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CLOUT ON A PLATE

In the political game of tags,
the lowest score wins



Cadillac

ILLINOIS
NORTHBROOK
Land of Lincoln
1
STEVE FOLEY

NOT MUCH ON THEIR PLATES

The most prominent license plate of all belongs to Dorothy Ogilvie, who got it 28 years ago when she was Illinois' first lady.



yan Ohs, a 22-year-old graduate student in engineering at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, remembers being stalked on Interstate Highway 57.

He was returning home to south suburban Flossmoor when he noticed a car with two older women come up behind his Saturn and then draw alongside.

"Both of them," he says, "just turned and gawked at

me, like: 'Who is this guy?' They couldn't believe it."

Ohs wasn't all that surprised by the attention, especially when the car with the two women pulled ahead and he saw that it sported a license plate with just three numbers.

That's a rarity in Illinois. There are only 900 three-digit standard-issue plates for pas-

When it comes
to influence, owners
of low license numbers
take a back seat
to no one

By Patrick T. Reardon ■ Tribune photographs by John L

senger cars in the state, and the vast majority of those are on Cadillacs, Lincolns, Jaguars, Mercedeses and similarly high-priced vehicles.

But the number on the plates on Ohs' inexpensive Saturn is even rarer: 21. Hence, the gawking.

"It's fun to have," Ohs says of the plate. "It's something I would never, ever want to give up for anything because it's been in the family for years. I consider it an heirloom."

License plate 21 has been in Ohs' family for half a century, ever since his great-uncle, Edward J. Barrett, was Illinois secretary of state. In that post,

was call up the state and ask for 21 on a license plate, saying "because it would be such a cute touch"—and you'd get it.

It isn't that easy, not by a long shot.

It's not like getting a vanity plate. For that, you just need to be clever (to come up with a witty combination of as many as seven characters) and lucky (that no one has already asked for that witty combination). The odds are in your favor: If one combination is taken, you can ask for something similar, and keep adjusting your request until you find something that works. There are millions of potential combinations.

and that basic need for stature, for place in society," says Jim Nowlan, a former state legislator and co-author of a well-received 1996 book on the interweaving of politics and government in Illinois.

"It's like wearing a T-shirt with a slogan on it. When we think of Illinois politics, we think of influence and insiders, and the way to measure that is in the shortness of the license plate number."

A veteran lobbyist puts it more succinctly:

"Low-number plates, that shows you have big you-know-whats."

meaning that the lowest number of vanity plate now in use is 3. Plate 2 and 1 are available, but no one has asked for them.

That wouldn't happen in Delaware. There, low-number license plates are bought and sold like hog futures.

One of those doing the buying and selling is real estate developer Anthony Fusco who, in the 1970s, obtained his first low-number plate, 477, for \$800. He could sell it today for \$20,000," he says.

At Fusco Enterprises in New Castle, Del., the dozen or so company cars all sport low-number plates. It's a trademark and an investment, and

Single-letter license plates, such as that held by state Sen. James DeLeo (right) of Chicago, were parting gifts of Jim Edgar when he left the secretary of state's office. Low-number plates, such as those owned by Mary Lee Carpentier (left in photo at far right) and her daughter, Jane Carpentier, can remain in well-connected families for decades.



Barrett oversaw the production and distribution of license plates. And, like secretaries of state before and since, he took the opportunity to use the low-number plates as gifts for friends and family, starting with himself (plate 21) and his wife, Jeanne (plate 22).

Barrett kept 21 when he left state government and became Cook County clerk, and, after his death, the plate was passed down to his sister-in-law, then to his niece and finally to his niece's son Ryan. (Plate 22 represented more of a political bequest, going to Barrett's ally, Joseph P. Griffin, a former treasurer of the Illinois Democratic Committee.)

Many of Ohs' college friends don't understand the significance of the plate. Some have even wondered if the car and the plate were his 21st-birthday present—as if all you had to do

But cleverness and luck won't do you much good if you're trying to get a plate like Ohs'.

His 21 belongs to an entirely different, much smaller, much harder to get, much more elite class of plates in Illinois: those with low—very low—numbers.

Consider this: There are 9.7 million license plates in the state, but only nine regular passenger plates with a single number, such as 1 or 7, on them.

In the circles of power and influence in Illinois, those one-digit plates are the most treasured, but the 90 two-digit plates, like Ohs', are nearly as prized. Also valued, though not as highly, are three-number plates and, favorites of Chicago precinct captains, those with just four numbers.

It's a question of scarcity.

