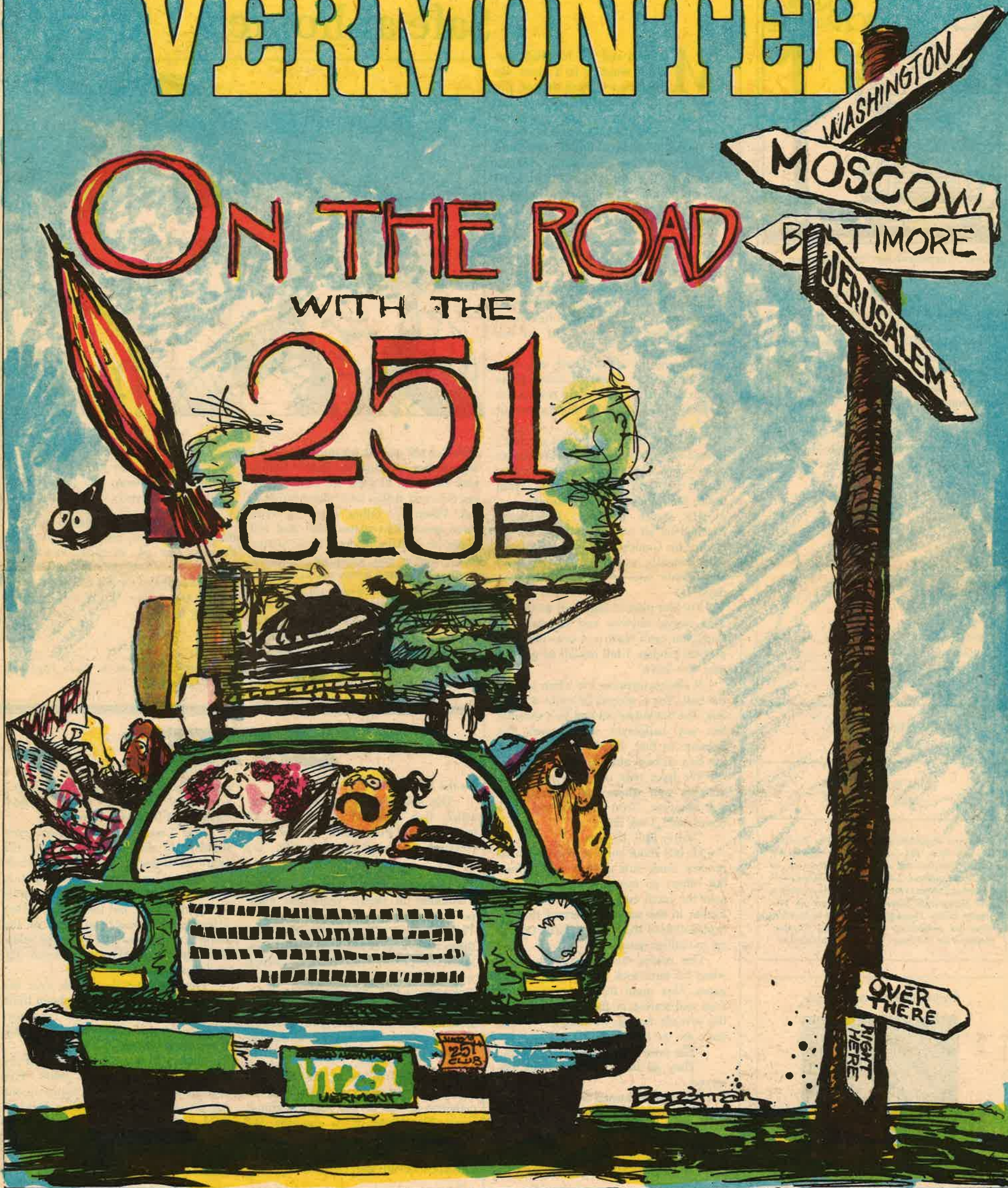


VERMONT

ON THE ROAD

WITH THE

251 CLUB





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CLUB

The William Rockford family of Montpelier could be more American. They could go to ball games on Sunday afternoons. And they could stay home weekends in front of their color television set, a 12-pack in the refrigerator.

Instead, they have chosen to deviate from the stereotype. You might call them the Vermont version.

