

The Driving Ambition of The 251 Club

*Wayfaring into
the Heart of
Vermont;
Who DO You
Talk to in
Ferdinand?*



By ANDREW L. NEMETHY
Illustrated by JEFF DANZIGER

U.S. SENATOR Patrick Leahy belongs, as did past governors Deane C. Davis and Richard Snelling. Ben & Jerry's, the world famous ice cream company, belongs, and so do more than 3,200 other luminaries, regular folks and companies.

What they're all in is the 251 Club, probably Vermont's largest organization, and certainly its most eclectic, low-key and egalitarian. It has no formal membership requirements or secret handshakes. It has no headquarters, though it's been around for almost 40 years. It holds only two meetings a year. And if you want to join, all it takes is a one-time fee of \$2.75 plus

annual dues of \$3.25 — along with one very simple caveat.

Explains the club's long-time director, Ken Laplant, 77: "I tell people that all they have to do is love Vermont and just maybe, someday, visit all of the towns in Vermont."

The 251 Club is, in essence, a fan club whose object of adulation happens to be a state. It takes its name (stated "two-fifty-one") from Vermont's 251 towns or, to be more precise, its 246 organized cities and towns and five unorganized places, such as Glastenbury and Somerset, parcels so remote and unpopulated they never became towns. But no town is too small or uninteresting for the Vermonthiles of the 251 Club. The membership roster is filled with dedicated road

warriors who hop in their cars to tour and detour, and wind their way through, up and over the Green Mountain State, checking off towns as they go.

However, many others are driven simply to belong, saluting with their memberships the idea behind the 251 Club: that every corner of the state has attractions and beauty and history. Members come from 35 states, including California and Alaska, and even from places as distant as Ireland and the Dutch Antilles.

William Rockford Jr., a successful 251 itinerant and the club secretary since 1985, says the biggest misconception is that the 251 Club is only for those who've finished the tour. Rather, he says, it is for anyone who thinks that visiting every town in Vermont would be a ball.

The idea for the club was proposed as something of a challenge in Dr. Arthur W. Peach's regular *Vermont Life* commentary, "At the Sign of the Quill," back in 1953 and 1954. Reflecting on how best to know Vermont, Peach said Vermont "historically has been a state of towns and only there can the real Vermont be seen." He claimed he had visited all 251 and urged others to do the same: Tour from Albany to Worcester (almost A to Z) "and you're on your way to the rewarding experience of a lifetime and memories good until the years are frosty," he wrote.

The concept of a 251 Club would probably never fly in New York or



Pennsylvania. Too big. Or New Jersey. Why bother? But Vermont's size, wonderful back roads and scenery, landscape, villages, and quirky New England history make it ideal for a club built around the great American pastime of the road trip. And four decades down the road since Dr. Peach issued his challenge, the Green Mountain State remains a place where the going is as good as the getting there.

This happens to be a good thing, because getting "there" can be difficult, as any Vermont traveler knows. By the state's very nature, not to mention geography and history, doing the 251 thing is a whimsical undertaking. There are some places, for example, that have no center, like Ferdinand or Lewis or Somerset. Or Fayston, which has two ski areas, a Center Road that doesn't lead to a center, and no hint of a middle anywhere.

Meanwhile, some towns have five or six centers, like Calais, where you'll find Adamant, Maple Corner, East Calais, Gospel Hollow, and Kents Corner, but no Calais proper (or improper). As for Bridgewater, is the hub in Bridgewater Center, West Bridgewater, or in Bridgewater Corners at the Country Store?

Then there are the logistical obstacles. Many towns have a maze of back roads with few signs, some have amazing roads with no signs. Some barely have signs of anything — like civilization, for example — such as in Victory, home of a famous bog and not much else.

But victory and much more await those who complete a statewide perambulation, thereby becoming "Plus" members in the 251 Club and getting their names printed in the club newsletter, *The Wayfarer*. For those who are up to the challenge, there's history to absorb, people to meet, roads to discover, villages to find, wildlife, scenery and landmarks to see, and adventures to have.

"We have never had so much fun in our entire lives as we have had with

the 251 Club — and we have traveled all over," says Patricia Kearney of Milton, who together with her husband, David, had done 130 towns by last winter, amassing many tales.

In Belvidere in the Northeast Kingdom last year, they found mud season and snow season all wrapped into one.

"That was a fun time. Two feet of snow in May," she says.

The club's loose structure allows many members, like the Kearneys, to add their own twist to the 251 goal.

"We've belonged to the American Bell Association for 15 or 20 years," she explains. "We're bell collectors. We have over 500 bells in the house. We love them," Kearney laughs.



Bruce Hodgman and Winnie the red Triumph pause at Reservoir Pond in Ludlow.

"Everybody says we're a bunch of ding-a-lings."

When they visit a town, they scour it for bells. "We never check off anything until we find a bell. There's one town that I'm absolutely thrilled with, South Royalton. We gave them four stars. They must have at least 10 bells."

On the other hand, some towns are bell-less. "We went to every single Fayston," says Kearney, laughing at the Washington County town's myriad roads and non-center. Finding downtown Goshen was just as hard: The Kearneys finally settled on a photo of a small monument just off Route 73 near Brandon Gap. For such towns, the Kearneys carry a cow bell a woman in Fairfax gave them on one of their forays. They try to find a local resident to hold it up as they take a snapshot for

their album. The cow bell is a great ice-breaker for the Kearneys' other passion, which is meeting people.

"That's the name of the game right there, in a nutshell: Meeting people in the different towns," she says.

Indeed, most club members will tell you that the encounters and adventures of their 251 journeys are what make the club such a trip.

