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NEW JERSEY WEEKLY DESK

## SOAPBOX; The Blue Plate, Special

By JOEL KELLER (NYT) 905 words

I'M a pretty lucky guy. Unlike most people, I can pinpoint the exact moment that I first knew I was an old fogey. And I didn't have to wake up to a creaking back and a chest full of white hair to do it.

It happened a few months ago in Bridgewater, as I was walking through the office parking lot with a younger colleague. A car whizzed past us a bit too closely and, in response, the colleague, spying the back of the car that the offending driver was in, called out, "Watch where you're going, you blue-plated old fogey!"

I turned to him and uttered a sentence that will stick in my head until time eternal: "Dude, I have blue plates on my car, too."

My co-worker embarrassingly began to make a half-hearted apology. As he did so, all surrounding noise faded away, and a realization set in. I had become one of those people I used to make fun of. I had ancient blue New Jersey license plates on my car, and I was proud of that fact.

I got the plates in 1992, the year before the state switched to the reflective tan plates seen today. By then, a lot of other states had switched to technologically advanced plates, but these were old-fashioned all the way: no logos or drawings, no odd typefaces. They just had "New Jersey," the plate number and "Garden State" in embossed block type.

Unlike other states, which force people to hand in their old plates when new designs are issued, New Jersey allows any plate issued after 1959 (even those old plates, which said only "N.J." instead of the full state name) to stay active. Because of this generous rule, I have been able to put those blue tags on four different cars, two of which have been totaled in fairly serious accidents. They've been on cars as diverse as a 1982 Honda that couldn't get out of its own way to a 2002 VW that can outrun most of the cars on the road. They've been with me since college and will probably be attached to the Porsche I buy when I suffer through my first midlife crisis.

Why such affection for two slices of metal? Well, for one thing, I know the number on those plates by heart. If I need to sign up for a parking pass or fill in some other form that requires my plate number, I don't have to run out to the car or dig out my registration. I can rattle off those numbers

and letters as if they are my phone number. It saves me precious seconds, and those seconds tend to pile up over 12 years.

But the real reason I get all doe-eyed over my old plates is that they remind me of an era that has passed. One thing I looked forward to when I traveled in the car with my family, whether it was in New Jersey or farther afield on vacation, was the sight of the distinctive license plates from other states. In the days before Gameboys, MP3 players and in-dash DVD players, there weren't too many things to do when you were on the road (especially if reading in the car made a person sick, as sometimes happened to me). Spotting unfamiliar plates was a fun way to pass the time.

Back then, it wasn't hard to tell which state was which. New Yorkers rode around with those burnt-orange plates with the blue letters, perfect for cabs and station wagons alike. Pennsylvania had a yellow-orange hue, not as gritty as its neighbor to the north. Connecticut was a dark blue, fitting in with its cold climate. California was a lighter blue, almost as if it was kissed by the sun. Missouri had a blood-red plate that proudly declared it the "Show-Me State." New Mexico was a bright desert yellow. Massachusetts was a Yankee-proper white and green. Each state was distinctive, showing a glimpse of a state's climate or personality, but simple and easy to identify at the same time.

Now, with the exception of New Jersey and a couple of others, most states have plates that are either white or screen-printed with a jumbled multicolored image. In many cases, the name of the state, printed in flat letters of various fonts, cannot be easily discerned from the back seat of a car. Specialty plates, showing a driver's support for a particular charity, school or sports team, further obliterate the state identity. All the variations make plate-spotting on the road very difficult; if the game was still popular, children on vacation would need laser eye surgery from all the squinting at state names on the backs of cars.

So I'm an old fogey. I'm only 32, but it's not so bad. The fleeting memories I have of the fellow road warriors, proudly displaying their state of residence, will stay with me for life. Any squinting I do has more to do with age and genetics than a game of plate-spotting gone awry.

Oh, and I'm also glad I'm not one of those people who still have those "N.J." plates. Now those people are really old.

**CAPTIONS:** Drawing (Drawing by Tom Bloom)

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