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The SPARK is published quarterly by WSAH, a non-profit, tax exempt organization affiliated with both the Wisconsin State Historical Society and the Society of Automotive Historians. Membership and donations are tax deductible. Address membership questions to: Bob Gary, 1316 Fourth Ave., Stevens Point, WI 54481. Address all manuscripts to be considered for the SPARK to: Chris Halla, 1455 W. Prospect Avenue, Appleton, WI 54914.

MEETING MINUTES

The Wisconsin Society of Automotive Historians held their Mid-winter Board of Directors and Membership Meeting Saturday, February 22nd, 1986 at the Brooks Stevens Museum in Mequon, Wisconsin.

Board and regular members and their guests included: Bill Cameron, Ken Nimocks, Ray Scroggins and son, Bob Gary, Chris Halla, Matt Joseph and sons, Wally Wray, Ken Knauf, David Babb and wife, Ray Wolff and son, Brooks Stevens and Dennis Schrimpf.

In the absence of Ray Scroggins, who was picking up the guest speaker, Ray Besasie, the Secretary's report was omitted.

Bob Gary submitted a complete Treasurer's report which consisted of a favorable financial review of money raising activities at Iola and Hartford and membership status as of February 22nd. Bob asked for more donations of literature to sell at coming events and said he would again have a tent to serve as a gathering place for members and for the sale of literature. The Treasurer's report was unanimously approved.

Next to report was SPARK editor, Chris Halla. Chris explained that he is aiming for balance in the content of SPARK; one-third automotive history, one-third information on the practical aspects of writing, recording and preserving automotive history, and one-third commentary as exemplified by Matt's article on Saturn. A discussion on enlisting additional corporate sponsorship followed, and Bob Gary will further pursue the matter. It was

noted that Chet Krause will no longer make a cash contribution, but might buy a published ad. Chris's report was unanimously approved following many expressions of congratulations for a superb publishing and editing job.

Matt Joseph reported on activities at the National Board of Directors meeting. The proposed addition of "International" to the Society's title was voted down, while approval was granted to a proposal to obtain insurance coverage for national and local officers while participating in Society-sponsored events. Matt then detailed a proposal advanced by Tom Warth for an international literature swap meet to be held the first Saturday after Labor Day in Osceola, Wisconsin. The idea was endorsed enthusiastically by the national organization with the responsibility of its execution to be assumed by the Wisconsin Chapter. Classic Motorbooks would provide a 30'x60' tent and all other equipment and facilities needed for the display and sale of antique automobile related books, publications, stock certificates, etcetera, with the Wisconsin Chapter handling the details and carrying out the publicity and all fiscal matters pertaining to the event. For its participation the Chapter would receive all revenues, which might not be substantial in the first year, but would show promise of increasing in future years. The proposal was well received and endorsed by the Chapter Board of Directors, who then appointed a committee consisting of Ray Scroggins, organization; Chris Halla, publicity; Bob Gary, finances; and Matt Joseph, liaison with the national SAH. The committee will meet as soon as possible, preferably in Osceola, to work out the details.

Matt noted that both the Canadian and United Kingdom chapters of the SAH have disassociated themselves and that, with the exception of Southern California, Wisconsin is the only viable and functioning chapter at the present time.

The next order of business was the appointment of a nominating committee for election of officers, which takes place every two years. Matt Joseph has graciously handled this assignment in the past and agreed to conduct an election by mail in advance of our annual meeting in Iola, where the change in officers and board members takes place.

Bill Cameron presented a summary of a letter from Mr. Dale Anderson, executive director of Hartford Heritage, Inc. telling of the establishment of an automobile and industrial museum at the home of Kissel automobiles, and asking for assistance in the form of loaning antique cars and monetary support. Bob Gary outlined the success we had at the Hartford car show in 1985 and advocated that we meet there again this year. A letter of congratulations and best wishes will be sent and Chapter members are urged to participate to the best of their ability. The next meeting of WSAH will be scheduled to coincide with the museum's opening in June.

Several items of discussion were brought up by Wally Wray. First was the idea of having WSAH stationery printed, without individual identification, for sale to members in any quantity. Enough interest was shown to have Wally further pursue the matter.

