



The License Plates of the
**VANDERBILT LONG
ISLAND MOTOR PARKWAY**

by
Al Velocci

It would be difficult to find a Motor Parkway artifact that generates more interest among Parkway enthusiasts than the small, colorful enamel license plates issued by the Parkway

during most of its thirty years of existence. Collectors of Parkway memorabilia eagerly seek out these five-inch square porcelain finished pieces of steel, making them the single most sought-after bit of Parkway lore.

Surprisingly, with all the interest generated by the plates and its desirability to collectors, its history, purpose and function are not well-known. A fixture on the Parkway for twenty-six years, the plates were mounted

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on the front of the automobile, usually nearby the state-issued license plate, and served as a forerunner of the E-Z Pass. As the auto approached an entrance to the Parkway, the gatekeeper took notice of the plate, opened the gate and waved the motorist on his way.

The Long Island Motor Parkway was a privately owned toll road built for the exclusive use of automobiles. One had to pay a fee to use the Parkway which ran from Flushing, Queens almost to the western shore of Lake Ronkonkoma in Suffolk County. Most motorists paid the daily fee whenever they used the Parkway, frequent and regular users opted for the yearly ticket which for some reason was known as the season ticket. Over the lifespan of the Parkway, the fee for a season ticket ran from fifty to one hundred dollars. The season ticket holders, and a few selected others, received the Parkway license plates.

Although the season ticket was available when the Parkway opened for business in 1908, it wasn't until 1912 that the Parkway issued the first plate. Prior to the introduction of the plates, the procedure for the season ticket holder was to pull up to the gate and show his ticket to the gatekeeper for admis-

sion to the Parkway. To simplify egress and add a certain cache to the experience of motoring on the best automobile road in the world, William K. Vanderbilt Jr., the President of the Parkway and its driving force, initiated the Parkway license plate. On November 21, 1911, he instructed the Parkway's General Manager, Arthur Pardington, to have Alfred Kienzle, the Assistant General Manager, "see about a plate to be issued to each car purchasing a season ticket, it should be made fast to the front of the hood. All it wants to be is a red disc which drops down in front of the radiator and about two inches across and to be fastened on where the water is poured into the radiator, with a clasp. On the red disc should be printed a

number, 1-2-3, and should correspond with the number of the ticket that goes with the car." Thus began the use of the Motor Parkway license plates.

During the thirty years the Parkway was in business, four different firms manufactured

inscribed with "Long Island Motor Parkway." Prior to 1921, the plates bore only a number and year date. Unless one was fortunate enough to come across a plate with the matching season ticket number, there was no way to associate the plate with the Parkway. Not only that, the shape was not always the five inch by five inch square plate which is most familiar.

In December 1911, Kienzle attended the Automobile Show at Madison Square Garden where he visited the booth of the Chandler Company of Springfield, Massachusetts, which manufactured nameplates and stampings. Kienzle explained his mission to the Chandler

personnel and supplied a rough sketch of what he wanted. On February 3, 1912, Chandler submitted a proposal to supply twenty-five discs, 3 3/8" in diameter; they were to be a brass plate, with the figures sunk and filled with a quantity of red enamel paint. Wires were to be soldered on as per Vanderbilt's specifications. Chandler quoted a manufacturing price of fifty cents each. Vanderbilt approved the proposal and twenty-five discs were ordered. Numbers 1 through 10 figures were to be



almost eight thousand plates, both dated and undated, for the Motor Parkway. Even though the plates were made of steel and had a porcelain enamel finish, very few have survived and less than one hundred are known to exist today.

A contributing factor accounting for the scarcity of surviving plates is the difficulty in associating the plates issued prior to 1921 with the Motor Parkway. It wasn't until that year that the plates were



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finished in red enamel paint, and numbers 1 through 15 figures in white enamel paint. The discs with red figures were intended for season ticket purchasers, while the discs with white figures were reserved for pass holders. This group included Vanderbilt, Parkway investors, directors and others closely associated with the Parkway. The order was delivered on April 11, 1912. So began the issuance of the annual "license plate," the first three years of which bore no resemblance to the plates which are familiar to

collectors and researchers today.

