



The License Plates of James Melton

By Craig Hardesty

Above left to right: Melton's 1958 record release. James Melton in front of his Connecticut museum.

Those of us in the antique car hobby may have all seen stories about license plate collectors from the early days when the collecting hobby was just gaining its footing. These pioneer collectors are responsible for many of the amazing plates that still exist in collections today. However, most people are unaware that one such early license plate enthusiast also happened to be one of the most well-known celebrities of his day.

James Melton grew up in the small central Florida town of Citra. The son of a sawmill operator, Melton began singing at an early age. With a phenomenal tenor voice, he left the south behind and went to New York City in 1927 to find fame and fortune. He was immediately hired as a regular at the Roxy Theatre and became a member of the popular quartet The Revelers soon after. He accompanied George Gershwin on his national tour in 1934 and was a regular on numerous radio programs including *The Voice of Firestone* (1933–57), *The Palmolive Beauty Box Theater* (1934–37), *The Bell Telephone Hour* (1940–42), *Texaco Star Theater* (1944–47), and *Harvest of Stars* (1945–50). He starred in several films including *Stars Over Broadway* (1935), *Sing Me a Love Song* (1936), *Melody for Two* (1937), and *Ziegfeld Follies* (1945). Making his Metropolitan Opera debut in Mozart's *The Magic Flute* in 1942, he would become a regular at the Met through 1950. From 1951–1952, he was the star of NBC's *Ford Festival* variety show on television, also known as *The James Melton Show*. He released nine albums between 1943 and 1958 and appeared as a lead singer on many others. While the magnitude of his celebrity has been largely forgotten over the years, in the 1930s and 1940s Melton was described as "America's favorite tenor" and earned two stars on the

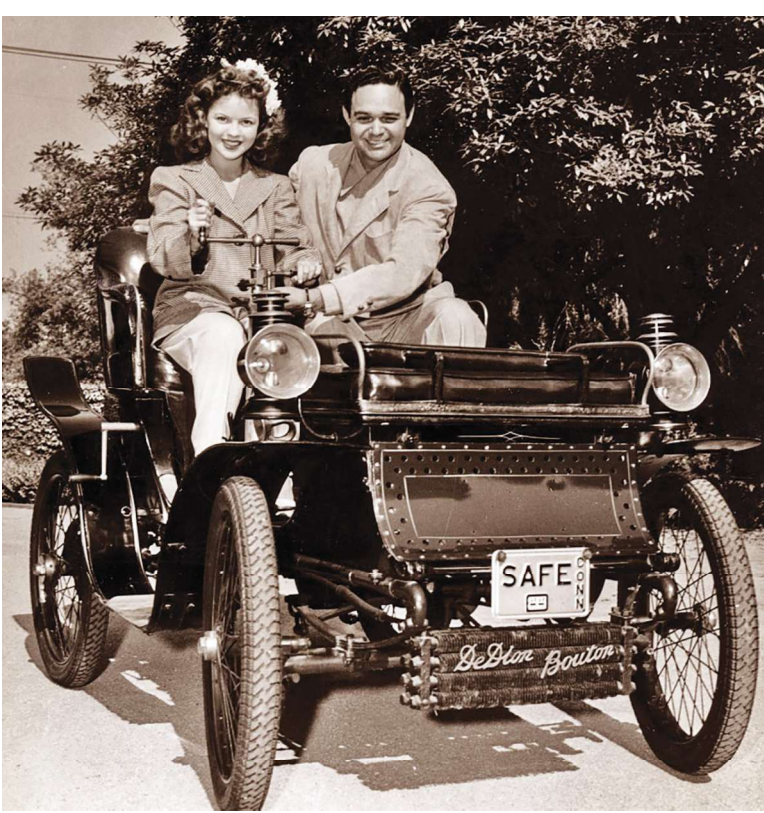
Hollywood Walk of Fame for recording and radio.

Although Melton enjoyed tremendous success as a singer and actor, his personal passion was vintage automobiles. Awestruck as a child by his uncle's 1910 White Touring Car, Melton purchased a similar vehicle in 1937. Within 10 years he had amassed a collection of more than 100 rare vehicles from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, Melton would become such a high-profile figure in the vintage car collecting world that he was elected president of the Antique Automobile Club of America in 1951.

