

Dr. Rick Rader contacted the Automobile License Plate Collectors Association, telling them that the Orange Grove Habilitation Center started a display of wheelchair plates in their lobby and needed some assistance completing the display. ALPCA members from all parts of the country started responding. In total, 22 members donated plates from their own collections to this great cause.

LICENSE RIGHTS

By Justin Mattes

They are considered one of the first special issue license plates ever. These pieces of tin go by many names including: “wheelchair,” “disabled,” and the less popular description, “handicapped.” They are easily identified by the symbol of a person seated in a wheelchair.

The logo was designed almost 40 years ago and today remains one of the most recognized icons in the world. Usually, you need a letter from a doctor or some other proof to obtain these plates. The plates aren’t just restricted to cars; you can spot wheelchair license plates on pickup trucks, motor homes, and even motorcycles.

International Symbol of Access

Who knew a sketch by a Danish design student would go on to become one of the most recognizable symbols in the world? In 1969 a competition was held to find a picture that indicates a facility is accessible to people in wheelchairs and with other physical disabilities. After some discussion, the winning design was submitted by Susan Kofoed. Ms. Kofoed drew a profile view of a stick figure with a tadpole’s head on top of three-quarters of a body. Two of the judges suggested the addition of a head to the stick figure. The judges still weren’t pleased. One of the judges described it as awful even as a symbol of specific wheelchair access, due to its ugliness and its strange Borg-like union of tadpole-figured man and machine. People compared it to some kind of alien anal probe. However, it was the

best design, and the committee approved it. They then discussed a label and decided to call it the International Symbol of Access.

Proof of Disability Required

In order to obtain these license plates, the applicant must submit a doctor’s note describing the disability. In Arizona for example, the person is issued license plates so long as he can provide a valid Medical Certification signed by a doctor. The driver doesn’t have to have the disability, just a person in the household. New Mexico has an interesting law on the books regarding wheelchair plates. In order to qualify, the person must have lost a limb or use of a limb above the wrist or ankle. If the driver wishes to transfer the plate to a new vehicle, he is exempt from paying the motor vehicle excise tax. Some towns in New Jersey allow vehicles with disabled plates to occupy metered parking space without having to pay the fees.

More Than Just Passenger Cars

Wheelchair license plates aren’t just restricted to passenger cars. The International Symbol of Access has been spotted on all kinds of vehicles. States that issue combination truck plates, like Connecticut for example, have the symbol. A big farming state like Wisconsin has issued farm truck plates with the logo before the number. Iowa holds the distinction of having the largest variety of license plates with the wheelchair logo on them. In states like



PHOTO BY DENNIS WILKES

The Orange Grove Habilitation Center lobby display.

Arizona and New York, a ham radio plate was spotted with the International Symbol of Access along with the regular antenna graphic. There has been a push for the motor vehicle departments to make the logo available on optional plates, so drivers with disabilities have the ability to express themselves just like every other motorist on the road.

Disabled Cycle Riders

States across the country from Arizona to Virginia allow wheelchair plates to be placed on the back of motorcycles as well. In 1973, Georgia became the first state to issue wheelchair plates on motorcycles. The states, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Idaho, Indiana, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma and Virginia all followed suit. Oklahoma issued disabled motorcycle plates after a rider with an artificial leg filed a petition with the state DMV. This plate is among the rarest disabled motorcycle plates out there, and has only been spotted in Oklahoma City.

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Placards Too

Nearly every state in the USA issues wheelchair plates, where the exceptions are Rhode Island and Oregon. However, placards are another option besides having a permanent license plate attached to the vehicle. There are two types of placards, blue and red. The blue placards are issued permanently, while the red placards are issued on a temporary basis, usually when a person was involved in an accident. These special signs hang from the vehicle's rear view mirror, and are issued to the person, not to the vehicle itself. So if the person uses another vehicle, he or she can just transfer the placard from one vehicle to another easily, especially now that leasing cars instead of purchased ones has become the trend. Having window placards allows the person to purchase specialty plates, like the Tennessee Smokey Mountains license plate, without having to sacrifice the ability the park in spaces reserved for people with disabilities. Oregon stopped issuing actual wheelchair license plates altogether, and just issues placards. This is why the Oregon wheelchair plate is nearly impossible to collect.



A special plate credits ALPCA members for their generous donations

PHOTO BY DENNIS WILKES

The Orange Grove Wheelchair Display

Dr. Rader, recently contacted ALPCA (Automobile License Plate Collectors Association), explaining to the Board that the Orange Grove Habilitation Center started a display of wheelchair plates in their lobby and wanted some assistance completing the display. Almost immediately after a request went out, ALPCA members from all parts of the country started responding. In total, 22 members graciously donated plates from their own collections to this great cause. The plates were sent down to Tennessee, where they were added to the display in the lobby. A plaque saying the plates were donated by ALPCA was placed besides the display.

Automobile License Plate Collectors Association

The Automobile License Plate Collectors Association (ALPCA) was founded in 1954 by Dr. Cecil George, a psychoanalyst from Massachusetts, and Asa Colby, a postmaster from New Hampshire. Dr. George read an article in the Boston Post about Mr. Colby and his collection of license plates. Dr. George had started collecting plates a few years earlier and had no idea there were others with similar interests. Mr. Colby started serious collecting in 1949. Dr. George wrote to Mr. Colby offering to exchange some of his duplicate plates for some of his. This started a friendship that endured until Mr. Colby passed in 1973. Their common interest spurred them into discovering if there were others with a similar passion. Mr. Colby placed advertisements in several automotive hobby magazines and stamp collecting periodicals and, shortly thereafter, their common passion grew into an organization which has risen to more than 11,500 members all over the world. The two held the first convention at Dr. George's home which attracted 17 likeminded individuals. Dr. George was assigned membership #1 and Mr. Colby took #2.

THE ALPCA HOSTS A YEARLY NATIONAL CONVENTION IN DIFFERENT CITIES ACROSS THE U.S. AND IS BROKEN UP INTO 23 REGIONS THAT HOLD LOCAL GATHERINGS SEVERAL TIMES A YEAR

Today, ALPCA produces a full-color, bi-monthly magazine filled with articles and pictures about license plates and the different aspects of license plate collecting to serve the some 3,000 active members. The club hosts a yearly national convention in different cities across the United States and is broken up into 23 regions throughout the United States that hold local gatherings several times a year. ALPCA has also spawned companion clubs in Europe and Australia. For more information and how to join please visit the club website at: <http://www.alpca.org> •

NOTE: This article is dedicated in memory of Stephen Gold and Tom Miserdino. They both taught me there is a difference between living with a disability and being disabled!

About the Author:

Justin Mattes has considered license plate collecting more than a hobby ever since he received his first license plates in 1992. His parents gave him an ALPCA membership as a Christmas present in 1993. Justin has attended eight national conventions around the country and been to dozens of regional meets. In 2008 he co-founded ALPCA's Garden State Region with fellow ALPCA member Marco Tramelli. They host an annual license plate meet, the second Saturday in November, in various locations throughout New Jersey. In 2009 Justin received an award for his license plate display "Route 66 by Wheelchair" at ALPCA'S annual convention in Erie, Pennsylvania

Justin was born in 1978 with athetoid cerebral palsy. He was fully mainstreamed in his local school district from first grade until he graduated from Pascack Valley High School in 1998. Besides license plate collecting, he is an avid amateur radio operator. Justin volunteers for his town's office of emergency management serving as a radio officer. A freelance writer since 2000, Justin has written dozens of articles on both license plates as well as radio communications. He is working on a book of poems as well as an autobiography. He currently lives in Northern New Jersey.