Evidently the plate system proved satisfactory as it was continued in 1913 but with a major change. In early December of 1912, Kienzle met with Charles Marsland, the New York manager of the Baltimore Enamel and Novelty Co., located at 190 Broadway in New York City. The two men discussed the possibility of Baltimore Enamel supplying the Parkway with a porcelain enameled plate for the season ticket purchasers. The Chandler Co., the original supplier, did not

manufacture porcelain finished products. Kienzle felt a porcelain plate would be more attractive than the brass discs used the previous year, and the vivid colors would be easier to see. In response to Kienzle's queries, Baltimore quoted a price of twenty-five cents for a disc 5 1/16" in diameter. The low cost was possible because they already had dies of that size in stock, so they were able to underbid Chandler Co. by fifty per cent.

On December 19, 1912, the Parkway placed an order with the Baltimore Enamel Co. for "fifty enameled iron discs, 5 1/16" in diameter, white numbers on a blue background with the numbers as large as possible." Rather than a clasp for mounting purposes, these plates were ordered with two small holes, one on either side.

Evidently, Kienzle, who had been promoted to General Manager of the Parkway by this time, was pleased with the Baltimore Enamel's plates and they were awarded the contract for 1914 without any apparent attempt to secure quotes from other suppliers. The 1914 order called for a plate similar to the one supplied the previous year running from "1 to and including 50." The colors were changed, however, with a white

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background and red figures. Twenty-five discs of the same kind were also ordered. These were numbered consecutively "1 to 25" but had black backgrounds with white figures. The season ticket purchasers received the red figure plates while official pass holders received the white numbered plates.

The introduction of the plate in 1912 simplified access to the Parkway, but created other problems. On September 19, 1912, George Taylor of New York City, holder of season ticket number 5,

wrote the Parkway and inquired about the procedure of using a vehicle on the Parkway that did not have the Parkway plate attached. The next day, Alfred Kienzle, the general manager, courteously responded the plate could be transferred to up to three autos listed on his season ticket, with the understanding that the holder of a season ticket would not use more than one car on

the Parkway at a time. This arrangement became standard procedure and was extended to all season ticket purchasers in 1913. It wasn't long before some ticket holders were complaining about the nuisance of switching plates from car to car.

One of the season ticket holders unknowingly provided the Parkway a solution to that problem of switching plates. John Barry Rogers, residing at 18 West Tenth Street, New York City, held season ticket number 15 listing three autos under his name. Tiring of moving the plates from car to car,

he wrote Kienzle in the Spring of 1914 inquiring about the possibility of ordering two additional plates with his number, 15. On his behalf Kienzle contacted Baltimore Enamel, who agreed to supply the two plates. On July 17, 1914, Kienzle wrote Rogers informing him the plates were in and could be picked up at the Great Neck Lodge (Lake Success) the next time he passed through. The additional two plates cost Rogers an additional \$1.41. The Parkway now had the solution to the

plate switching problem. Season ticket holders were offered the opportunity to order additional same-number plates.

The year 1915 saw major changes in the plate shape and format. The disc of the last two years was replaced by the more common 5" by 5" square plate that would be used in the remaining twenty-three years of the Parkway's existence. Besides the change in

shape, the reworked plates included the year on the plate for the first time. The earlier discs bore only the number.

The Baltimore Enamel Co. retained the contract for producing the plates. The number was now 3" in height while the year date was only 1/2" high. Two eyelets were furnished for mounting purposes, one on either side in the center of the plates. The color combination was changed as well, producing a very colorful yellow background with black numbers. Plates numbered 1 through 50 were ordered,





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and for the first time, multiples of certain numbers produced at the start. Those who opted for additional plates were charged a dollar, which amounted to a tidy profit for the Parkway since they were paying only twenty-five cents for each plate. In one

fell swoop, the Parkway solved the problem of switching plates from car to car while bolstering its revenues in a modest fashion.