Cars of the Brass Era were not considered particularly valuable at that time, and Melton would often get leads on derelict cars while singing at rural venues. In his book *Bright Wheels Rolling*, he even gives an account of a 1909 Pierce-Arrow he literally got in exchange for singing a song requested by the owner! Once the cars were secured, he would spare no expense giving them "nut and bolt" restorations.

During his most active years of collecting, Melton lived in Weston, Connecticut, and his original intent was to donate his collection to the state to be displayed in a state-funded museum. The state expressed a keen interest, and negotiations took place both before and after World War II. Eventually, he grew frustrated with the political wrangling and concessions he was asked to make. So, in July 1948, he opened the 20,000-square-foot Melton Museum in a former bowling alley property he had purchased in the town of Norwalk.





Melton teaching actress Shirley Temple how to drive his "SAFE" 1900 DeDion Bouton while on tour in California in 1944.

The License Plate Connection

Connecticut began issuing personalized license plates in 1937, a full 20 years earlier than any other state. Motorists with good driving records could request these "initial plates" with three characters (usually their initials or a variation thereof) for a one-dollar fee. A few years later, the number of allowable characters increased to four. In the book *James Melton: The Tenor of His Times*, Melton's daughter discusses rumors that he may have been a driving force behind the development of these plates. While circumstantial evidence would suggest this was unlikely, Melton was certainly a big fan of the concept. In fact, he went on to obtain so many personalized plates for his vintage vehicles that it became a trademark.

The earliest plate I can verify is "JXM," appearing on Melton's 1911 Stanley Steamer in film footage from the September 1939 Vintage Motor Car Club of America meet. Once Connecticut began issuing initial plates, common initials were issued rather quickly, forcing many to use variations of their initials. My guess is that was the case here since Melton did not have a middle name and "JM" was likely already taken. Many of his other serial numbers such as "JMEL," "JAME," and "MRJM" are also clearly variations of his name. Some of the others are less obvious, such as "JEDG," used to honor the car's original owner Judge William Malone; "FUST," used on a 1911 Oldsmobile that had won "Fust Prize" in its class at the 1946 Detroit Automotive Golden Jubilee; "MMMM," used by Melton's wife (Mrs. Marjorie McClure Melton); and "XMAS," used on a 1907 Rolls-Royce, which happened to be green with red interior. The "XMAS" Rolls Royce was Melton's favorite car and the most photographed of all the vehicles in his collection.

From the early 1940s through 1960, Melton's personalized plates gained more media exposure than virtually any license plate collection before or since. In addition to the numerous brochures, postcards, and souvenir booklets published by his museums, Melton's plates were prominently featured in books like *Dream Cars* (1953), *Oldtime Steam Cars* (1953), *Bright Wheels Rolling* (1954), and *The Glorious Glidden Tours* (1996); magazine articles in publications such as *Life* (1942), *Parade* (1945), *Auto Sport Review* (1952), *The American Magazine* (1953), *Family Circle* (1954), *Antique Automobile* (1957), and *The Antiques Journal* (1957); and advertisements for a variety of products including Ethyl gasoline (1947), Schaefer beer (1948), Catalina sportswear (1950), Gulf motor oil (1953), PurOlator oil filters (1954), and Mercury automobiles (1959). Cars bearing his special plates appeared at numerous media events like the New York World's Fair (1939–40), the parade lap of the Indianapolis 500 race (1946), the Hartford Golden Automobile Jubilee (1947), the opening of Florida's infamous Sunshine Skyway bridge (1954), and multiple entries on The Glidden Tour between 1946 and 1957. In an interesting side note, when Melton was invited to the 1946 Indy 500 race, he was also asked to sing "Back Home Again in Indiana" in celebration of the return of the race after World War II. It was such a hit that it has been sung every year since and has become a cherished Indy 500 tradition. Melton would return to sing the song in 1947, 1948, 1950, and 1954.



The Glidden Tour endurance drive, inactive since 1913, was revived by James Melton in 1946. He is shown here on that 1946 tour driving his 1907 Locomobile. His "JMEL" plate was transferred to more cars than any of his other vanity plates.



A page from the 1945 Melton Museum souvenir booklet shows a sampling of his Connecticut plates that he used on his vehicles.

