. From 1918 to 1929, both "WYO" and the year were on the left side of the plate.

Until 1950, manufacture of the license plates was contracted by the state, then inmates at the penitentiary began making them and have continued since that time.

Many of the plates in the Highway Department collection are sought after by collectors because it contains some very rare plates. The collection is unique because of the uniformity of numbers, the fact they were all owned by just two individuals, one of whose generosity makes it possible for a lot of people to see a phase of Wyoming's history. That's Howard Burke. 

## Collection outgrew original case

**A**s a result of the generosity of Howard L. Burke, the complete collection of Wyoming's license plates is established and continues to grow. When the gift was made to the Department in 1955, there was little room to display it for the public, and, when the Department moved to new quarters in 1958, the lobby of the new building provided the space needed for just such a display.

An engineering student at the University who was working summers for the Department took it upon himself to build an appropriate display for the plates.

In the summer of 1959, John Cole, now state Right-of-Way engineer, procured two logs, hand peeled and finished them, acquired the 6" x 12" planks for the base and assembled the display. In order to carry as much continuity

as possible, the top board was sent to the State Penitentiary where it was routed in the same fashion as the "Welcome to Wyoming" signs that greeted in-bound visitors to the state.

Wings were later added when the number of license plates became too numerous for the original five- by nine-foot board. Since the original mounting, the plates have been repositioned once to cut down on wasted space. At that time, non-removable screws were used and multi-piece plates were covered with plexiglass as a deterrent against theft and vandalism.

The display is probably the biggest attention-getter in the Department. 