Another item was the request for a list of members

indicating the specific areas of automotive history in which they are able to help. Bob Gary explained that he is working on such a list using information from the original applications and that copies will be mailed to all members.

Wally then proposed that an antique Wisconsin road map be reproduced for sale as a fund-raising activity. At that point Matt Joseph produced a remarkably well-kept 1926 Wisconsin map and told an interesting story of its acquisition: The map was given to him by a county truck driver who came to Matt's aid when his 1932 Lincoln developed a cooling system leak. Bill Cameron volunteered to follow up on the costs of reproducing the map and will report to the board.

Next, Wally asked if we should repeat the membership survey which was conducted by Bob Lichty a few years ago. Following discussion, it was decided that Bob Gary's project would be a suitable substitute.

No further official business was brought before the board, and the meeting adjourned at 4:30 p.m.

The program for the afternoon consisted of reminiscences by 82 year-old Ray Besasie on his development of early gas-saving devices, the turbo-charger, aircraft, and the early Excalibur J-cars, which were very successful in racing events in the 1950's. As a matter of interest, Bob Gary was one of the drivers of the early race cars. Brooks Stevens, Honorary Member of WSAH, elaborated upon the development of the Excalibur cars and other automotive history. Several photographs were also passed among the group. In conversation after the

presentation, Mr. Stevens remarked that he and Mr. Besasie together had over 150 years to look back upon!

The meeting was preceded by lunch at the Chalet Motel and was followed by further viewing of the museum vehicles, a social hour at Bill's "Hospitality Suite," and dinner and more fellowship at Nantucket Shores Supper Club.

Respectfully submitted by Bill Cameron and Ken Nimocks.

WISCONSIN LICENSE PLATES THROUGH THE YEARS

By Keith Marvin

On July 1st 1905, the State of Wisconsin issued its first automobile license plate to Dane County Judge A.G. Zimmerman of Madison. In this simple action, the Badger State became the fifth of these United States to issue motor vehicle number plates on a state-wide basis, although automobile numbers were known in several large cities of the country.¹

Actually, they had been known in Wisconsin for several months, in the cities of Madison and Milwaukee, where municipal registrations had been in effect since the preceding year² and with the introduction of the new markers, the local issues became obsolete.

The Act of the Wisconsin State Legislature approving statewide registration had been approved only three weeks previously--on June 5th--and it may be assumed that either the plates were provided with lightning speed or that, certain of the measure's passage, manufacturing had been underway before this. However, by July 1st the plates were ready for all comers, the registration fee being \$1.00!

The plates were fashioned of black-painted zinc to which were riveted aluminum numbers, three-inches high; a hyphen, and the suffix letter "W" which stood for the State's name, the issuing authorities probably never considering any confusion with cars registered in Washington, West Virginia or Wyoming. Wisconsin wasn't alone in the practice, either.

Connecticut would identify its motorists by plates prefixed with a "C" until 1914.

Registrations were under the direction of the Secretary of State in Madison and only a single plate was issued, to be hung or fastened securely at the rear of the vehicle to which it was assigned. Wisconsin law provided a legal speed for motor vehicles of 12 mph in corporate city or village limits and a maximum of 25 mph in the country. By the end of 1905, a total of 1,492 plates had been issued and the series was continued, numbers reaching 2666 at the end of the following year; 4147 at the end of 1907 and 6192 at the end of 1908.

In 1909, there was a sort of re-registration. The authorities took a long hard look at the existing practice, found little if any fault with it and decided to continue the series; with one change. The registration fee was increased to \$2.00 per vehicle. Previous registrants were allowed to renew their existing numbers at \$1.00. By the end of 1909, the number plate had reached 9232. The system was continued through 1910, with numbers reaching 15212. The only significant change this year was the elimination of the hyphen separating the plate number from its "W" suffix. The space was taken up by the fifth digit.³

Sometime early in 1911 State sachers decided that a new plate series was in order and, with an annual registration system (and, undoubtedly increased revenue in registration fees) in mind, approved the issuance of a new set of plates effective July 11th. Since this would be a mid-year issue, it was decided that it would apply to new registrations only and that those previously registered might carry their plates until January 1, 1912. The 1911 series

was similar in materials and size to the previous plates but with three important differences. The first was the color, aluminum on green. Secondly, the plate would be issued in pairs for the front and rear of the motor vehicle. Finally, it would be dated, and the year 1911 was added to the left-hand side. The numeric sequence, oddly enough, began at "1-W" and one wonders how many of these plates may have duplicated some of the very early ones of the receding series which still might have been in service?