The 1915 style and format was used from 1915-1920, though the colors, like resident parking stickers currently issued by Long Island towns were changed yearly. The color combinations and numbers were as follows:

1916 - Yellow numbers on a black background, 62 plates ordered.

1917 - Black numbers on a white background, 65 plates ordered.

1918 - White numbers on a blue background, 64 plates ordered.

Most Parkway buffs assume plate number "1" was held by William K. Vanderbilt, Jr. This was not so. Additionally, there were two different number "1" plates, one held by the season ticket purchaser and the other by the official pass recipient. "Willie K," as he was known to his friends, was content to have pass plates number "14" and "15" on his cars in 1912 and 1913. By 1914, he had added numbers "38," "39," and "40." He used these numbers at least through 1918. In the early 1920's, he switched to season ticket number "100," ordering four plates every year until 1928, after which he ordered eleven plates yearly with that number.

The number "1" season ticket plate was issued to the Singer Car Co. of New York City in 1913. It's not clear who held number "1" the previous year. The number "1" and number "2" official pass plates were held by J.P. Morgan, who had invested heavily in the Parkway. Pass plates numbered "3" and "4" were assigned to Vanderbilt's

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father, William K. Vanderbilt II. In 1914, the number "1" season plate was assigned to Alfred C. Bedford, who had previously held plate number "14." Bedford was a Locust Valley estate owner and a partner of John D. Rockefeller at the Standard Oil Co. He ordered a minimum of three number "1" plates through the 1919 season. The number "1" plate for 1920 and 1921 was assigned to the U.S. Rubber Company headquartered in NYC. In 1922, the number "1" season ticket plate was acquired by Joseph P. Grier, stockbroker and partner in the Wall Street firm later known as Smith, Barney. Grier, who had previously held plate number "30," was a bachelor and a close friend of Vanderbilt's. Both were members of the Links Golf Club on Long Island, and Grier had accompanied Vanderbilt on a three month cruise of Europe in 1924 aboard Vanderbilt's yacht, the *Ara*. Grier held the number "1" plate until 1938 when the Parkway closed. He ordered a minimum of three plates every year, but four plates was his norm.

The 1919, license plates were produced by a new company. On October 17, 1918, the Baltimore Enamel Co. notified the Parkway officials they would be unable to supply plates for the 1919 season as the federal government had taken over their plant for war production purposes. Baltimore Enamel suggested the Parkway contact the L.D. Nelke Co. located at 23 East 26th Street in New York City, about manufacturing plates for 1919. The Nelke Company had been producing signs since 1861, and New York was their home office.

Kienzle contacted Nelke on October 25, 1918, and placed the Parkway's order for sixty-two plates for the 1919 season. Though the size and format remained the same, the new plates featured brown numbers on a white background. Nelke did not possess their own porcelain facilities and the order was subcontracted to an unidentified western firm.

The Parkway re-ordered plates from Nelke for the 1920 season, with no changes except for yellow numbers on a black

background. The new order placed on October 7, 1919, called for eighty-two plates.

Nelke had serious problems with the 1920 order. The plates arrived without the year date, only the number. The quality was also inferior. Since the war was over, Kienzle wrote the Baltimore Enamel Co. on October 6, 1920, and inquired if Baltimore Enamel could resume supplying the Parkway with plates. They replied in the affirmative, and Baltimore Enamel was given the contract for the 1921 season.

1921 saw the major change in plate design. Since 1915, the 5" x 5" square plate had only the number and year date imprinted. 1921 bore the inscription "Long Island Motor Parkway" for the first time. The numbers and letters were black on a light green background. "Long Island Motor Parkway" was painted on two lines occupying the top third of the plate, the number in the center third, and the year was placed at the bottom third of the plate. Also new that year were four eyelets, one in each corner, instead of the two sup-

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plied in previous years. Kienzle's order for seventy-six plates was delivered in December, 1920. Parkway officials were delighted with the new design and restored quality. The largest order for Parkway plates in 1921 came from George Whelan of 511 Fifth Avenue in New York City. He ordered a total of three season tickets, numbers 27, 28, and 29, and nine plates for his automobiles.