"Vermont doesn't have the majesty of the Western mountains," says J.B. Stearns, an education and business consultant from Underhill. "But it has so many doodads: museums, covered bridges; you're sure to find something."

Stearns went to his first 251 Club meeting last summer at the Lake Morey Inn in Fairlee, one of two club meetings held each year. The festive, jam-packed gathering drew 382 members for a buffet lunch and featured a lively and amusing town history lesson on Lyndonville from Ken Laplant, plus a guest speaker, Vermont door prizes, and best of all, says Stearns, "an opportunity to shoot the breeze" with other club members.

"There's all sorts of people, all the way from college professors to plumbers to anybody who really likes Vermont," notes Stearns, a native Vermonter who "left Vermont and went in the Air Force and, by the Jesus, I was never coming back." But after traveling all over and ending up at school in the hot, flat Kansas plains, he realized he craved green hillsides.

"It was brewed into my personality," he says. When he got an offer to teach at Leland and Gray High School in Townshend, he jumped at the chance to return. There he met Charles Marchant, a fellow teacher who wasn't a native, but "like a person who converts to a religion, he was even more fanatical about Vermont," Stearns says with a hearty laugh. The two of them became traveling buddies and toured the state in the 1950s, long before they heard about the 251 Club. When they joined the club, they de-

cided they needed a new reason to retrace their steps. Marchant, a philatelist, came up with postmarks.

"We went back to towns we'd visited years ago. We collected all the postmarks just as an excuse to go tromping all around the state again," says Stearns. "Americans are made so we like our little certificate, a definable challenge. It was a fun thing to do for a native Vermonter."

Stearns was saddened by some of the changes he saw, the disappearance of many barns, and the transformation of many towns into bedroom communities whose residents work elsewhere. But he found one key ingredient unchanged: Almost everywhere he went, he met people he knew, or who knew someone who knew him.

"Vermont is still a very small community," he says.

251 Club meetings not only feature the swapping of tales but the flipping of photo album pages. Looking through the albums, one sees not only interesting pictures of Vermont, but a revealing snapshot of the picture takers, whose photos and interests are no less varied than the Vermont scenery.

Take Ted Schultheis and Jack Carter, a couple of New Yorkers who own a vacation home in Waterbury Center, and who one might say had a dogged interest in the 251 Club. A native Vermonter raised in Windsor, Carter knew of the group and, when he moved to New York City, decided the 251 tour would be a good antidote for urban stress.

"Living in New York, it's another part of the world," Carter says. So on weekend visits to Vermont, he and Schultheis detoured to visit towns. Their dogs figured prominently in their photos; the five-year odyssey began with Ginger, an Irish Setter, and ended with Maggie, a Labrador retriever.

For fun, Carter, Schultheis and dogs chased down identifying landmarks bearing a town's name so they could show they had been there. What re-

sulted is a quirky photographic litany of town line signs, post offices, town garages, fire stations and general stores. Sometimes, they had to be very resourceful.

Looking for something — anything — in Holland, on the Canadian border in the Northeast Kingdom, "we went all the way through town and then had to go back" says Carter. After a lengthy search, they finally found a marker: A 50-gallon roadside trash can with Holland's name on it.

Bruce and Ann Hodgman of Addison completed their tour around the state last year, and for them it was a triumph in more ways than one. Every shot in their album of 251 photographs

features "Winnie," their fire-engine-red 1966 Triumph sports car.

For nearly 10 summers and falls, the Hodgmans took Thursdays off, and headed out from the Addison Four Corners store, which they own. Their album is a variety store full of views of Vermont, either with their car in the scene or taken from their car. One shot shows a town viewed through Winnie's rearview mirror.

"We try to be creative. We may or may not always succeed," quips Bruce. For Ferdinand, an unorganized town with a population of 12, "what we've got is kind of an unidentifiable red spot about a quarter of a mile down the road," which succinctly sums up Ferdinand, where roads are about the only landmarks.

"We try to talk to somebody in every town, but you get to Ferdinand, who do you talk to?" he asks.

The only drawback to the 251 Club, Hodgman says, is that achieving your goal is something of an anticlimax: "You feel let down: What are we going to do today?"

Nan and Austin Lambeth of Middlebury have an answer, and a map to prove it. When they finished their 251 tour, they wondered, "what next?" What turned

up down the road was the road itself.

The Lambeths are now embarked on the challenge of driving every road on the Vermont map. With magic markers, Nan Lambeth is slowly coloring them in, from main ones like winding Route 100 to bottom bouncers like the rugged Kelley Stand Road up and over the main ridge of the Green Mountains in southern Vermont. So far, they're up to 6,000 miles, four scrapbooks, and counting.

Is there a better way to know Vermont inside out? Probably not. We're sure Dr. Peach would approve. And could there be a new club in the offing?



Andrew Nemethy, author of Vermont Life's tour guide, Travel Vermont, sallies forth often from his home in Adamant to write about Vermont.



Ted Schultheis and Jack Carter created their own sign when they completed the 251 Club circuit in the remote, nearly signless town of Lewis.

FOR INFORMATION on the 251 Club, write to club secretary William H. Rockford Jr. at 40 Clarendon Avenue, Montpelier, VT 05602. There is a one-time membership fee of \$2.75 and annual dues are \$3.25. Members receive the club newsletter, *The Wayfarer*, three times a year. There are annual summer and fall meetings. Automobile decals are \$1.50 and 251 Club pins cost \$2.

"The important factor in membership," says Rockford, "is to learn to know our beautiful state and her people. This can be accomplished only by visiting, and we assure you that you will harvest memories and records that grow more and more precious with time."