"It probably goes back to our genes,



Andre Maurois, the French novelist and biographer, once noted, not with admiration: "In America, to have a license number of one's automobile as low as possible is a social advantage."

He was only partly right.

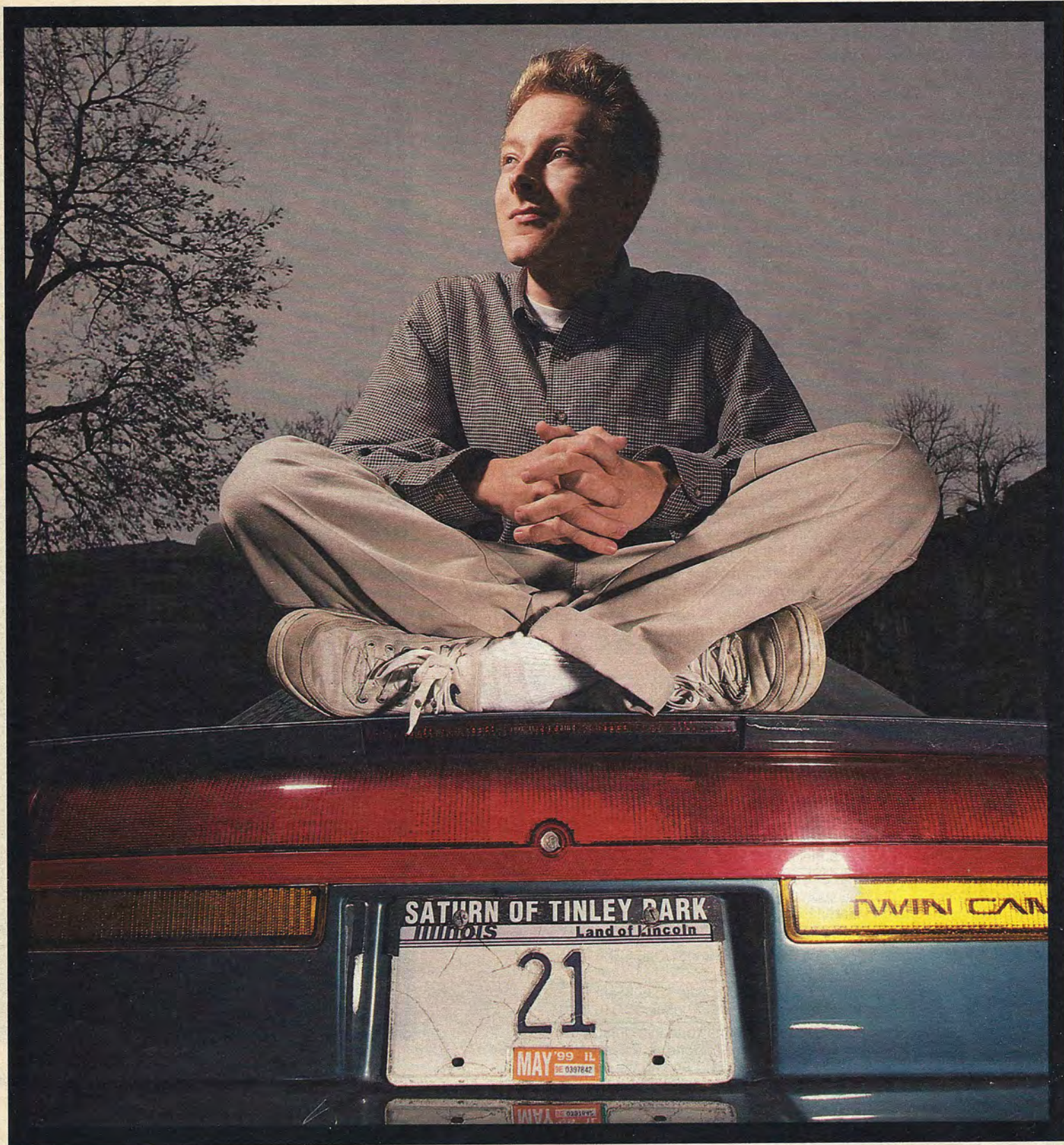
In some states, low numbers don't seem to mean much at all. For example, in California, Wisconsin and Minnesota, all regular plates feature three letters and three numbers, such as AAA 256 or GTY 765.

True, in these states, it is possible to request a very low number on a vanity plate or on one of the wide variety of other extra-cost specialty plates, but it wouldn't say anything about where one stood in the local constellation of movers and shakers. Indeed, in Minnesota, low numbers are so devoid of

announcement to the world that Fusco has money to burn. He took this to the extreme four years ago when, at an auction, he outbid the competition to obtain license plate 9—for \$185,000.