In 1922, the Baltimore Enamel Co. delivered one hundred ten plates, numbered one to seventy-five, with the additional plates being duplicate numbers. The 1922 color scheme is now unknown. 1922 is the year Baltimore Enamel also supplied ninety-seven new official pass holder's discs, not the plates given the season ticket holders. Those discs were similar to the disc last supplied to pass holders in 1914. By 1922, Mrs. Vanderbilt had acquired

pass number "1" and was assigned the plate with the matching number for her personal automobile. Vanderbilt's brother Harold held pass and plate number two that year.

Baltimore Enamel continued to supply this style and format through 1926. In 1923, one hundred twenty plates with white letters and numbers on a blue background were ordered. In 1924, there was a substantial increase in the number of season ticket purchasers. That year one hundred fifty-nine plates with red numbers and letters on a white background were ordered. The next year, 1925, saw another large jump in season ticket purchasers, and the Parkway ordered two hundred six plates. The colors selected that year were dark blue figures and letters on a gray background. This was a totally new color combination. There was a thirty percent increase in plates ordered for

1926. Two hundred sixty-seven plates with green letters on a white background were ordered.

There was a change in plate manufacturers in 1927. After supplying the Parkway with plates for the past twelve years, the Baltimore Enamel Co. lost the business to the Ingraham-Richardson Co. of Beaver Falls, PA which maintained an office in NYC at 26 Cortland Street. The change was almost certainly due to the lower price submitted by "Ing-Rich," as they were known. Their quote of \$0.34 for each plate was substantially lower than the \$0.50 each that Baltimore Enamel had been charging the past several years. Quality would not be a concern as Ing-Rich had a solid reputation producing enameled steel products since 1901. The colors selected for 1927 were orange letters and figures on a blue background. It was colorful to say the least. Ing-Rich supplied two hundred sixty-seven plates that year. Interestingly, it wasn't until June of that year that Charles Marsland, still managing the New York office of Baltimore Enamel, realized he would not receive the 1927 plate order.

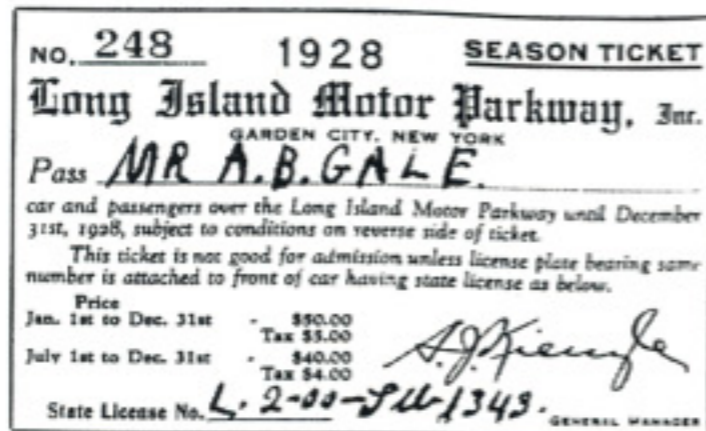
Ing-Rich retained the contract to supply for the 1928 season. That year the Parkway administration instituted some changes

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in the plate issuance policy. Only two plates with the same number could now be ordered. Even so, the order for 1928 rose to seven hundred twenty-nine plates, a quantum leap over the two hundred sixty-seven plates ordered the previous year.

A major reason for the increase in the size of the order was the issuance of new plates to the pass holders. The last time pass holders received the new plates (discs) was in 1922. The 1928 pass holders' plates would be identical to the plate issued to the season ticket holders'. In the past, the pass plate was of a different size and shape or utilized different colors. In 1928, the only way to distinguish the pass plate holder from the season plate subscriber was by the number on the plate. The pass plate recipients were issued numbers between 701 and 900. Mrs. Virginia Vanderbilt, wife of the Parkway founder, who held pass plate numbers "1" and "2" since 1924, was given plates numbered "701" and "702," thereby retaining her standing over Parkway patrons. She didn't enjoy this distinction very long as Vanderbilt divorced her later that year and remarried, the new Mrs. Vanderbilt taking her place at the front of the pass holders' line in 1929. The first Mrs. Vanderbilt, who became known as Mrs. Graham Fair Vanderbilt, was obliged to purchase season tickets if she wished to continue to use the Parkway. In 1929

she received plates numbered "391," "392," and "393."