What the Rockfords do on weekends is simply drive. But this extended family of four — Catherine, 79, William, 48, Frances, 47, Billy, 11, and Billy's bevy of stuffed animals — are no regular Sunday afternoon drivers. They are out to see Vermont, to stop in every town they can squeeze in.

The Rockfords belong to a club whose expressed purpose is to visit all of Vermont's communities so members can know the Green Mountain state well enough to tell tales of lore decades after their firsthand viewing.

It is called the 251 Club — denoting the number of Vermont cities, towns and unorganized but supervised gores.

Now in its 28th year, the club has about 4,000 members who have either visited all 251 communities or are doing so, according to club secretary John "Jack" Brewster of Montpelier.

First suggested in the 1954 summer edition of Vermont Life magazine by Dr. Arthur W. Peach, the club was formed by Peach the following year after a strong response from the magazine's readership.

Since then the club has met semi-annually to swap stories and to recognize members who have completed their journeys through Vermont. Those recognized are called "plus" members, while "minus" members are those still with towns left to see.

This Saturday will mark their latest

meeting, at the Woodstock Country Inn where reservations are being taken for only — you guessed it — 251 members.

At the meeting, William Rockford said, he will have a surprise for club members — documentation that five Rockfords are "plus" members.

Frances Rockford has taken color snapshots of her husband, her son and an old stuffed frog at each town visited.

Rockford, a former vice president at the Northfield Bank and a former car dealer, pored over the photos with a visitor recently. They were taken in front of post offices, general stores, and even restaurants if the name of the community was in full view.

"I think we should evaluate our own state," said Rockford, taking a break from the 238 assembled pictures. "Instead of going to Europe, I'd rather get to know my own country, and especially Vermont."

Although he was born in New York, Rockford said he thinks he has "come to know Vermont as well as some of the natives."

They had 15 towns left to visit at midsummer and all were within the rectangular southern corner of Bennington County. Rockford figured it would take them three trips.

"I don't know what we're going to do after this," he said.

His wife, Frances, a teacher aide in Montpelier, interrupted: "We'll probably do it again."

Rockford then admitted to prior thought of collecting different minerals from each of the 251 communities, which would require a second pass-through.

"Lots of times we have ended up in barnyards, but that's fun. People probably think that we're crazy, that we're a little weird ... but while someone gets a

By JOHN DONNELLY

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kick out of a six-pack of beer and a ball game on TV, I get a kick out of driving on back roads," he said.

His son, Billy, a sixth-grader, is just as enthusiastic. He said he takes alternating armfuls of animals with him, but has included his old frog in every trip.

"I just like to have my animals on the trip. They'll be a plus member when we'll be a plus member," he said.

"That's right," said his father, standing over his son's neatly packed bed of stuffed animals. Billy estimated he has more than 100. Nowhere close to 251, however.

Elizabeth Perley Carr of Waterbury usually traveled alone on her mission to see all 251. She finally became a plus member last year with the drive into the Bennington County town of Glastenbury, population 33.

"I was all alone with nothing to do," she said recently from inside her home, just a block away from the Waterbury State Hospital. "I enjoyed the beauty of what I saw and then I drove out."

Her next-to-last town was Glastenbury's neighbor Somerset, population 0, and it proved more memorable.

"I drove on a gravel road for 13 miles and at the end of the road was the most beautiful sunset in Somerset," she said.

Like Rockford, Carr is a director of the club. Directors oversee different

responsibilities that crop up, but Brewster is in charge of the day-to-day correspondence and compilation of the club's newsletter, the Wayfarer.

Carr has collected postcards from Vermont towns, including several that were on the market more than half a century ago. (She also has collected postcards from all the 50 United States. One year, she said, she collected rocks from each of the states. "I marked each rock with a magic marker but when I got home I discovered that it had all got washed off. I was left with a bag of rocks," she said.)

"I'm in the club because I'm an old-fashioned Vermonter," she said. "I've always been interested in Vermont and the history of Vermont."

On those counts, she has a lot of company in this state. But most of the company in the 251 Club are her peers or older. At the mid-July meeting in Montpelier there was a sea of 400 gray, white and pink heads. It worries the 65-year-old Carr.

"There weren't many people there (in Montpelier) younger than I," she said. "All the older members should be interesting the second generation from them. I should probably be careful with what I say; I'm getting older but I'm not so sensitive yet."

Carr has done her part in enlisting younger members: She hooked two a couple of years ago.