Recently, Fusco got in touch with the investor who owns plate 8, only to learn that the man wanted \$300,000 for it. Too much, Fusco decided. "I'd give him \$200,000 or \$250,000," he says. But not \$300,000.

Back in 1994, news reports of Fusco's purchase of the number 9 plate caught the eye of Pat Quinn, then the Democratic candidate for Illinois secretary of state. Within a few weeks, Quinn was proposing that Illinois competitively bid its low-number plates to raise money for state government and eliminate favoritism from the process. (This would be somewhat different from the system in Delaware, where such bid



#21

'It's something I would never, ever want to give up for anything because it's been in the family for years. I consider it an heirloom.'

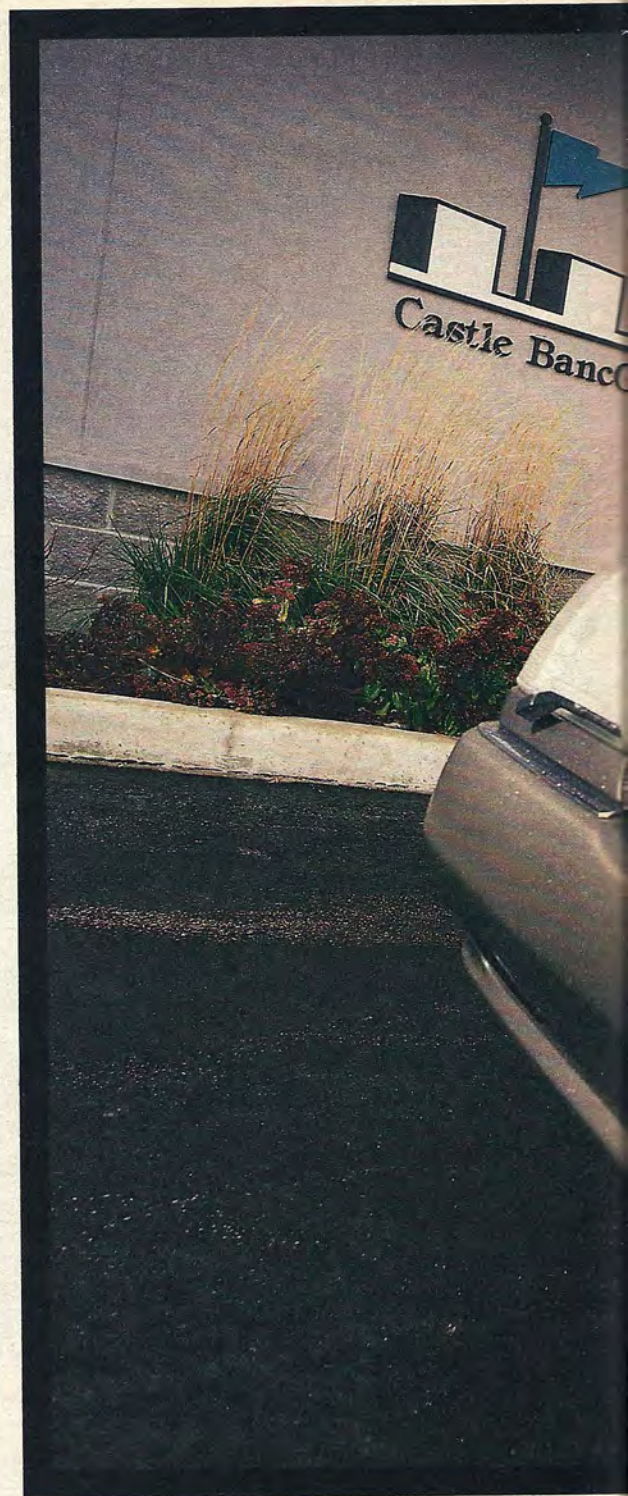
— Ryan Ohs, a graduate student and a grand-nephew of onetime Secretary of State Edward Barrett

Like reading a history of Illinois

The list of car owners with the lowest-number license plates reads almost like a political history of the last century in Illinois. The state began requiring vehicle registration in 1907, but only began providing plates in 1911. From the start, the low-number plates were a prized political perk, and some have been in the same family for decades.