Another reason for the large increase in the number of plates in 1928 was the creation of a whole new class of plate holders. This new category was restricted to members of the Links and Wheatley Hills Golf Clubs, both in Nassau County. They were issued their own distinctive plate, completely different from those issued to the season and pass holders. Although they were the same size, 5" x 5", the golf club plate colors were yellow and green, not the red and white issued to the season and pass holders. The design was also different. The layout of the club plates consisted of a 1 1/4" wide yellow circle with the outer edges of the circle touching all four sides of the plate. In the circle, "Long Island Motor Parkway" was imprinted in green while the middle green center contained the number and date in yellow. Two hundred of these plates numbering 501-700 were ordered.

For 1929, Ing-Rich was called upon to supply an astounding 1,250 plates, the largest single year order the Parkway ever placed. The 1929 colors

were black and white except for the Golf Club plates which retained the design of 1928. But the clubs' colors were changed to blue and white. Two hundred of these plates were ordered.

On October 15, 1929, Kienzle wrote Ing-Rich, placing the 1930 order for eight hundred fifty season plates. Among these were Vanderbilt's eleven "100" plates, and Grier's four number "1" plates. Colors for 1930 featured top and bottom thirds in red and center third in white. The major change this year was the elimination of the year date. The format consisted of "Long Island" in white on the top third of the plate, the number in red in the center third, and "Motor Parkway" in white in the bottom third portion of the plate. It is not clear why the Parkway chose to eliminate the year date. It was not a manufacturer's error.

William Davis, the New York manager for Ing-Rich, contacted Kienzle the very next day concerning the order. He pointed out that the sketch accompanying the order omitted the year and requested clarification. After confirming the Parkway's intent, Ing-Rich produced the plate exactly as ordered. For 1930, one hundred golf club plates were also ordered numbering 1-100. They retained the same format utilized by the golf club plates in the previous two years, except the colors for 1930 were black and yellow. As in the season plates, the year date was eliminated.


For some unexplained reason, the cost of the season ticket for 1931 was increased to \$100.00 per year, double the price of just two prior years. This new price policy led to a fall-off in the number of season ticket pur-

chasers. 1931 also saw the return of the Baltimore Enamel Plate Co. as supplier of the plates after a break of four years. At the time, their Long Island representative was George H. Blanchard Co., an advertising firm located at 328 Fulton Street in Hempstead. On September 30, 1930, Blanchard submitted a quote to the Parkway to supply plates manufactured by Baltimore Enamel for the 1931 season at a cost of twenty-nine cents each. Ing-Rich kept its thirty-four cents price.

Kienzle, going with the low bid from a proven source, placed an order on October 25, 1930, for seven hundred sixty-two plates. The prior year's red and white colors were retained, but the format was different. The layout was a full width red semi-circle filling the top half of the plate with the rest of the plate in white. For the first time since 1921, "Long Island" was not featured across the top of the plate. Plate numbers now filled that space. "Long Island Motor Parkway" was painted in red across three lines on the bottom white half of the plate. As in 1930, the year was not included.

Along with the season plates, the Parkway ordered the distinctive golf club plate once more. Only fifty of these were

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required, half of the previous year's order. Between the Depression and the higher cost of the season ticket not many members renewed. In fact, only members of the Links Golf Club renewed, as the members of Wheatley Hills boycotted the Parkway, protesting the higher cost of the season ticket. Not one member of the Wheatley Hills Golf Club renewed for 1931. The Links plates were numbered one through fifty, and retained the same format and layout used in the previous two years. The colors were changed from 1930's black and yellow to blue and white, the same colors used in 1929. They were also undated.

