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Been there, done that

Can anyone replace the secretary of the 251 Club?

By KEVIN O'CONNOR
Staff Writer

Help wanted: Secretary. Must have telephone and typing skills, plus driving directions to Lewis, Vt.

Where, Vt.? William Rockford knows. For 20 years, the Montpelier man has served as unpaid secretary of Vermont's 251 Club, a nonprofit group that encourages people to visit the state's nine cities, 237 towns and five unorganized land parcels — including Lewis, which is in the state's Northeast Kingdom.

"The objective of each club member is to visit each one, and visit

means not to just drive through, but to linger a bit, talk to someone who lives there, visit a store or the post office, take notes for a diary, perhaps stay overnight — at least pause long enough to look around a bit," Rockford writes in a letter to prospective members.

The group has no other rules or requirements. You don't, for example, actually have to go anywhere, let alone submit photos, postmarks or other proof. But that doesn't stop members from mailing affidavits.

"Dear Mr. Rockford," one California surgeon wrote on hospital letterhead. "Enclosed is the documentation of our journeys through-

out Vermont in our quest to be admitted to the honorable 251 Club ..."

The family of a retired Vermont Air Force major sent the secretary a two-volume photo album picturing its travels in each town.

(Rockford has his own scrapbook of his wife's snapshots of himself and his son at the Addison Four Corners Store, the Albany post office, the Alburg Methodist Church — all the way up to the Worcester Town Hall.)

The club began before the interstate highway, but even with today's thruways, members still face hurdles.

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File Photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

William Rockford and his wife, Frances, have helped steer the state's 251 Club for 20 years. It took the couple seven years to visit each of Vermont's towns.

Club

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The unorganized town of Lewis doesn't have any roads or residents, so club members usually visit there last.

First, however, they call Rockford.

Rockford, a retired banking administrator, joined the club's board of directors in 1977 and became its secretary in 1985, following only two other scribes in the group's half-century history. But after celebrating the club's 50th anniversary last year, the 71-year-old decided it was time to give way to a fourth generation.

"It wasn't a case of not liking it — health-wise I'm fine and love everything," Rockford says. "But I thought after 20 years, we might need to groom somebody else."

The group's 4,000 members, from 39 states and four countries as far away as Australia, think differently.

"I've gotten lots of nice accolades, but only one inquiry," Rockford says. "When I told him what the job entailed, he said he'd pass."

Join the club

Vermont's 251 Club began in 1954 at the suggestion of Vermont Life magazine commentator Arthur Wallace Peach.

"Years ago, before the auto, I knew men who had never been 50 miles from their village or farm; now, there is no excuse for a Vermonter's saying that he does not know his state from top to bottom," Peach wrote in the magazine's summer 1954 issue. "I propose to organize a 251 Club

Rockford followed founding scribe Lillias Bailey, who served to 1977, and John Brewster, who took over for the next eight years. He is a native of Schenectady, N.Y., and his wife, Frances, signed up for the club upon moving to the state after their son's birth in 1970. He became secretary 15 years later, soliciting dues (\$8.50 for a one-year membership or \$23.50 for five years), sending out thrice-a-year newsletters and setting up

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."

Today the club welcomes anyone interested in touring the state, whether or not they have visited all 251 communities. For more information, e-mail thevt251club@aol.com or write W. H. Rockford, 40 Clarendon Ave., Montpelier, VT 05602.

summer and fall luncheon meetings that can draw 500 people.

The secretary is well aware of Lewis: His family drove their new car through a beaver pond there. He used to tell people that was the town's one and only landmark. But now the pond is reached only by a logging path that's gated and padlocked.

One New York stockbroker discovered this, and cell-phoned Rockford in distress. So many

others have complained ("How do you get to Lewis?" is the secretary's most frequently heard question) that Rockford sought help from member James Douglas (who, in his role as governor, regretfully reported the private drive was out of his jurisdiction).

The club will meet today in Rutland for a sold-out luncheon. Its nine-member board of directors was supposed to review letters from prospective new secretaries. But after advertising for applicants three separate times this past year, the board has yet to receive a reply.

"No one ever applied, so I told the board unofficially that me and my wife will be staying on — at least for the foreseeable future," Rockford says. "We love promoting Vermont."

Or most of it, that is. "Be aware that the road to Lewis is rough," Rockford wrote in a recent newsletter, going on to direct people around potholes, rocks, ruts and spotty cell-phone service. "In any event, stay away in mud season."

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