On January 1, 1912, a completely new 1912 series was issued obsoleting all existing Wisconsin plates. These were zinc, as usual, painted red, with the aluminum numbers attached and in the same size and design. These plates were presumably made by the Schwaab Stamp & Steel Company, in Milwaukee which had produced the 1911 series. Some were also probably made by the Green Bay Cornice & Corrugating Company of Green Bay.⁴

In 1913, the plates, although of similar design, were of different materials, the aluminum numbers being fastened to a background of thin steel, and featuring a blue background. For 1914, Wisconsin opted for an embossed steel type which was becoming increasingly popular in other states, outwore the beautiful but delicate porcelain types and, most importantly, was much easier to produce at a considerably lower cost. The traditional design was retained, and the 1914 plates were the first to be produced in the State Prison at Waupun, although it is believed that private concerns still provided the overflow.⁵ From this point through 1924, Wisconsin plates appeared annually, changes of color scheme being their most notable difference from

year to year. For 1916, the "W" identification letter was removed in favor of the State abbreviation, "WIS" which was carried through the ensuing year and then, oddly, this was abandoned in favor of the earlier "W" which was carried through the 1920 issue. Another interesting if minor point was the inclusion of a painted border on the 1919 plates. This was a one-year feature and wouldn't appear again until 1932.

In an effort to expedite rapid identification, a hyphen was introduced in all numeric sequences starting at 10,000 in 1921. Three years later, in 1924, a letter designation was adopted to identify the assigned vehicle according to its weight, the following being employed: A - For less than 1,600 lbs; B - 1,600 through 2,000 lbs; C - 2,000 through 2,800 lbs; D - 2,800 through 4,000 lbs; E - More than 4,000 lbs; This system would remain in effect through the 1931 series.

In 1932, larger license plates were issued and for the first time, the state name appeared in full-- or at least on four through six numbered plates. The abbreviation was still retained on the smaller plates made for one to three-number sequences. Also in 1932, the painted outer border, in disuse since 1919, was reestablished and would remain an integral part of Wisconsin plate design through 1940. One other change which would remain peculiar to 1932 plates was the hyphen--heretofore and for many years hereafter used on five and six-number plates which was eliminated. Plates remained basically the same without notable change other than color scheme through 1939, the only perceptible change being that beginning with 1934, the "WIS" abbreviated combination series was extended to four-digit plates.

In 1940, the term, "AMERICA'S DAIRYLAND" was used for the first time. The plates carried these words under the numbers with the state name and date on top. The stroke on the numbers (as well as on state name, date and legend) was thin and the plates suffered from the legibility which had been a hallmark in Wisconsin plate design. Whether it was for this reason or not, a second series of 1940 plates appeared in June of that year with numbers starting at 430-000.⁶ The new design carried "WIS-40" vertically between the two banks of numbers and with the "AMERICA'S DAIRYLAND" ploy below. Numbers were taller and the stroke was thicker.

The 1941 plate was somewhat similar to the first 1940 type in design but with the "AMERICA'S DAIRYLAND" on the top and "19 WISCONSIN 41" on the bottom, but thanks to larger and considerably thicker-stroked numbers and letters, it was most legible. The outer painted border was eliminated. In 1942, due to the metal conservation program, Wisconsin issued its plates with rounded-off corners. This steel saving device wasn't new. It had initially been introduced with California's 1940 series and copied by Arizona a year later. It would be retained by those states through 1955. Idaho had also contemplated this move in its own plate design but it didn't go into effect.