Through the Blanchard Co., Baltimore Enamel received the order for the 1932 season. The year date returned on the season plate after an absence of two years. The colors selected were black and white, reflecting the somber mood of the times. The layout was changed from the previous year in that the top two inches of the plate contained a black background with white numbers, the remaining three inches a white background with "Long Island Motor Parkway" on two lines and the year date at the bottom, all in black. Five hundred seventy season plates were ordered along with fifty golf club plates, which retained the same format as in the previous years, the colors changed to green and white. The inch and a quarter wide white circle reaching all four sides of the plate had "Long Island" imprinted in green in the top half of the circle and "Motor Parkway," also in green, in the bottom half of the circle. The green center circle framed the white number. While the season plates were dated, the golf club plates were not.

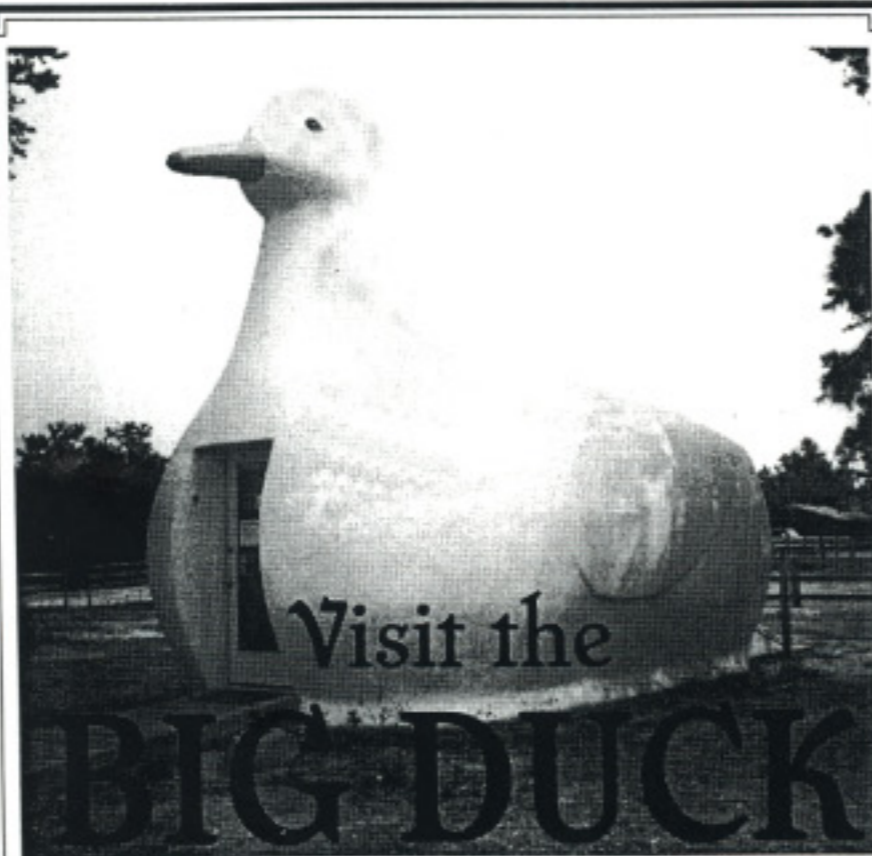
In order to retain the business in 1933, Baltimore Enamel was forced to reduce the cost of the plates to \$.25 each, even though the order was smaller than the previous year. Only three hundred sixty-one plates were made for 1933. While retaining the previous year's format, the colors changed to

orange and white, with orange filling the top half of the plates. The golf club plates were discontinued. 1932 was the last year the Parkway issued plates specifically for the club.