PLATE	WHO HAS IT...	...AND WHY
1	Dorothy Ogilvie	Widow of Gov. Richard Ogilvie (1968-72)
2	Anton Kerner	Son of Gov. Otto Kerner (1961-68), grandson of Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak (1931-33)
3	Mary Lee Carpentier	Widow of state Sen. Donald Carpentier; daughter-in-law of Secretary of State Charles Carpentier (1953-64)
4	Thomas E. Livingston	Senior aide to Gov. Jim Edgar (1991-99); planned to give Edgar the plate after he left office
5	Neil M. Bidwill	Son of Arthur Bidwill, president pro tem of Illinois House (1955-65); also has "72" and "NB" plates
6	Shirley B. Stratton	Wife of former Gov. William Stratton (1953-61)
7	Margaret H. Hensey	Secretary and fiancée of Secretary of State Paul Powell (1965-70); inherited much of his wealth
8	Not taken	Until spring 1998, former Gov. James R. Thompson (1977-91) had this plate on his auto
9	James 'Pate' Philip	Illinois Senate president; one of the top Republicans in the state; wore "9" on his high school basketball team
10	Jane S. Vredenburg	Ex-wife of a descendant of the Vredenburg family, longtime members of the Springfield business elite
11	William E. Shaw	Fifth-generation newspaper publisher; his great-great-grandfather helped Lincoln start the Illinois Republican Party
12	Alexander S. Hewitt	Great-great-grandson of tractor king John Deere; mother was on Illinois Racing Board; works in Denver real estate
13	Carl O. Hoffee	Prominent Springfield attorney, involved in real estate; his brother was on a state universities board
14	Paul L. Warren	Director of the Arthur Morgan Co., a publishing firm in Mesa, Ariz.
15	Charles F. Becker	His father was the CEO of Franklin Life Insurance Co. and a friend of Charles Carpentier
16	Seymour A. Cohen	Owner of SAC Imports Inc. of Chicago; ex-owner of building on the Magnificent Mile; also has "SY" plate
17	Gerald R. Forsythe	Nephew of Secretary of State John Lewis (1970-73); the Forsythe family also has plates "F," "32" and "02"
18	John Castle	Son of Atty. Gen. Latham Castle (1953-59); former aide to Gov. James R. Thompson (1977-91)
19	Not taken	Before last October, Tribune cartoonist John T. McCutcheon Sr. and his son John Jr., a former Tribune editorial page editor, had had the plate for 81 years
20	William H. Perkins Jr.	Federal and state lobbyist for a half-century; business partner of Secretary of State Michael Howlett (1973-77)
21	Ryan Ohs	U. of I. graduate student, grand-nephew of Illinois Secretary of State Edward Barrett (1945-53); family also has "404"
22	Joseph P. Griffin	Former treasurer of the Illinois Democratic Committee; political ally and aide to Barrett; brother of judge
23	S. Barry Lipin	Chairman and CEO of U.S. Auto Leasing & Presidential Car Rental; also has "0700," "374" and "918"
24	Ruth S. Notaro	Widow of Michael Notaro, founder of Statistical Tabulating Corp. and friend of George Halas
25	Cynthia Swain Davis	Retired teacher whose father was head of the Illinois Bar Association and a longtime U. of I. trustee

