



California MOTORCYCLES

From the collection of Scott Broady

1913-2005



Page 10000
10000

Page 10000
10000



For: 130400
© 2006, Inc.

NEARLY A CENTURY OF

California Motorcycles

by Scott Broady

California's cycle history rides its own road in Golden State plate history—with curves, unique tabs, legends, and other surprises.

While California vehicle registrations began in 1905, it wasn't until 1909 at the latest that motorcycles would be registered separately in California. These pre-state motorcycle plates all come from the City of Los Angeles. Those that we've seen so far are black on white curved porcelains with "L.A." appearing below the registration numbers. There is one curved painted metal pre-state motorcycle as well in the same design. Refer to the color centerfold on pages 34-35, for a complete set of California motorcycle license plates. Most of those shown are natural issues. Natural plates are those issued the same year as its tab or sticker. Naturals do not show evidence of renewal for additional years. In the run shown, the 1919 plate is a renewed 1916 issued plate. The rest of the plates are in sequential order of issue.

1914 First State Motorcycle Plates

In 1914, California began the first statewide issue of license plates for motorcycles (as well as passenger cars). It was a heavy steel curved porcelain plate. These new plates were also curved like the rear fender, the same as the pre-states, but were a little larger. Colors of California motorcycle plates matched passenger colors for every year. Numbering in 1914 started at 1 and progressed to 9999 (with the second pair of numbers stacked under the first pair). Plates then went from A1 through A999, B1 through B999 and so on. Motorcycle plates for 1914 and 1915 never needed a second letter. The 1915 plates were made on thinner steel, which accounts for why 1915's are harder to find in nice condition than the 1914 plates.

1916-1919 Tab Varieties

In 1916, California issued undated blue on white porcelain curved plates. Like the passenger car plates, these were validated with matched tabs. The 1916 tabs for motorcycles are identical to the rear passenger car numbered 1916 lead bear tabs. Having identical tab designs for both vehicles and motorcycles lasted for only one year. It appears that it was



ABOVE: Collage of early California motorcycle curved fender plates from the collection of the author. All photos courtesy of the author.

too easy to mix and match tabs, so the state made motorcycle tabs for 1917 through 1919 in slightly different designs than their regular passenger car tabs. The 1917 motorcycle tab features a poppy flower facing left (as opposed to the car tab where the flower faces right). It also appears that the tab color on the cycle tabs for 1917 is a much lighter yellow than on the vehicle tabs. So few have remained, that none have surfaced with really nice paint.

The 1918 motorcycle tab has the same mission bell design as the car tab, but the motorcycle version is smaller. In 1919, the motorcycle tabs used the same five pointed star design and size, except that they were painted orange (rather than red) and have the letters "M" and

"C" flanking the serial number box. Close-up photos of the tabs as well as comparisons to the vehicular tabs are shown on the next page. Since this baseplate lasted four years, and there was room for only four full-sized characters, the state not only issued single letters, but also issued double letters and most of the triple letters too. So 9999 was followed by A1 through Z999; then AA1 through ZZ999; then AAA1 through ZZZ999 (although triple "I" is about the highest they issued). Note that the letters on double and triple letter plates were always the same. There was no mixing. For example, AA is followed by BB, CC and so on; as was AAA followed by BBB, CCC and so on. Also, the letters "I" and "O" were not used, but "Q" was.

Tab numbers don't appear to match the plate numbers, but like vehicular plates, they do match, in a coded sequence. The state didn't stamp letters on the tabs, instead opting for a slightly complex system of converting the letter(s) to a number. "A" became "10", "B" became "11", and so on through the alphabet. This progressed all the way to "TTTT" at "75". See the table at end of story for a list of the codes. Check out the 1918 plate AAA379 (in the centerfold), which has tab number 58379; and K134, which has tab number 19134.

