

LICENSE PLATES, DRIVER LICENSE BOTH TURN 100

It's among the most prized possession of any teenager and certainly one of the most important documents you carry with you every day.

The California driver license turns 100 years old in 2014, as do the first permanent state issued vehicle license plates.



JOHN HUNNEMAN

This week I lobbied a call to the Department of Motor Vehicles in

Sacramento expecting to hear big news about the planned centennial celebration of both license plates and photo IDs.

"They do?" said the nice public information official. "Thanks for bringing this to our attention."

Later, by email, I was informed that while no plans had been formulated for a celebration this year, in 2015 the DMV would likely hold some kind of centennial event for the DMV, which was established in 1915.

Still, this year should not pass without recognition of two items almost everybody needs and possess.

Yes, there were motorized vehicles in California and people to drive them prior to 1914.

As early as 1901, state laws authorized cities and counties to license bicycles, tricycles, automobile carriages,

carts and similar wheeled vehicles, according to the California Department of Motor Vehicle's website.

However, early laws regulating motorized vehicles were all over the road, with some areas not allowing them to operate at night, and others requiring the new contraptions to pull to the side of the road when a horse-drawn carriage approached.

In 1905 the secretary of state began to register and license vehicles charging owners a \$2 fee for a numbered circular tag they had to display on the vehicle. Motorists were also required to somehow display their registration number on the back of their vehicle in three-inch high black letters on a white background. Some just painted the numbers on their cars.

In 1905 there were a reported 17,015 vehicles registered in California.

In May 1913 the legislature approved a bill establishing an "operators license" or a "chauffer's license" and required that after Dec. 31, 1913, "no one may operate or drive a motor vehicle without a license."

Yet while the state now required drivers to have a license, it didn't begin requiring them to take an examination to get that license until 1927.

The first California license plates were issued in 1914.

The plate featured white lettering on a reddish-brick colored background. The five-numbered placard also included the letters CAL vertically along one edge and 1914 on the other. The plate changed to black letters on yellow in 1915 and blue lettering on white in 1916.

By 1915, when the DMV was created, the number of registered vehicles statewide had climbed to 191,000.

Of course, these days California is the car capital of the known universe. As of Jan. 1, 2013, California had 24,290,288 licensed drivers.

Riverside County had the fourth largest number of licensed drivers with 1,353,866. Los Angeles was first with just over 6 million, followed by San Diego (2.2 million) and Orange (2.1 million) counties.

There are 31.9 million registered vehicles, including cars, trucks, trailers and motorcycles, in California.

Riverside (1.7 million) again is fourth among all the counties. It still follows Los Angeles (7.4 million), San Diego (2.7 million), and Orange (2.5 million) counties.

And it all began 100 years ago.

So take a number, have a seat until that number gets called and know that you're part of a California tradition that began a century ago.

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FILE PHOTO
Firefighter Sean Knoll attaches an Arson Hotline license plate frame on a fire engine in 2006. California license plates turn 100 this year.