Chicago Tribune



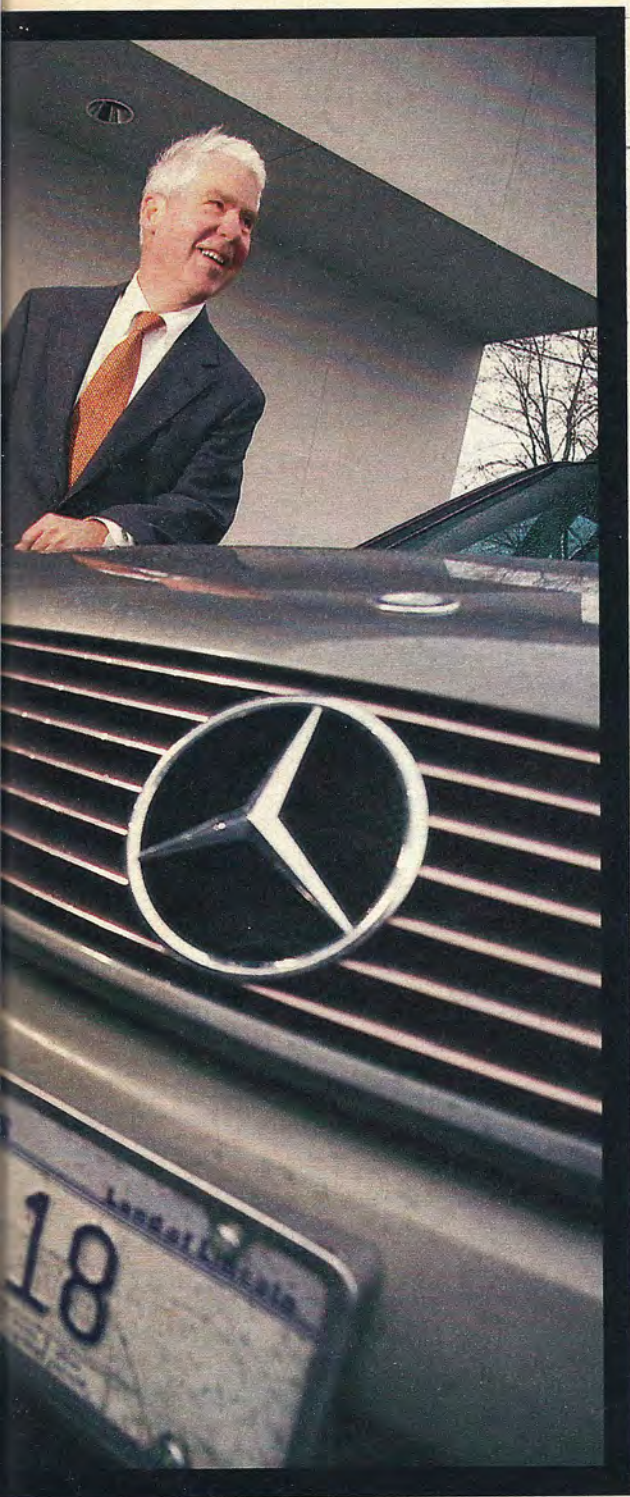
John Castle, an active Illinois Republican, has the plate once

ding is informal and produces no revenue for the state.)

The proposal received virtually no backing—and little wonder, given the toes of leaders of both parties that would have stepped on in putting it into practice. A month or so later, Quinn went down in defeat to Republican George Ryan.

The holder of plate 9 in Illinois, by the way, is Senate President and Republican powerhouse James "Pate" Philip of Wood Dale. "Number 9 is Sen. Philip's lucky number," says spokeswoman Patty Schuh. "It was his number when he played basketball at York High School. He doesn't remember how long he's had the plate. It was presented to him by Jim Edgar when [Edgar] was secretary of state."

Politics, particularly in Illinois, is a game of favors. And number plates are a special kind of favor. For one thing, they don't cost a politician's campaign fund anything. For another, they're not going to be the subject of great scandal because



Edgar, the late Latham Castle, Illinois attorney general in the '50s.

bestow no direct monetary advantage on the recipient.

But low-number plates are gifts of good will that keep on giving. Every time car owners look at those low-number plates, the odds are they think fondly of the politician from whom the plates came. There is, however, one problem. Those who get the low-number plates don't like to give them up. They hang on to them until death, and, often, their relatives find ways to keep the plates in the family.