1920s: Embossed Metal Plates Begin

In 1920, embossed metal plates were issued. This is the same change as in vehicle plates. Plates featured all numeric serials, up to five digits. Although motorcycle registrations were high in the early 1920's, they weren't high enough to explain the 1923 plate in the centerfold with serial 50794. 1923 was similar to other years in that serials started at 1, so we believe that the 50 thousand serial might be a replacement plate series for motorcycles. In 1925 the state began using a new die set with bolder numbers. There appears to be two sets



ABOVE: A Los Angeles cycle pre-state from Rob Tyler, 1916 base motorcycle plate with a double letter prefix

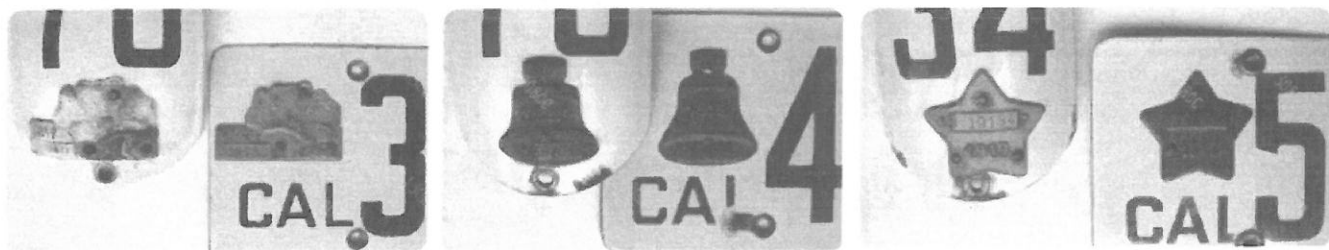
in a horizontal format for the first time. The legend "CAL" was expanded to "CALIF". This would only last for four years (through 1937). In 1936, error plates are verified with the legend at the top (instead of the bottom). As early as 1938, another die set was used to

produce motorcycle plates at least through 1940. The state added a tall skinny number die set, and plates were produced using the standard and skinny die sets. Compare the two 1939 plates (see photo on next page). 6880 has the skinny die set.

1950s

In 1951, the legend "CALIF" returned to motorcycle plates, but only on this base. In fact, the tabs were cut at an angle to fit snug against the letter "F". Also, most of the 1951 motorcycle plates were made of aluminum. Only the last of them (in the six digit range) were made of steel. All 1951 car plates were steel, so the motorcycles were definitely different. The 1956 motorcycle plates were initially made of steel, and started at 1. The stickers for 1957 through 1962 were all smaller versions of the passenger car stickers, except that the 1960 sticker was a metallic sticker instead of a reflective one. This base plate went through the same changes as the passenger plates.

1960s



ABOVE: Although the 1916 M/C tabs were identical to the car tabs, the 1917 through 1919 tabs were different. The poppy on the 1917 cycle tab, faces left (not right), the mission bell on the 1918 tab is smaller, and the 1919 star has "MC" embossed and is orange rather than red

of dies in this period because plates appear with taller and shorter numbers.

In 1929, California retooled for a new look on all their plates. This is the year that passenger plates became larger, and serials were standardized on the 1A1234 format. Since they were in the process of retooling for the rest of the plate types, motorcycles were no exception. There are two distinct types of motorcycle plates for 1929. One is identical to the 1928 plates (1-247); the other (9-440) has two less holes (4 instead of 6) and a different die for the legend "CAL 29". If you put these 1929 plates side by side, you can compare the two number die sets (see next page). In 1930, motorcycle plates reverted back to the 1925-28 look, continuing the two number die sets and using six holes.

1930s: Horizontal Plates Appear

Starting in 1934, motorcycle plates were made

produce motorcycle plates at least through 1940. The state added a tall skinny number die set, and plates were produced using the standard and skinny die sets. Compare the two 1939 plates (see photo on next page). 6880 has the skinny die set.

