

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 20, 2008

Adventures with Delaware License #8: My father always told people he pinned a \$1 bill to a request for an auto license and mailed it to the Secretary of State, Dover, DE. They sent him license #8, so he assumed he must have been the eighth person in the state to request a license. We know now that 1909 was the first year Delaware required tags, so it's likely #8 was put on a Stanley Model H of 1906, the first Stanley my father owned. He grew to love this low number, and many thought he was a politician, but only the first three numbers were assigned to state officials (this has been the case for at least 80 years).

In the 1950s, a law was passed stating that a license number must go with the car when a vehicle changed hands and could not be retained by that car's owner to put on his new one. To get around this law, an out-of-state title had to be obtained, because if a car was sold out-of-state, the tag would come back for re-issue, and it could be picked up and re-assigned. The one wishing to use this method to retain his tag had to inform the Motor Vehicle Department that the car was leaving the state, and he wanted to retain the number before the transaction occurred. My father and I did this successfully a few times by going to a magistrate in Penns Grove, New Jersey, and obtaining a New Jersey title. Once, however, the details were overlooked.

Early in 1968 and in declining health, my father traded in a 1964 Chrysler Imperial to a dealer in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and was buying a used 1966 Cadillac to take its place. He failed to tell DMV that he wanted to retain #8. The #8 registration went to Harrisburg and would eventually come back to Dover for re-issue. When I learned what had occurred, I went to Dover immediately and was able to speak to Robert J. Voshell, the Motor Vehicle Commissioner. I explained that it was an oversight and pled my case. He was very understanding and told me that despite the many people, including himself who would cherish this number, he would hold it for us when it came back from the Pennsylvania capital. We got it back, it was assigned to the Cadillac, and I never told my father what had happened. After he died, I was driving this car between Penns Grove and Bridgeport, New Jersey, and was stopped by a Jersey police officer. He insisted the tag was a fake, that no one ever issued a tag with one digit. I had to wait while he called DMV in Dover to ascertain that he could let me proceed.

In the late 1970s, having sold the car registered with #8, I retained the number properly, but the grace period between cars was running out (you could "hold" a tag for six months before re-issue), so hurriedly I bought a heavily used 1975 Mercury Monarch to carry the single-digit tag. My partner in the Wilmington Holiday Inns, Walter Anderson, needed a car for a few days, and I insisted that he borrow the Mercury, as I had a '72 Cadillac Fleetwood with #76 that I could use just as well. Reluctantly he agreed to borrow the Mercury. Going to the bank on his first trip, the tag fell off, and it was lost. Walter was beside himself; something had happened to something belonging to someone else, but he told me what had happened. Within a day or two, however, I received a phone call from the police barracks at Penny Hill saying the tag had been turned in. Walter was greatly relieved and said he would get it for me. When he arrived, however, the police would not give it to him, as they did not believe an ordinary human should own such a tag. I had to go, prove all sorts of things, and finally got the tag back on the car.

The next time Walter went to start the Mercury, the key stuck in the ignition, and it wouldn't turn. He called a locksmith who came, but he had to replace the lock and gave us new keys. Walter returned the car to me; he didn't want to wait for a third happening. Thinking I would never need the old keys, I threw them away. That was fine until the first time I locked the car. I was at the Sears repair place on MacArthur Drive. Having completed my business there, I couldn't get in the Mercury. I went back in the office and told them of my plight. Without hesitation the clerk said, "we have just the man who can get in any car." He called him, and indeed he got the door unlocked and I was on my way. I don't recall how I remedied the problem, but I sold the Mercury and the #8 tag just before I fell off the roof in January 1984. Since I had never had both at the same time, I figured it was much better to have Ruth than Delaware #8.