



Vermont's 251 Club

By KENALENE J. COLLINS

Photographs by DANIEL A. NEARY and VERMONT DEVELOPMENT AGENCY

LICKING STAMPS and stuffing envelopes is just one of the many details of keeping Vermont's 251 Club members together and active. This year's quarterly mailing went to 2,200 homes in most of the 50 states, plus Canada and Panama.

In the 21 years the club has flourished, membership has grown from two to nearly 4,000. And much of the credit can go to Mrs. Lillias Bailey of Montpelier. In 1956 she was handed responsibility of the club upon the death of its organizer, Dr. Arthur W. Peach, then director of the Vermont Historical Society.

At a St. Johnsbury Rotary Club meeting, Dr. Peach introduced the idea of a "status Club," as he called it, to give recognition to those Vermonters and others who had visited every town in Vermont. The idea met with complete silence.

Undaunted, the ebullient Dr. Peach launched the idea soon after in this magazine's Summer 1954 issue. He surmised that of the then 370,000 Vermont residents, maybe 100 had visited every town in the state. "... there is no excuse for a Vermonter's saying that he does not know this state from top to bottom." Dr.

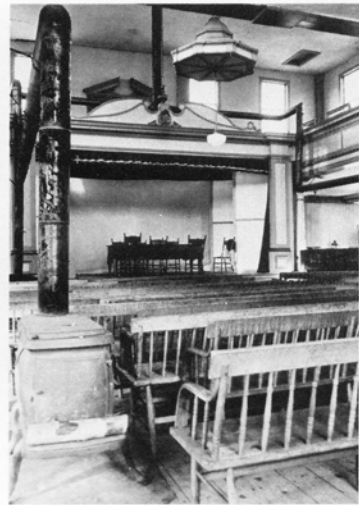
Peach then announced the organization of the 251 Club, "... to be made up of Vermonters and others who can show that they have visited, not merely driven through, the 251 towns in the state. We will have an annual meeting in Montpelier each Summer and compare pictures, notes and memories, with no speeches; any high-domed or long-winded speaker who shows up will be tomahawked in the best Iroquois style." Dr. Peach and Huntley Palmer of St. Johnsbury were the first two members. Mr. Palmer is still an active member.



POMFRET, VDA



NEWFANE, VDA



STRAFFORD, VDA



EAST DOVER, VDA

The first annual meeting, under Dr. Peach, took place at the old Pavilion Hotel in Montpelier July 18, 1955. There were no officers, no committees and "no long-winded speakers" at the meeting. There is now a Board of Directors, "To sign checks if anything happens to me," says Mrs. Bailey, in her seventies and still going strong. Meetings are now held twice a year.

Anyone who has the will to visit the 246 organized and five unorganized towns in Vermont can become a member. (The unorganized town of Lewis did pose a problem in early days with no road to it. A lumber road now cuts into it making access easier.) Until a member has visited every town he is a "minus" member and becomes a "plus" member when the 251 visits are completed. To prove their state travels, some members have their picture taken in front of post offices, the zip code being a stable reference. One member has

used churches as proof of visits.

The initial format of the club has remained virtually unchanged. Members keep in touch through the newsy *Wayfarer*, started by Mrs. Bailey to replace the *Between Us* initiated by Dr. Peach. It contains brief sketches of historical items in Vermont, reviews of books by Vermont writers and the dates and contents of the bi-annual meetings. Printed in green ink, only one member has complained that green is more difficult to read than black ink. Mrs. Bailey is not about to change the ink color. It represents the green mountains of Vermont.

During Mrs. Bailey's leadership the club has grown from 200 to its present membership and the bank account rose from nothing to over a thousand dollars. Mail expenses have gone up from three cents to 13 cents per mailing and while there were no membership fees until 1959 when 50 cents was charged, now, to keep



Mrs. Lillias Bailey in a rare, quiet moment.
Photo by Daniel A. Neary.



LUNENBURG, VDA

pace with inflation, it is \$2.00 for initial membership and annual dues are a dollar.

Reading like a Who's Who in Vermont, the club membership is two-thirds Vermonters, representing every field of government, business and the arts. Summer meetings take place at the National Life Insurance building in Montpelier where Vermont's former governor Deane C. Davis is apt to instruct everyone to "stand up and look at the sunset" as the day disappears beyond Camel's Hump—the high point of the scenic Winooski River valley.

Autumn meetings usually take place in the splendor of Fall foliage at Lake Morey Inn in Fairlee or at Basin Harbor near Vergennes. Reminiscent of a family reunion, the meetings allow members—ranging from teenagers to lively oldsters well into their eighties—to renew acquaintances and compare notes of their Vermont travels and family happenings. All share a bond of special love for Vermont, most have roots in Vermont and many travel miles to renew their spirit in this fresh and peaceful countryside.

Though dues keep the club solvent, there's not much cushion after annual expenses are settled. Yet the members have, through voluntary contributions, raised \$1,500 and funded the electrified modules in the new quarters of the Vermont Historical Society in the Pavilion Office Building. Mrs. Bailey is given a nominal fee for administration of club ac-

tivities and, though Dr. Peach might not approve, speakers are the favored program at meetings and they sometimes cost. Guest speakers have included naturalists, historians, humorists, collectors, travelers and musicians, all experts in their fields. One speaker wrote accepting the invitation to speak, adding "... and by the way, make me a member."

Though still coiling through Vermont valleys and mountains, roads have improved since Dr. Peach formed the club 22 years ago. Then, in answer to complaints that Vermont roads are full of curves with no place to turn out, Dr. Peach said, "Friends have been driving them for years and the accidents are on our main roads not our country roads. We've been turning out for a quarter of a century without damage and without words except for a few cuss words."

Looking at the piles of mailing stacked around the room, Mrs. Bailey expressed a desire to "kick out in '77" when she has completed 20 years on the job. Most of her work has been done from her former residence of 28 years, the stately mansion next to the statehouse in Montpelier. During her tenure there's been much money raising activity, including the sale of jewelry, books by Vermont authors and car stickers for automobiles. The vehicle sticker sparks lively conversations with strangers, mostly out-of-staters, who ask what the emblem stands for and then recount their adventures in, or plans to see, Vermont.

When Mrs. Bailey retires who will replace her? "Whoever takes over takes more than they realize," commented Mrs. Bailey. A Montpelier institution herself, she served many years as secretary of the Greater Vermont Association (now renamed the Vermont State Chamber of Commerce). She also has kept her finger in the legislative pie in the 45 years she has opened her Montpelier homes near the state capitol to legislators. Full of antiques and oriental rugs that Mrs. Bailey collects at auctions, her homes have provided luxury bed and board. Her circle of friends is wide. She has, of course, visited every town in Vermont, even bumping her way over the lumber road into Lewis 10 years ago.

The 251 Club is a singlehanded operation with Board members infrequently consulted. Mrs. Bailey's personality sets the tone for club activities. Her zest for life, voracious appetite for the new and unexplored and seemingly endless energy surfaces in her writings in the *Wayfarer* and also as she chairs the club's meetings, greeting each and every one with a hearty "hello."

New members receive a packet containing a state map, list of towns and directions for reaching those not detailed on the map, and the latest issue of the *Wayfarer*. They also receive a personal note from Mrs. Bailey assuring them that they will, as 251 Club members, "... harvest memories that grow more precious with time."