

Early New Mexico License Plates

Newsletter #2

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1932 Trailer plates verified

It has been a long-running puzzle as to why no 1932 New Mexico Trailer plates have been seen in modern times. The license plate purchase contract for that year shows that 850 Trailer plates were purchased (see the chapter on “Manufacturers” in *Early New Mexico License Plates* for details). Of these, 587 were sold. [*Biennial Report of the Comptroller’s Department ... for the Nineteenth and Twentieth Fiscal Years*, Juan N. Vigil, State Comptroller, p. 34. (FY 1931 and FY 1932)]

Admittedly, 850 is a small number of plates—fewer even than the number of New Mexico’s 1912 first-issue Passenger Car plates—and if the 263 unissued Trailer plates were destroyed, then the 587 actually put in circulation is a smaller number yet. Nonetheless, surviving examples of Trailer plates are known for 1924, 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930 and 1931, all of which years saw even fewer Trailer tags issued.

In the *Early New Mexico License Plates* book I made the observation that it was my memory that 1932 Trailer plates may in fact have been seen in modern times (though quite a long time ago) and that their format was like that of 1932 Truck plates, but with the word “TRAILER” substituted for “TRUCK.”

It can now be said that that memory was faulty, for at long last a 1932 Trailer plate has surfaced, a photo of which now appears on the NMplates.com website at:

<https://NMplates.com/Trailer.htm>

As can be seen, the format is *not* like that of the Truck plates. Rather, it is more like the 1932 Guest plates, but with stacked letters “TRLR” instead of “GST.”

The 1932 Trailer is also illustrated at:

<https://nmplates.com/TypeSets.htm>

If the photo does not appear at either or both of the aforementioned pages, click the reload button on your browser.

Interestingly, only about a year ago, a New Mexico collector sent me a photograph of another 1932 Trailer plate with no original paint, and with the embossed TRLR letters hammered absolutely flat. He asked me if I thought this plate was what it appeared it might be. Never before having seen one, and with the obliteration of the TRLR so complete, I could not honestly say. It could be one, or it could have just as well been a Passenger plate with the letters TRLR outlined with a small cold chisel. Now we know that his plate is indeed authentic, but the question is whether the damage done to the TRLR letters can be undone.

Newly discovered New Mexico DMV publications

We recently obtained copies of several previously unknown New Mexico DMV publications which shed new light on numerous aspects of N.M. license plates. Some of these publications are referenced in the information related below. There are instances where the new information partially, but not definitively, answers certain specific questions and we are left to speculate on its exact meaning pending the discovery of further documentation.

Amateur Radio Plates

In the “Amateur Radio” chapter of the *Early New Mexico License Plates* book it was mentioned that until April 1, 1979 New Mexico was a plate-to-car state, meaning that if you sold your car the license plate went with the car. The law granted only three exceptions to this rule: Political plates, such as those used by state legislators; plates on an out-of-state car sold in New Mexico; and ham radio plates. Unfortunately for the radio operator himself, the law required that he turn his ham plates back in to the Motor Vehicle Commissioner before replacement plates would be issued to the buyer.

We recently obtained a copy of the publication *Procedures for Titling and Registering Motor Vehicles in New Mexico - 1964*, which verifies that all of the above is correct, as far as it goes, but it turns out the procedure was even more complex.

When the Amateur Radio operator received his ham plates, he had to surrender his regular car plates in exchange. If the ham sold his car during that registration year, he surrendered the ham plates, at which time the “Regular plates [would] be returned to applicant.” The word “returned” implies (but is not absolutely conclusive) that the MVD had held on to the regular plates the ham surrendered earlier and gave him back the same ones. Fortunately, and whatever the case, this cumbersome, bureaucratic procedure ended on April 1, 1979 when New Mexico became a plate-to-owner state, meaning that when a car was sold the plate stayed with the original owner, not with the car.

Wrecker plates

Another publication we recently obtained is *New Mexico License Plates - 1984 Edition*, New Mexico Transportation Department, TAS-10263, Rev. 12/83. Among a number of surprising revelations in this booklet is the instruction for use of Wrecker plates: “MUST BE DISPLAYED ON REAR OF VEHICLE BEING TOWED, NOT REAR OF TOWING VEHICLE.” (Caps are in the original.) We haven’t come up with a theory as to why this procedure was used, or whether this was the case for all years that Wrecker plates were in use (they have been verified from as early as 1971 until as late as 1984). If anyone knows of any other states which did this, and why, we would like to hear from you.

Wholesaler plates

These plates are from the early 1980s and have the “WS” prefix followed by the zia and a 4-digit serial. Though an example is illustrated at NMplates.com/Wholesaler.htm more than one person has expressed doubt that the WS prefix actually stands for “wholesaler.” In fact, the aforementioned *New Mexico License Plates - 1984 Edition* illustrates this series of plate and explicitly identifies the type as “Wholesaler.”

Handicap Parking placards

In both the *Early New Mexico License Plates* book and the NMplates.com website, we go to great pains to explain that the motorcycle plate size handicap parking placards are just that, and are not motorcycle license plates. It was explained that they were to be placed on the dashboard, and in fact, that’s the only place I ever saw them, and I thought I remembered that there were instructions from DMV to use them that way.