The 1942 plates were the first semi-permanent ones to be issued by Wisconsin and in anticipation of extended hostilities in the international situation and resulting shortages of metal, used the 1942 issue through 1945 with a vertical metal date tab of different colors issued annually to revalidate the base plate. Another--and relatively scarce--

smaller plate of the same color scheme was issued during 1942, but differed from the regulation issue both in design ("WIS" and a horizontal 1942 date tab on the bottom) but curious alpha-numeric combinations consisting of three letters only. No "AMERICA'S DAIRYLAND" slogan appeared on this series which was nearer the size of a motorcycle plate than the regulation type of passenger-car tag.

For 1943, motorists were requested to remove their front plates and keep them for future use in view of the increasing metal shortage and a windshield sticker was issued in place of the now missing front plate for that year.⁷ For new registrations in 1943, a smaller plate of the same colors as the regulation series was issued. This series, also devoid of the state slogan, carried a black on white date tab on the lower right corner of the tag itself--horizontal instead of the regulation vertical type. In 1946, a brand new series was inaugurated. This white on black plate was, like its immediate predecessor, made with rounded off corners and its design, in accordance to the initial plans that the plates expire in 1946, carried that date. The basic changes in plate design provided a small prefix number which would indicate the month of expiration, followed by larger numbers. In between the prefix number and the larger ones, two small slits were added to accommodate the ends of the metal inserts which would be provided annually. As it turned out, this series didn't expire in 1946 at all but was extended into 1952. In 1946, all motorists were issued a pair of plates, dated either "'46" or "'47." These two types were used the following year with tab inserts.

In 1948, these were continued and a new series without basic date appeared. For 1949, these three were continued, all of course with the proper date inserts, and in 1950, a rectangular fourth type was added to the three existing varieties. For 1951, the four types were continued and, to add to the confusion, the rectangular types were issued in both steel and aluminum. Also this year, newly-issued base plates were restricted to one only per motorist, due to a metal shortage. In 1952, final year of the basic series, a fifth type of rectangular plate featuring all letters only appeared. The system had become extremely complicated over this seven-year period and new plates were in order. They appeared for 1953, black on yellow base plates with a new system--a prefix letter denoting the month of expiration, "A" indicating January, etcetera. The state name was once again abbreviated to "WIS" and the letter and month of expiration was noted. This system continues to the present time.

The 1953 plate was revalidated for 1954 by a date-tab and in 1955, a new base plate was issued, the policy of issuing biennial plates being continued through 1964. The revalidating devices employed in the even years during this period were metal date tabs through 1960 and, starting with 1961, reflectorized plate stickers. In the 1956 series, a second letter was added to the various plate expiration dates. The 1965 base plate, unlike its biennial predecessors, was used for three years and the next base in 1968 was the first to have a reflectorized background. Also, usage of the full name, "WISCONSIN" was once again resumed. This plate was used for five years, revalidated by annual reflectorized stickers.

In 1979, a new black on reflectorized yellow plate made its appearance and this plate is in current service, updated annually by the ubiquitous stickers. Current news regarding its longevity isn't consistent but it seems assured that the plate has good chances of being retained in service until the late 1980s.

(EDITOR'S NOTE: As we all know, Wisconsin has now selected a new design for its next license plate. CH.)

Footnotes

- 1) Notably Chicago, St. Louis, Philadelphia and, in Canada, Montreal.
- 2) Madison registrations started in August, 1904. In Milwaukee, they began September 8th.
- 3) Numbers on the 1905-1911 series reached 21365 at the time the new 1911 series was put into use.
- 4) From "Wisconsin-America's Dairyland," ALPCA NEWS-LETTER, October, 1978. This excellent account includes information by Roy Carson, Warren Baier and Lew Hemstock.
- 5) Plates were all prison made starting in 1921.
- 6) From "Wisconsin-America's Dairyland," ALPCA NEWS-LETTER, October, 1978.
- 7) This practice of recalling a previously-issued front plate wasn't exclusive with Wisconsin. This also occurred in New York State and the previously-issued second plate was returned to the state where it was subsequently restamped as to date, repainted and re-issued as the 1944 tag. In Newfoundland, the front plate, returned to the Motor Vehicle Dept., had its numbers repainted and was reissued as the 1944 series.