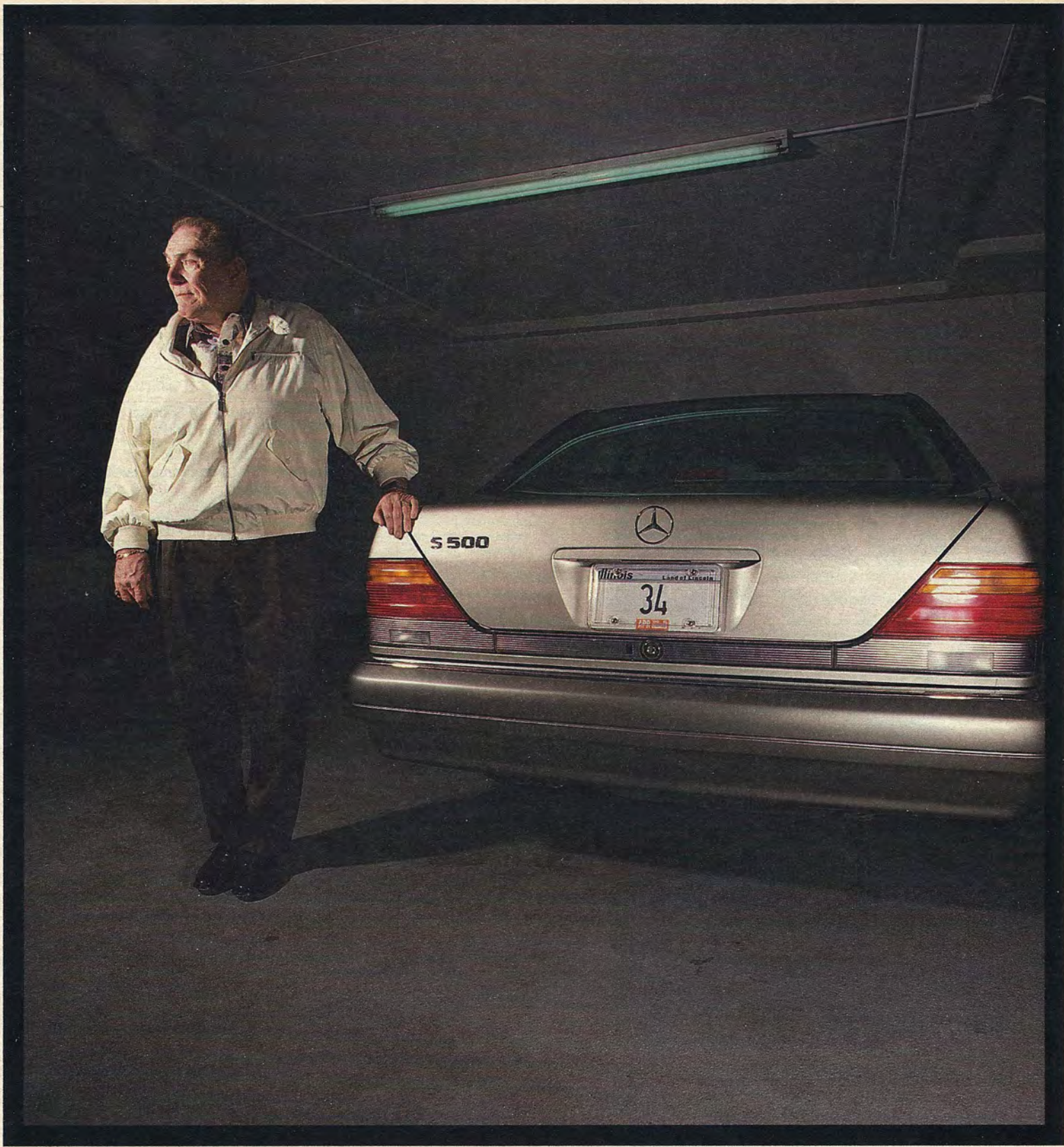
Not to worry. Over the years, Illinois secretaries of state have solved the problem in several creative ways. One was to issue a new set of plates beginning with a zero (01, 02, 03 . . .). Later, two zeros were added at the front to create another new set of numbers, and then three zeros and so on.

A beneficiary of this strategy was Gale Sayers, the Chicago Bears running back great who, in the mid-1970s, moved back to Illinois from Kansas. He called up the secretary of state's office

Edgar's alphabetical order

Eight years ago, just before he left the secretary of state's office for the governor's mansion, Jim Edgar handed out newly created single-letter license plates to friends and allies. Some of these drivers have other plates with low numbers or double letters, including Marc Zaransky (five others) and Palumbo Brothers (four others).

PLATE	WHO HAS IT...	...AND WHY
A	Dr. Firouz Amirparviz	Cardiologist; friend of Gov. Jim Edgar (1991-99)
B	Charles W. Bidwill III	President, Sportsman's Park racetrack; co-owner of Casino Queen riverboat in East St. Louis
C	James L. Covert	License plate boss for Secretary of State George Ryan (1991-99); son of Rockford industrialist Cal Covert
D	William E. Dugan	President of Local 150 of the International Union of Operating Engineers; strong Edgar supporter
E	Not taken	Reserved for Edgar, who left office this month
F	John D. Forsythe	Nephew of Secretary of State John Lewis (1970-73); GOP fundraiser; Edgar friend from central Illinois
G	Charles L. Gauwitz	Longtime Teamsters Union official whose retirement in 1998 was honored by Edgar proclamation
H	Robert Hickman	Former top Edgar aide; former Illinois Tollway director; convicted in 1997 in corrupt land deal
I	State of Illinois	Plate assigned to a red sports car given to the state by Mitsubishi; favorite toy of Gov. James R. Thompson (1977-91)
J	Richard D. Joutras	Appointed by Edgar to Illinois State Police Merit Board; executive vice president of The Segerdahl Corp.
K	Kenny Construction	Politically connected firm whose president was co-chairman of Edgar's '94 inauguration party
L	Vernon R. Loucks	Chairman of Baxter International Inc., a Deerfield firm that contributes heavily to Illinois Republicans
M	Diana J. Moser	Wife of banker/developer George Moser, an early Edgar backer who hosted the governor at his Wyoming home
N	Edward J. Noha	Chairman, Chicago Economic Development Commission; co-chairman, CNA Financial Corp.
O	Lawrence E. Warner	Contractor and insurance adjuster in Chicago; also a fundraiser for George Ryan
P	Palumbo Brothers	One of Illinois' oldest and largest road builders; frequent contributor to both political parties
Q	Fred S. Latsko	Chicago real estate owner and developer; hosted fancy pre-birthday lunch for Edgar in 1992
R	Alvin J. Robinson	Insurance firm owner; Harold Washington adviser; Richard M. Daley appointee; George Ryan friend
S	Silas S. Cathcart	Finance chairman of Edgar's 1990 campaign; retired chairman of Kidder Peabody Inc.
T	Terry A. Scrogum	Member of Illinois Arts Council; member of Illinois Gaming Board; former special assistant to Edgar
U	James Upchurch	Head of engineering firm; longtime friend of Edgar and Edgar's brother Fred; big GOP contributor
V	Frank Vala	A builder-developer in Springfield; big GOP contributor; like Edgar, an Eastern Illinois University alumnus
W	William L. Weiss	Co-chairman of Edgar's gubernatorial transition team; retired chairman of Ameritech
X	James DeLeo	State senator from Northwest Side; protege of Ald. William J.P. Banks (36th); ex-Traffic Court clerk
Y	Dr. Luis Yarzagaray	Professor of neurosurgery at Loyola University's Stritch School of Medicine
Z	Marc Zaransky	Former in-law of Ald. Bernard Stone (50th); pleaded guilty in 1993 to bribing a Cook County official