After examining hundreds of period photos and written materials, as well as speaking with several historians and plate collectors, I have been able to put together a list of 25 Connecticut personalized serial numbers confirmed to have been used by Melton. The majority of these were made on both the 1937–1947 and 1948–1956 bases. A few continued on the 1957 base. This may seem like a small number considering the size of the car collection. However, photos indicate that some of the museum vehicles used regular issue plates, and many were not registered at all. The personalized plates seem to have been reserved for Melton’s favorites.

The Move to Florida

The harsh Connecticut winters can make enjoying the antique car hobby a seasonal affair. Melton described the situation in a column he wrote for *Cars* magazine in June 1953: “For some time it has been apparent that the type of operation we conduct in Connecticut is a tourist attraction and as such could only be really successful in a part of the country where there are a great many tourists who are in a relaxed state of mind and looking for interesting stops. I believe I have found such a place in Florida.”

In fact, Melton had been planning a move to Florida for quite some time, initially hoping to move his collection to Daytona Beach to tie into that city’s auto racing heritage. Conceptual drawings and details were released in a December 1950 article in *Road & Track* magazine describing a glamorous new facility on the banks of the Halifax River. Unfortunately, those plans fell through, and Melton ended up purchasing an ornate former casino property in the town of Hypoluxo instead. As numerous ads at the time explained, the new “James Melton Autorama” was located “8 miles south of Palm Beach on U.S. Route 1.”

The new facility opened in April 1953 to much fanfare. Using the move as an advertising opportunity, some of the cars were driven the entire 1,500 miles from Connecticut to south Florida. All the vehicles and car haulers were festooned with banners and stopped for promotional events along the route, even being greeted in Washington, DC, by Melton’s close friend President Eisenhower!

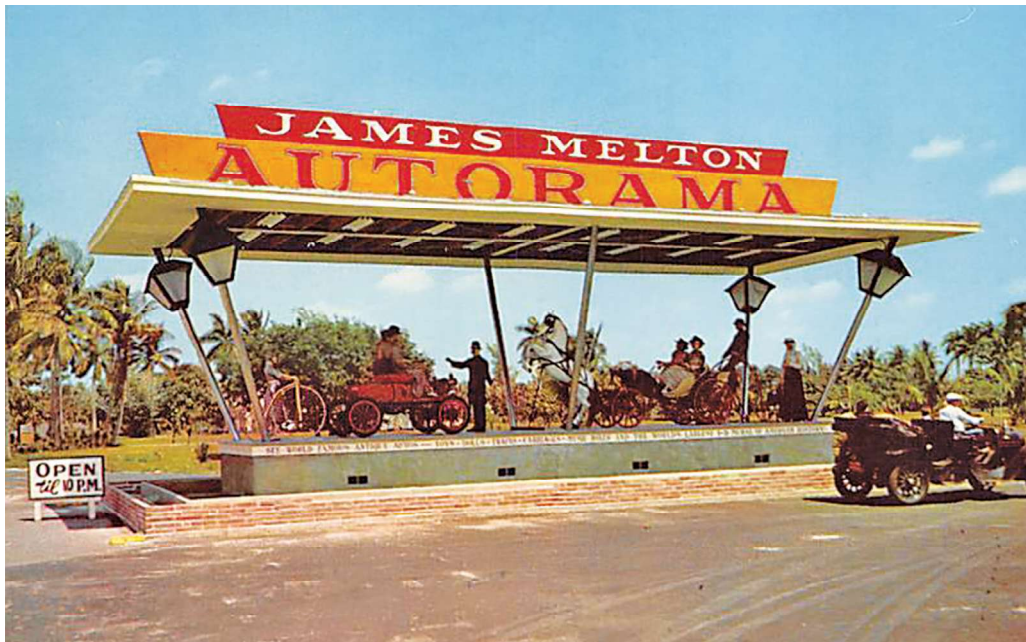
His move to Florida truly showcased Melton’s appreciation for license plates. At this point, Connecticut was still the only state issuing vanity tags. But Melton had connections with numerous high-ranking officials, including Florida Governor Fuller Warren (1949–1953). This undoubtedly explains how, only a few months after Melton’s move to Hypoluxo, the state legislature enacted a new law creating Florida Statute 320.085 entitled “Antique automobiles used for display or exhibit.” The new statute specifically defined the term “Autorama” to mean “a place where any antique automobiles manufactured more than twenty years prior to the current year are displayed or exhibited.” It further stated that, for a one-dollar fee, any vehicle in an Autorama could receive “a distinctive license plate with such letters and numerals as shall be selected by said Autorama.” These were to be used in lieu of the “Q” coded plates normally issued to antique vehicles.