Wisconsin License Plate Color Schemes

1905 Silver on Black...Nos. 1-W to 1492-W
1906 Silver on Black...Nos. 1493-W to 2666-W
1907 Silver on Black...Nos. 2667-W to 4147-W
1908 Silver on Black...Nos. 4148-W to 6192-W
1909 Silver on Black...Nos. 6193-W to 9232-W
1910 Silver on Black...Nos. 9233-W to 15212W
1911 Silver on Black...Nos. 15213W to 21365W
 Silver on Green...(new registrations)
 Nos. 1-W and up
1912 Silver on Red
1913 Silver on Blue
1914 Black on White
1915 White on Black
1916 Red on White
1917 White on Olive Green
1918 Black on Cream
1919 Yellow on Green
1920 White on Maroon
1921 Black on Gray
1922 White on Olive Green
1923 Red on White
1924 White on Black
1925 Yellow on Blue
1926 Black on Cream
1927 White on Navy Blue
1928 Black on Orange
1929 White on Apple Green
1930 Black on Gray
1931 Yellow on Blue
1932 Blue on Yellow
1933 White on Dark Purple
1934 Black on White
1935 White on Black
1936 Green on White
1937 White on Blue
1938 Black on Silver

1939 White on Black
1940 Red on White
1941 Black on Yellow
1942 Yellow on Black
1943 Yellow on Black...Black on White date tab
1944 Yellow on Black...White on Green date tab
1945 Yellow on Black...Red on White date tab
1946 White on Black
1947 White on Black...Black on Orange date insert
1948 White on Black...Black on Yellow date insert
1949 White on Black...White on Green date insert
1950 White on Black...Yellow on Light Blue date
 insert
1951 White on Black...Red on White date insert
1952 White on Black...Black on Yellow date insert
1953 Black on Yellow
1954 Black on Yellow...White on Red date tab
1955 Green on White
1956 Green on White...Blue on Yellow date tab
1957 Black on Yellow
1958 Black on Yellow...Red on White date tab
1959 Green on White
1960 Green on White...Black on Orange date tab
1961 Black on Yellow
1962 Black on Yellow...Black on Reflectorized
 Red sticker
1963 Blue on White
1964 Blue on White...Silver on Reflectorized Red
 sticker
1965 White on Maroon
1966 White on Maroon...Black on Reflectorized
 Yellow sticker
1967 White on Maroon...Reflectorized Silver on
 Green sticker
1968 Black on Reflectorized Yellow
1969 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Red on Reflec-
 torized White sticker

- 1970 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Black on Reflectorized Orange sticker
- 1971 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Black on Reflectorized Green sticker
- 1972 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Black on Reflectorized Red sticker
- 1973 Red on Reflectorized White
- 1974 Red on Reflectorized White...Black on Reflectorized Green sticker
- 1975 Red on Reflectorized White...Black on Reflectorized Orange sticker
- 1976 Red on Reflectorized White...Yellow on Reflectorized Blue sticker
- 1977 Red on Reflectorized White...White on Reflectorized Red sticker
- 1978 Red on Reflectorized White...Reflectorized White on Blue sticker
- 1979 Black on Reflectorized Yellow
- 1980 Black on Reflectorized Yellow
- 1981 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...White on Green Reflectorized sticker
- 1982 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...White on Reflectorized sticker
- 1983 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...White on Blue Reflectorized sticker
- 1984 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Blue on Silver Reflectorized sticker
- 1985 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Yellow on Blue Reflectorized sticker
- 1986 Black on Reflectorized Yellow...Black on Red Reflectorized sticker

WSAH (and related NEWS

Bob Gary, WSAH Treasurer and "custodian of saleable stuff," wishes to remind all society members that books, magazines, manuals and automobilia of all manner are needed for sale at Hartford, Iola and Osceola. So far the sale of such items has been our most successful fund raising project. If you can contribute, contact the nearest Board member or Bob. We will somehow arrange a pick-up. Hartford is in early June, so it is important to gather as much as possible now. (So far the project has raised \$351.50, but our account balance at this time holds barely enough to publish the next issue of SPARK.)

There's a curious new book out titled the Guide to Wisconsin's Historical Markers. It's published by Guide Press (P.O. Box 173, Verona, WI 53593) in league with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The 165-page book contains the complete text of all 269 state markers. The sell price is \$9.95. From each sale \$1.00 is donated to the State Historical Society.