The 1984 publication *New Mexico License Plates - 1984 Edition* says, though, that they were to be put on the sun visor. To my recollection, I never once saw one on a sun visor, and can't imagine any easy way to attach one in that location. Also, placing it on the sun visor would have it facing the driver when the visor was in the up position, thereby negating the safety benefit (however small) gained ever since sun visors have been padded.

Prorate plates

Yet another revelation in *New Mexico License Plates - 1984 Edition* is that the “PR” prefix prorate plates were used on (interstate) buses as well as interstate trucks. Though such buses would have been far outnumbered by interstate trucks, this would have been a perfectly logical use for the PR plates. Of course, without the matching registration certificate there is no way to know which type of vehicle a given plate was used on.

Driverless Car

Much to our surprise, the publication entitled *Procedures for Titling and Registering Motor Vehicles in New Mexico - 1964*, uses the term “Driverless Car” for rental cars. This is much later than we previously believed that the term was in use, and in fact the publication nowhere even refers to them as “rental cars.” Moreover, the publication has an illustration of a form called “Application for duplicate plate or sticker,” which has a list of different types of plates, one of which is “driverless,” listed together with Bus and Taxi license plates. This seems to imply that there was a distinct type of New Mexico plate for rental cars at that time, which will be an important find if one surfaces some day.

Mail Order Registration Renewals

The year 1964 was not long after New Mexico introduced multi-year plates in 1961, which were to be renewed in subsequent years by affixing a validation sticker for each new year. *Procedures for Titling and Registering Motor Vehicles in New Mexico - 1964* informs us that this also brought about the practice of renewing vehicle registrations by mail without the need to stand in line at the MVD, and that mail order renewals were authorized by the state legislature in 1963 when House Bill 412 was signed into law. But this appears to be in error, as I obtained a copy of that law and it has nothing to do with mail order registrations. Additionally, Eric Tanner’s records show that mail order renewals were introduced a decade earlier, in 1953. We are presently trying to find the applicable law to verify exactly when this came about.

Supporting the earlier date, however is the February 15, 1953 issue of the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, page 22, which has a column by Oliver La Farge describing the system, which was ridiculously burdensome. Any person wanting to renew by mail had to fill out a form, get it notarized, then enclose a certified check or money order. Personal checks were not accepted. There apparently were very few people who thought this was less work than just going to the DMV office in person.

30-Day Non-Resident Seasonal Agricultural Permit

Procedures for Titling and Registering Motor Vehicles in New Mexico - 1964 explains how non-residents employed as seasonal agricultural workers in New Mexico could apply for a special thirty-day permit registering their foreign [i.e., out-of-state] vehicles in this state in lieu of a permanent registration. This permit is described as a “sticker,” and is apparently a windshield sticker. The aforementioned publication includes an illustration of the sticker, albeit a rather poor black and white reproduction, which we in turn have reproduced on the NMplates.com website at:

<https://NMplates.com/30DayAgPermit.htm>

If anyone should come up with an original of one of these, we would like to make arrangements to photograph it.

1952 Truck made with 1953 dies

On the first page of photographs in the “Miscellany” chapter of the Early New Mexico License Plates book we illustrated two varieties of 1952 Truck plates, i.e., the types both with and without the word “TRUCK.” What was not mentioned, but perhaps was obvious anyway, is that the style without “TRUCK” was made with 1953 dies.

1952 Passenger made with 1953 dies

Coincidentally, a very high numbered Bernalillo County 1952 Passenger plate has turned up which was also made with 1953 dies. As soon as we can obtain a satisfactory photograph of it we’ll post it on the Varieties page of the NMplates.com website. There are some other recent similar discoveries that we hope to detail and illustrate on the NMplates.com Varieties page at a later date.

Special Permit plates

This type of plate, of which only one example is known to exist, is described briefly in the “Modern Plates” chapter, as follows: Exists in the red-on-yellow colors and general style of 1965-1968 era tags, but is undated. “SPECIAL PERMIT” is silk screened in red at top. Probably issued for trucks and trailers carrying oversize/overweight loads.

Although not absolutely conclusive, and with no illustrations provided to remove any lingering doubt, the publication *Procedures for Titling and Registering Motor Vehicles in New Mexico - 1964*, seems to lend at least a degree of support to the conclusion drawn immediately above. In the section dealing with the movement of House Trailers on highways, the publication states, “Any mobile home that exceeds 8 feet in width will be required to have a **special permit** from the Highway Department” [emphasis mine]. Note that the permitting agency, logically enough, is the Highway Department, not the DMV.

And because the Highway Department was the agency issuing the permits, the same Special Permit plates could have been used for tractor trailer rigs hauling oversize loads. Moreover, since such permits are issued for a particular load hauled on a particular trip, it’s quite possible that the permittee was required to return the plate to the Highway Department at the end of the trip. Such a requirement could explain the paucity of such plates known to survive today.

Any hope of finding supporting documentation from this period was probably lost when a very large PCB-filled transformer in the basement of the Highway Department headquarters in Santa Fe ruptured on June 17, 1985. The building and its contents were subsequently declared irreparably contaminated, and everything in the building was either buried or otherwise destroyed. This included not only all documents, but even the Highway Department’s archive of historic glass plate and film photographs going back to pre-statehood days.