Melton (third from left) at the opening of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in 1954.

Melton was now free to register his cars in Florida with vanity plates under the new Autorama statute. According to state registration records, nine Autorama plates were first issued in 1955. Again, this seems like a surprisingly small number. However, Melton continued to reside in Connecticut, and photographs indicate that most of his cars kept their Connecticut registrations even after the move. It is believed that Melton primarily requested Florida plates only for vehicles he intended to operate in Florida for promotional purposes. The Florida plates of that era were significantly larger than those used in Connecticut and could accommodate up to eight characters. While Melton’s Connecticut plates were all of a personal nature, he chose more





The entrance to the new James Melton Autorama in Hypoluxo, Florida, in 1955.

advertising-oriented words like “AUTORAMA,” “WELCOME,” and “Y’ALL COME” for his Florida plates. With the exception of “GENT” used on his favorite steam car, a 1907 Stanley Steamer “Gentlemen’s Speedy Roadster,” none of the serial numbers used in Connecticut were carried over to Florida.

State records further indicate that seven Autorama plates were issued in 1956 and 1957, three in 1958, four in 1959, and two in 1960. The low registration numbers make these plates far rarer than the Connecticut ones, with photos also being more elusive. As with the Connecticut plates, I have not found a comprehensive list of all the Autorama plates that were issued. However, I have been able to confirm ten different serial numbers that were used at various times between 1955–1958. Unfortunately, no photos or examples of surviving plates from 1959 or 1960 turned up during my research. In fact, the latest Melton personalized plate that I am aware of is actually a Connecticut “SAFE” plate with a 1962 validation tab, which is still in the possession of Melton’s daughter Margo.

The “Y’ALL COME” plates are very interesting as they incorporated an apostrophe into the serial number and used completely different dies than any other known Florida plates from this era. Even so, upon examination of a surviving example, I strongly believe they are legitimate state issues. Also of interest is that the Florida Autorama statute remained in place through 1975 and was worded in such a way that any car museum could have technically requested them. However, given that so few were issued, and none were issued after 1960, it is likely that all Autorama plates were issued to Melton.

Most of the photos I have found show the Florida plates being used on the front of the vehicles. Since Florida is a single plate state, it is clear that Melton liked displaying them prominently on the front for public events

and publicity photos, further supporting the idea that he saw them as promotional tools. He even continued using some of them for decoration on the front after they expired. A photo in the aforementioned 1959 Mercury magazine ad shows the new Mercury driving next to Melton’s 1920 Stutz Bearcat still wearing its 1955 Florida “BEARCAT” plate on the front.