Business continued to decline on the Parkway. This was due to the effects of the Depression as well as competition from the Northern State Parkway, which was in better condition and did not charge a toll. On November 14, 1933, Kienzle ordered two hundred fifty plates for the 1934 season from Blanchard/ Baltimore Enamel. Actually, the Parkway did not need so many plates, as the number of season ticket purchasers had fallen below two hundred. The extra plates were probably given to new pass holders. The colors selected for 1934 were white and blue with a new format. The new design consisted of a white diamond, the four points of which reached the outside edges of the plate. The number and date in the diamond were painted blue. The resulting triangles in each corner of the plate had a blue background with the words "Long Island Motor Parkway" in white, one word in each triangle.

The number of season ticket purchasers took a steep dive in 1935. Only sixty-two season tickets purchasers renewed. On December 28, 1934, Kienzle ordered just seventy-five plates from Blanchard and Baltimore Enamel. Among those not renewing was Thomas Hastings, who held plate number "2" in 1934. He felt the pass was not worth the \$100.00 a year. The previous year's design was retained with the colors changed to black and red.

Another third of their season ticket subscribers fell away in 1936. Reflecting its declining fortunes, no new plates were issued in 1936. The remaining forty ticket holders were told to continue to use their 1935 plates on their autos, as only new season tickets would be issued.



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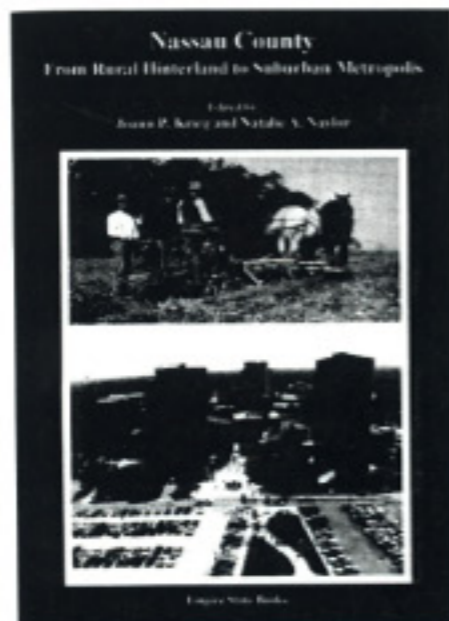
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Nevertheless, in 1937 the Parkway once again decided to order plates. Seventy-five plates were ordered from Baltimore Enamel, many more than required. In the last full year of business, only seventeen season ticket purchasers renewed, and a total of thirty-five plates were ordered. These plates cost the Parkway \$.40 each. The other forty plates were probably distributed to employees, friends, and hangers-on. The colors selected for 1937 were a nautical blue and white, with the design very similar to the format used by the golf club plates a few years earlier. The background of the plate was white with a one-inch wide blue circle filling the plate with the words "Long Island Motor Parkway" in the circle in contrasting white. The number and year date were in blue on the white center of the plate. On December 14, 1936, the plates were shipped by the Railway Express Agency to Parkway headquarters off of Clinton Street in Garden City. These would prove to be the last plates ordered by the Parkway.

Very few Motor Parkway plates have survived. The earliest known example is from 1924. Examples of every year after that date exist, with the largest number from the 1928-1932 era. Among the survivors are at least

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four number "1" plates that once adorned the cars of John P. Grier. At least four golf club plates survive, one example each from 1928, 1929, 1930, and 1932. One of Vanderbilt's number "100" plates remains in place on his Chrysler at the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum in Centerport, New York.

SOURCES

All the information for this article was obtained from the archives of the Suffolk County Vanderbilt Museum in Centerport. I would especially like to thank Florence Ogg, the Curator of Fine and Decorative

Arts and Archival Collection, for her support and making the archival collection completely available for research. I know I made a nuisance of myself on numerous occasions, bombarding her with questions about Vanderbilt, his life and experiences. Anyone owning a Parkway plate who would like to know to whom it was originally issued, contact Florence Ogg, the Curator of Fine and Decorative Arts at the museum. There is an excellent chance she can identify it for you. Thanks, Florence. I would also like to thank Joseph D'Amore and Bob Sisler, fellow Parkway

enthusiasts, for their assistance in confirming plate colors and designs.

This is Al Velocci's first appearance in the Forum.

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