

Penticton author inspires Tales From the Back Bumper exhibit



By Penticton Western News
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Have you heard the one about Archduke Franz Ferdinand's cursed car and the licence plate that predicted the end of the First World War?

Penticton author Chris Garrish has. Along with a whole bunch of other interesting and quirky stories about the hidden nuances of licence plates, some of which will be on display at the Penticton Museum's latest exhibition *Tales From the Back Bumper: a 100 Year History of the Licence Plate*.

"It really was a challenge to take something as mundane as licence plates and make it into an interesting and even sexy exhibit," said museum curator Peter Ord. "One of the interesting parts of the exhibit is the role of licence plates to portray image and propaganda, particularly you see that in the U.S."

Ord said licence plates tell a tale of life in the 20th century and even play a part in Penticton's history, from Dr. R.B. White and his hand-painted personalized plates to Penticton's own Pacific Coast Militia Rangers Company 71 who were part of Canada's reserve defences in case of Japanese invasion during the Second World War. The exhibit explores the development, evolution and surprising controversy surrounding licence plates.

It is these stories that drew Garrish in from the time he got the first plate during Expo 86 when the government designed a new licence plate for the province.

"I would only get a plate every couple of years at first then I discovered the internet and this whole community of collectors and it took off from there," said Garrish, who got into the hobby while working on his master's thesis on fruit growers.



Garrish's research on licence plates took him into the museum archives and a conversation with the curator. After building enough information to write a book (*Tales from the Back Bumper: A Century of B.C. Licence Plates*) with quirky stories, photos and history research into a book, Ord has now invited him back with his book in hand, as inspiration for the new exhibit.

"Government-issued stamps, currency and coins, people are encouraged to have that kind of stuff. Plates you aren't encouraged to have, so it was neat. As you get older you start to understand more of the slogans and messaging they convey."

Garrish has approximately 500 plates, by no means the largest collection around.

"I have a friend in town who has 30,000 plates. My wife won't let me



display mine but I have a website. The book is a compendium to the website and is more about the stories and interesting things about the plates. The website is more catered towards collecting dorks," he said of www.bcpl8s.ca.

Garrish said car connoisseurs, tailgating truckers and history buffs will find his book and the exhibit fascinating. Ord added the new installation highlights exactly what the museum sets out to do.

"That is identify an object that most people wouldn't even take a second glance at or even care about and look deeper to find out what really it tells us about ourselves and our community," said Ord. "For us to be able to provide a local story as well adds this whole new perspective."

The curator said archives are open to the public to learn more from personal history, or for research Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons. He welcomes people to come to the museum to use their references. *Tales From the Back Bumper: a 100 Year History of the Licence Plate* opens on Sept. 12 from 4 to 7 p.m. at the Penticton Museum. Garrish will be at the opening event for a book signing and small presentation on the history of the licence plate in B.C. Admission is by donation and there will be a tailgate buffet of appetizers, beer, wine, door prizes and live music.

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