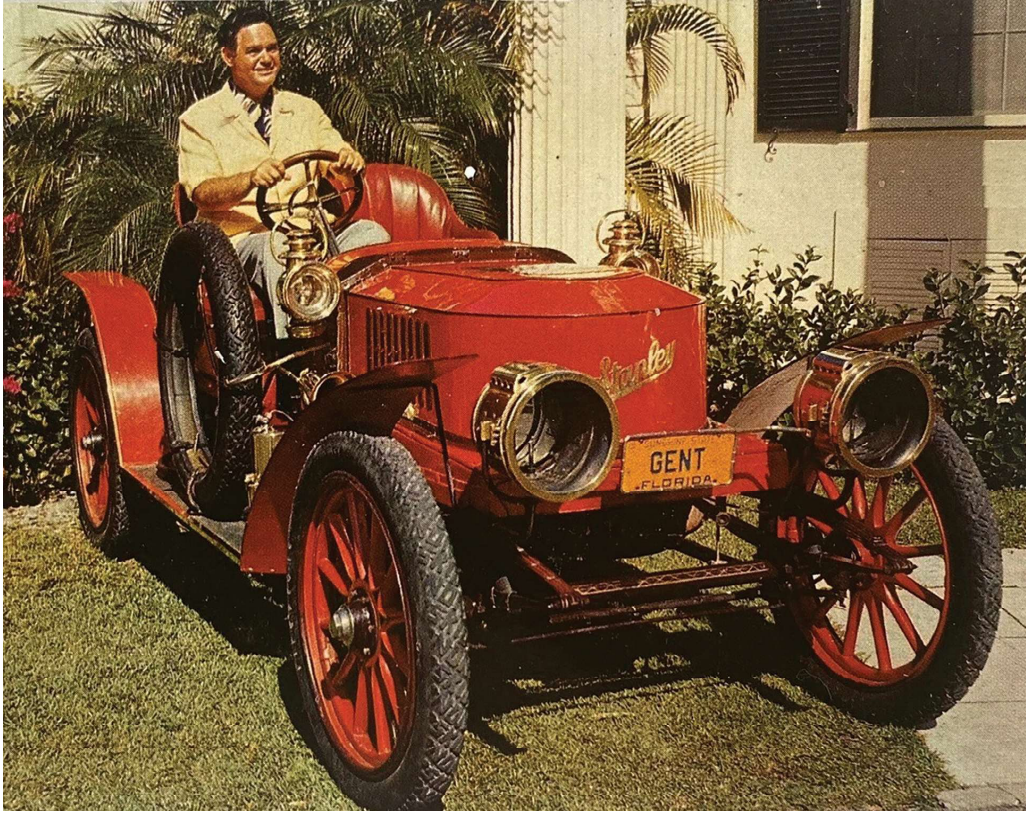
Due to financial mismanagement and a significant decline in visitors after the opening of the Sunshine State Parkway in 1954, the Autorama proved to be unsustainable. In a December 1963 article lamenting the loss of the Autorama and several other beloved local attractions, *The Boynton Beach Star* described them as “all gone since over half the traffic that crowded US 1 now races through the back areas of Boynton on the turnpike.” Melton began liquidating his

collection in the late 1950s, finally selling about 35 of the remaining vehicles to Winthrop Rockefeller in a highly publicized sale in June 1960. Due to tax liabilities on the vehicles, it took over a year to finalize the sale. Melton died unexpectedly in April 1961, and what remained of his Autorama permanently closed five months later when Rockefeller took possession of his vehicles. The cars purchased by Rockefeller were eventually used to open The Museum of Automobiles in Morrilton, Arkansas, in 1964, a facility built specifically to house the Melton collection. This museum is still in business today.



Mayor Catherine Strong (front left) and members of the Delray Beach, Florida, Chamber of Commerce pose in the James Melton Autorama’s 1918 Dodge Victoria with its 1957 “WELCOME” plate.





like to know if any club members know of other vanity plates Melton used that were not covered in my article. If you have any information, please reach out to me at: chardesty@hccfl.edu.

Editor's note: This article was reformatted for the VMCCA Bulb Horn. It originally appeared in the December 2025 issue of the Automobile License Plates Collectors Association's PLATES magazine.

(Photos by Craig Hardesty)

The "GENT" plate was the only personalized serial number that carried over from Connecticut to Florida.

Fast-forward to the 1980s, where several long-time ALPCA (Automobile License Plate Collectors Association) members had booths set up at one of the famous Hershey, Pennsylvania, antique car swap meets, when a gentleman showed up with around 30-40 early Connecticut initial plates. The man explained that the plates once belonged to famous singer and car collector James Melton and promptly sold most of them to the collectors in attendance. I wish I knew more of the history behind how this man came to be in possession of such a large trove of Melton plates after all those years. But, thanks to this fortunate series of events, a surprisingly large number of Melton's Connecticut plates still exist in collections today.

While his car collection was legendary, is it fair to also describe Melton as a license plate collector? I think so. He did have a small collection of early American plates on display at the Autorama. But, more than that, his personalized plates clearly meant something to him. He put a lot of effort into obtaining them and loved showing them off. We all enjoy the hobby in our own way, and Melton's plates certainly made him happy. So, now you know the nearly forgotten yet fascinating story of James Melton, "America's favorite tenor" and arguably America's most famous celebrity plate collector!