#34 ' I had lunch one time with Jim Edgar when he was secretary of state, and I said, "If you ever have one of those low numbers come up, I'd like it." '

—Don Stephens, mayor of Rosemont and master fundraiser

looking to get license plate I AM 3D (the title of his book on his friendship with teammate Brian Piccolo, who died of cancer) or WE ARE 1 (a comment on the close relationship he shares with his wife, Ardythe), but both were taken.

"I couldn't think of anything else. I just said: Can you give me 0000? They said: No, but we could give you 0001."

He took it and has enjoyed having it, although he has this story: "One time, the police stopped me, and I thought: 'What did I do?'" In fact, he hadn't done anything wrong. The officer had noticed the 0001 plate and, checking it in his in-squad computer, learned the car belonged to Sayers: "He just wanted an autograph."

One of the interesting quirks of the world of license plates in Illinois is the way some families seem to be magnets for low numbers, single or double letters and other sought-after combinations. Lindahl Brothers Inc., one of the longest operating excavation firms in the Chicago area, and its owners have 14 such prized plates, while J. Paul Oddo, business agent of Local 476 of the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees, and his relatives have eight double-letter plates, one of which is BO.

Five low-number plates are held by various present and former Tribune employees, but that number no longer includes plate 19, which, until October, had been held by the late Tribune cartoonist John T. McCutcheon and his family for 81 years.

Except for the single- and double-digit plates, the ones with the highest prestige are those with two characters (two letters or a letter and number combination) and, even more sought after, those with just a single letter.

In fact, shortly before he left the secretary of state's office for the governor's mansion in 1991, Jim Edgar distributed those single-letter plates to a host of friends, ranging from his personal cardiologist to the finance chairman of his gubernatorial campaign.

Well, actually, Edgar handed out only 25 of the 26 plates.

He didn't assign the plate featuring the letter E to anyone. Instead, that plate was stored away for eight years—reserved for his own eventual use as ex-Gov. Edgar.

Chicago Democrat Howard Carroll, a veteran of the state legislature for nearly three decades, has license plate 26. "The purists say the low numbers are the real clout," Carroll says, "and the nouveaux [as in nouveau riche] are the ones with the letters or the ones with the zeros."

In fact, it's not really a question of clout and no clout, but of old clout and new clout.

Reading down the list of those with the license plates 1 through 25 is like scanning a history of Illinois politics.

Consider Anton Kerner with plate 2. His father was Gov. Otto Kerner, and his grandfather was Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, slain in 1933 by a sniper bullet meant for President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. Or look at William E. Shaw, whose family has long had plate 11. Not only have five generations of his family run newspapers in Dixon, but his great-great-grandfather, B.F. Shaw, helped establish the Republican Party in Illinois.

Because of the tendency to hand plates down to children and grandchildren, few of those with the very lowest-number plates could be considered present-day power-brokers.

By contrast, the developers, company presidents, fundraisers and state appointees who make up the bulk of the list of those with single-letter plates—while far from household names—are well within the orbit of power and influence in today's politics.