1940s: Through the War Years

In 1942, California began issuing tabs to vehicle plates to save metal for the war effort, but not for motorcycles. Instead, motorcycles got a dated 1942 plate in the same colors as the 1941 plates. This was a general re-issue. The first motorcycle tab was the 1943 "V" (Victory) tab. It looks like a car tab, except it's smaller, rectangular and has no embossed edge. The 1942 plates were again updated with a 1944 "bear" tab. The bear tab looks just like the 1944 trailer (and windowless vehicle) tabs, except (you guessed it), it's smaller, flat with no embossing, rectangular and has no turned edge. Cars (most had

In 1960, there were some aluminum plates issued (see the 1960 plate #135794 in the color centerfold motorcycle run, and then they standardized back on steel plates without tab slots. The 1956 bases got up to about 200,000. The 1963 base plates were larger (8"x5"), featured two sticker wells which could accommodate full size passenger stickers and started at number 100,000. The first approximately 100,000 plates were made of aluminum, similar to some other non-passenger varieties like commercial and trailer. No passenger plates were made of aluminum.

Three 1970 Natural Styles

On October 6, 1969, blue plates debuted for passenger cars, but not for motorcycles. Plate number 999999 wasn't reached until 1970, and that's when California finally switched to blue plates for motorcycles. Unlike passenger car plates, there are no 1969 stickered blue motorcycle plates. However there are three



ABOVE: The two die types for 1929 cycle plates are shown side by side. 1-247 is the type consistent with the plates between 1925-1928. 9-440 has only 4 factory holes (not 6), shorter numbers and a different die for "CAL 29".



ABOVE: Two four digit 1939 cycles with different dies. 3643 has the common dies for this era. 6880 has the taller



ABOVE: Shown are a very high numbered black 1963 base plate and a big blue from the first series. Both of these plates were issued in 1970.

styles of natural 1970 motorcycle plates. After 999999, what Californians refer to as "big blue" was issued. These short lived plates were only issued for a portion of 1970 and featured a number pattern that would begin a 16-year run. The new format was 1A1234. In this era, all plates in a letter series were issued before the next letter appeared. It went like this; 1A9999 was followed by 2A0000, up to 9A9999, and then 1B0000. Big Blue was only issued from 1A through 5A. At 6A, California downsized the plates to 7"x4" (the current size; conforming to Society of Automotive Engineers (SAE) Standards) and made them with only one full size sticker well. This became the third natural motorcycle plate for 1970.

1971: Staggered Experiment

In 1971 (while issuing plates in the "C" series), California introduced an experimental system for staggered monthly registrations for motorcycles only. The state was thinking of doing this for all California vehicles, but would not implement it for the rest of its plate types until 1976.

New motorcycle plates for 1972 were redesigned to include a small square sticker well, and cyclists were issued small square black on white month stickers and special half-tone year decals. This practice continued through 1975. The colors for the staggered motorcycle registration stickers were different than for other vehicle types. 1972 was red, 1973 was green, 1974 was pink and 1975 was purple. Some staggered motorcycles with December expirations got regular car stickers (indicating that DMV officials did a little mixing and matching in December when it really didn't matter; see plates 2G2631 and 2J2399 at top right). Motorcyclists that retained their older plates in this period (through 1975) continued to receive regular passenger plate stickers without a month sticker.

1976: Staggered Registration for All

In 1976 when everyone joined the staggered registration program, all the older motorcycle plates received month stickers (either the new full size red on white month stickers or the smaller square stickers), with months determined by a formula based on the plate number. This created some interesting placements for month stickers on those 7x4 one-well blue plates, where a second sticker just didn't fit no matter what you did with it. For a few months in 1976, new motorcycle plates continued to be issued with a small

month well on which the larger month stickers didn't fit very well. Soon after, motorcycle plates were redesigned again to include two equal size wells for the stickers. This resulted in the legend "CAL" being made a little smaller. The expires 1978 plate 7M2797 is an example of this design. The next change occurred in 1979, when the state began making motor-



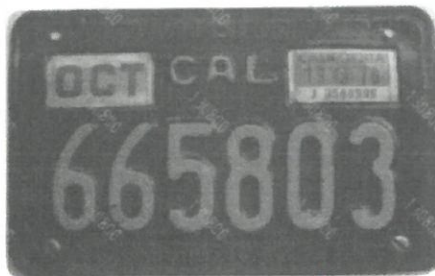
ABOVE: Two natural cycle plates issued regular stickers rather than the half-tone motorcycle stickers.



ABOVE: Cycle dealer frame swallows this 1972 plate.