I am always interested in uncovering more personalized license plates that Mr. Melton may have used back in the day. Since he was heavily involved with the VMCCA, I would

A 1959 Mercury ad shows Melton's "BEARCAT" plate on his Stutz.

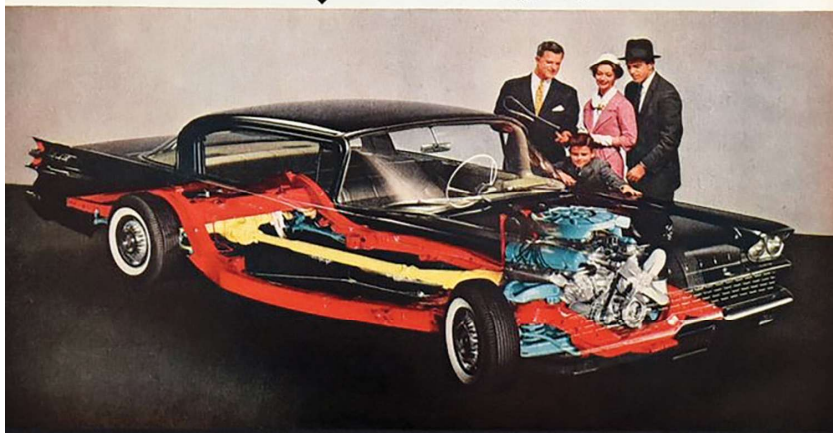


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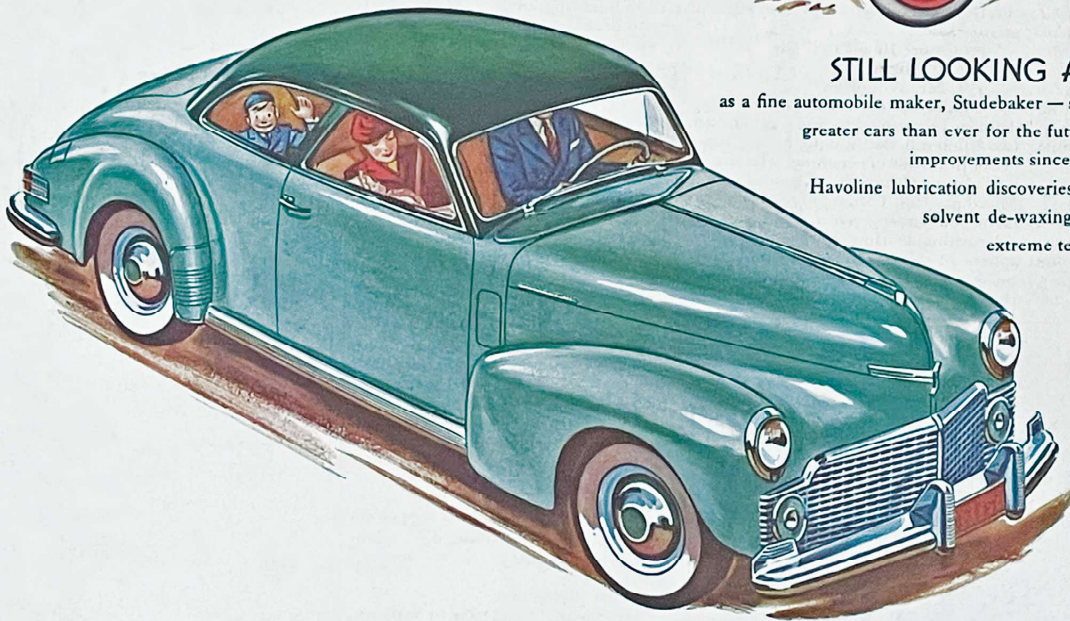
FOR THE 1904 CARRIAGE TRADE

Famous since 1854 as a fine carriage builder, Studebaker—farsighted then, too—introduced one of the earliest “horseless carriages.” This 1904 model Studebaker was a snappy 2-cylinder, rear-entrance job with 15 horsepower—just in time to take advantage of a great new motor oil called Havoline, which was introduced that same year.



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THE TEXAS COMPANY

The Texaco Star Theatre featured James Melton. This ad appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post* published it on September 29, 1945. (Image courtesy of Tracy Lesher)