Some of those with low-number and other elite plates are loath to credit their political connections. ("It was luck," says Springfield builder-developer Frank Vala of obtaining license plate V.)

Not Don Stephens.

Stephens, the only mayor that Rosemont has had in its 42-year history, explains how it works:

"I had lunch one time with Jim Edgar when he was secretary of state, and I said, 'If you ever have one of those low numbers come up, I'd like it,' and, one day, he called up, and I had one."

It was No. 34.

Several years later, George Ryan was secretary of state and was planning a new series of plates with a single letter and a single number. So Ryan's chief of staff, Scott Fawell, gave Stephens a call. "He told me they were doing this and asked me if I wanted S1, and I said, 'Yeah.'"

Of course, the reason Stephens was having lunch with Edgar and getting calls from Ryan's aide is that he is a master fundraiser and the head of one of the most potent political organizations in the state.

Although a Republican, Stephens is also friendly with Democrats. And giving him distinctive license plates has been a way for the GOP leadership to keep him happy.

And those plates do make him happy.

But, sometimes, Stephens warns, such plates can be too distinctive.

"You don't want to pull a Clinton with a plate like that," Stephens says. "If you pull into a motel, everyone knows you're there." ■

Passing the plate: The history of No. 1



No. 1—is wrong.

Francis George, the Roman Catholic cardinal archbishop of Chicago, has never had that plate on his limousine, although several of his predecessors did. For 31 years, the plate was assigned to a succession of Catholic cardinals. But that was just a mid-century chapter in the long and colorful history of plate No. 1.

In fact, the history of Plate 1 goes back to even before Illinois began issuing license plates. It goes back to Sidney Gorham.

Gorham is the man who wrote the law in 1907 that required the licensing and registration of motor vehicles in the state. Gorham wasn't a legislator. He was the attorney for the Chicago Automobile Club, a predecessor of the Chicago Motor Club, and, somehow, amid the work of writing the bill and shepherding it through the legislative process, Gorham arranged to be given license No. 1.

At first, he and other Illinois residents had to supply their own plates. That changed in 1911 when Illinois took over the job of manufacturing and distributing the plates. What didn't change was that Gorham kept Plate 1.

Gorham's demise in December 1935 left Illinois politicians with the delicate question of what to do with Plate 1. One year, they gave it to the Motor Club. The next, it was on a car belonging to the Peabody family of the Peabody Coal Co., the largest coal producer in Illinois at the time.

Then, in 1939, someone got the bright idea of bestowing the plate on Cardinal George Mundelein. In a state with so many Catholics (and so many Catholic politicians), who was going to complain? After Mundelein's death, the plate was passed on to his successors until, in 1970, Cardinal John Cody decided that it was too ostentatious, and he exchanged it for a more run-of-the-mill plate.

Paul Powell was the secretary of

state then, and for the first time in three decades he was the one who had to face the knotty question of who should get Plate 1.

He gave it to himself.

There was probably no surprise in that. Powell had earlier grabbed Plate 17 for his car, and he had given Plate 7 to Marge Hensey, his secretary and lady friend, whom he called "Little Bit."

But Powell didn't get to enjoy his lowest-number plate for long.

On Oct. 10, 1970, in a hotel room in Rochester, Minn., where he had gone for tests at the Mayo Clinic, Powell died of an apparent heart attack. And it wasn't long before word leaked out that his executor had discovered a shoebox containing hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash in the room at the St. Nicholas Hotel where Powell had lived when in Springfield. In all, some \$850,000 was found in the hotel room closet and in Powell's office safe.

No explanation was ever offered as to why Powell had all that money. But the story instantly entered Illinois political lore. Eventually, Little Bit, who was with Powell in Rochester, inherited much of his money. But she didn't get plate No. 1.

Even before the discovery of Powell's hoard, his replacement as secretary of state, John Lewis, had given the plate to Dorothy Ogilvie, the wife of the state's squeaky-clean, good-government governor, Richard Ogilvie. As the state's First Couple, the Ogilvies had the use of state-owned cars, but their daughter, Elizabeth, was 16 and needed a private car to learn how to drive. So the couple bought her a Vega, and the most prominent license plate in the state was attached to Elizabeth's undistinguished subcompact car.

Today, 28 years later, the plate is on Dorothy Ogilvie's 1989 Cadillac, the car she uses to run to the Jewel and to drive out to Westchester to visit a now 40ish Elizabeth. At times, someone will ask how Mrs. Ogilvie got such a low license plate.

To which the elegant matron will respond: "I slept with the governor."

—P.T.R.