They are Nancy Giles, 25, and Mark Hutchinson, 27, of Randolph, who were



married in July. Carr gave them a membership and a wall hanging in the shape of Vermont for Christmas presents. In each county are two pockets, one for the names of towns visited and the other for unexplored territory.

"We've been to about half of the places so far," Giles said. "Mark and I are planning a camping trip to Essex County sometime soon. Mark hasn't been to any towns there and I've been to just Granby."

The schoolteacher said she and Hutchinson have learned some preparation is needed before embarking on a trip.

"We have a weekend to visit the entire Essex County. You really have to plan something like that. You just don't happen through Lunenburg or Maidstone," she said.

Giles said she plans to photograph each town's schoolhouse as a way of documenting their visits and as an educational experience.

Frederic Aldrich Sr., 82, of Richmond documents his visits through his mouth. He has a mindful of stories.

"I've been a plus member since '60," he said. "Thirty-two years it took." He admitted to having started well before the official club was formed.

"I've been interested in all I could learn about Vermont," he said. "And I started early."

When he started traveling around the state there were a few more unorganized gores than there are now, and a few more state and town roads.

For instance, there are not many 251 Club members who have walked into Ferdinand. Now there is a town

road that goes past Maidstone Lake into Ferdinand. But Aldrich walked in. He walked in to Lewis, another remote Essex County gore, too. Now members take a logging road all the way to Lewis Pond.

"If you're going not in the winter or mud week then you don't have any problems going to any town in Vermont," Aldrich said.

Aldrich, Republican town chairman in Richmond, said things have changed over the years in the club.

For one thing, at the start there was none of the show-and-tell pictures for documentation, he said.

"We didn't have to do that at the beginning," he said. "We all knew each other and all knew the others had done it."

One thing that has never changed in the club, though, is all the stories that filter back about the native Vermonter.

Helen Simino, "a little past 60" and from Burlington, is a great one for those types of tales.

She has several stories centering around Lewis, which most club members agree is the hardest-to-get-there-gore.

"My partner (June Duba of Burlington) and I asked directions how to get there from this man and he told us to go down past three railroad tracks and at the last one back up 75 feet and go to the left. Then you go eight miles into the woods. It is so gorgeous. But after you get in there, there's this sign that says, 'Truck drivers have right of way.' The road was barely wide enough for our car," she said.



Photo by STU PERRY

The Rockford family from left: Catherine Frances, William, Billy and Bill's stuffed animals

Frederic Aldrich Sr. of Richmond peruses his scrapbook of Vermont towns left; 251 Club members June Duba and Helen Simino of Burlington below



Photo by IRENE FERTIK



One time when they were trying to get to Adamant, a small village east of Montpelier, they asked for directions, she said.

"I asked this man, 'Does this road go to Adamant?'"

"He said, 'I don't know.'"

"I asked, 'What do you know?'"

"He said, 'Folks are up to the barn.'"

One time in trying to find Baltimore, a hamlet near Springfield, they asked four men for directions, she said.

"I asked, 'Where is Baltimore?'"

"One man said, 'This is it.'"

"I asked, 'Where are all the people?'"

"And he said, 'This is it.'"

"We try to take a drive where we go on a new road every time," Simino said. "But it's getting quite hard.

"They see two women in the car and they don't think we can go anywhere ... but we've gone everywhere in this state and so many times you just stop and thank God how lucky you are in living in Vermont," she said.

T. Murdock Hale, a minister at the First Presbyterian Church in Barre for 30 years, now retired, shares Simino's attitude.

Although he also is a 251 Club member, he has not visited even a majority of Vermont's towns — nor does he plan to.

"I haven't made any effort," the Washington (Vermont) resident said. "One year I was invited to say grace at the meal and since then I have been a member, but not an active one.

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"I am a member mainly to hear the speakers they have at the banquet."

According to Brewster, there are many members like Hale and that is fine with the club.

"It's a very easy organization to join," Brewster said. "It's not expensive and it's one place where two can live as cheaply as one." It costs \$2 to join and annual fees are \$2.50 — for individuals, couples or families.

Brewster, a plus member, has visited many of the towns with his wife, but went to 40 towns on his moped.

"You can go to these towns anyway you like," he said. "Only requirement is that you go."

He added the club is always looking for members, old or young.

"Although we don't have many young couples," he said. "It was rather obvious at the (Montpelier) banquet."