ABOVE: 16K0199 was made without the half space next to the letter that has been a feature of California cycle plates since "expires 2002". 16K5977 is a normal plate.



ABOVE: Three older cycle plates renewed for 1976, the year all vehicles joined the staggered monthly expiration program. The black plate was issued a month decal that easily fit on the plate; the small blue plate had no room for the extra decal, so the "C" in "CAL" was covered; and the 4C plate has no month decal.

cycle plates out of aluminum. This change didn't occur at one point, but over a range of plates in the high "P" series where they flip flopped between steel and aluminum. This occurred four years after all other plate types in California had changed to aluminum.

1982 Reflectorized Begins

On December 13, 1982, California began offering reflectorized plates to motorists for a small extra fee. For most vehicle types, this was the Sunset plate. For motorcycles, this was simply an all embossed blue on reflective white plate. Serials began at 11A0000, so as not to conflict with the six digit serials on the blue plates. (California never issued a "10" number prefix, probably because the zero would be next to the letter, which is not done in pass plates; and no 20 prefix, and presumably no 30A series, either). This was the first time California motorcycle plates had seven digit serials.

This series is the same one we have today in California, although at the time few cyclists opted for these plates, so serials progressed slowly. As a result, white plates with 1984, 1985 and 1986 expirations are tough to find today. The progression goes as follows: all letters are finished before the lead numbers change. 11A9999 is followed by 11B0000, then after 11Z9999, we have 12A0000.

The earliest expirations I've observed on these white plates is 1984. Theoretically, there should be some white 1983 motorcycle plates around, but I haven't seen one yet. For every year from 1984 through 1987 California issued both blue and white plates

California Curved Motorcycle Plate Codes (1916-1919)

Note: The letters I and O are not used, but letter Q is used. Examples: plate K134 has a tab number 19134 plate AAA379 has a tab number 58379

Prefix Letter(s)	16 base Tab code	Prefix Letter(s)	16 base Tab code	Prefix Letter(s)	16 base Tab code
A	10	AA	34	AAA	58
B	11	BB	35	BBB	59
C	12	CC	36	CCC	60
D	13	DD	37	DDD	61
E	14	EE	38	EEE	62
F	15	FF	39	FFF	63
G	16	GG	40	GGG	64
H	17	HH	41	HHH	65
J	18	JJ	42	JJJ	66
K	19	KK	43	KKK	67
L	20	LL	44	LLL	68
M	21	MM	45	MMM	69
N	22	NN	46	NNN	70
P	23	PP	47	PPP	71
Q	24	QQ	48	QQQ	72
R	25	RR	49	RRR	73
S	26	SS	50	SSS	74
T	27	TT	51	TTT	75
U	28	UU	52	UUU	76
V	29	VV	53	VVV	77
W	30	WW	54	WWW	78
X	31	XX	55	XXX	79
Y	32	YY	56	YYY	80
Z	33	ZZ	57	ZZZ	81

to motorcycles. This is why there are two plates shown in the motorcycle run for each of these years.

1986 7-Digits Appear

In 1986, the blue plates finally passed 9Z9999, and seven digit plates were required for the non-reflective (blue) plates. Since the white plates had already started at 11A0000, the new seven digit blues would have to start at 21A0000. These were issued with 1986 and 1987 expirations before the state ceased issuing non-reflective plates to all vehicles in January 1987. They issued all the "A" series plates (21A0000 through 29A9999) and "B" series plates got as high as 27B. The order these plates were issued is different than the white ones are being issued. Also, 1986 and 1987 natural plates come in three styles (blue six digit, blue seven digit, and white, as shown in the run).

Since 1988

Since 1988, only white plates were on issue. 1988 naturals only come in white. California was only in the mid "11" series at the time, so you can see how slowly white plates were issued between 1984 and 1987. Later, the blue paint used was made darker.

The last change that occurred was in 2002, when a half space what put on either side of the letter in the serial. This began at 15W0000. There are other spacing variants since then (see plate number 16K0199 previously where the half spaces were omitted). But motorcycle plates have been largely unchanged since 1982. California has just started the "18" series. I've already seen an 18B plate. 🚲

Thanks to Jeff Minard for his help.