

They beat a path to all 251 cities and towns in Vermont

By Diane E. Foulds

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BURLINGTON, Vt. — There's no club like it. The meetings draw farmers and physicians, senior citizens and newlyweds, natives and new arrivals. The membership has swelled to the point that there are few halls big enough to host the group, yet in they stream, bound by a compulsion to travel and a fascination with Vermont.

"There are a lot of towns that are so small and so hidden, like Victory and Granby," said Joby Mallory, 69, of Fair Haven, who joined with her husband, David. "Places way up north that are many, many miles from anywhere. Like Ferdinand. We've lived here all our lives and we didn't know it existed."

The 251 Club has been active since 1954, thanks to Arthur "Pop" Peach, a retired professor of English at Norwich University in Northfield. Peach couldn't fathom why his fellow Vermonters so rare-

If you go . . .

The 251 Club

40 Clarendon Ave.
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ly ventured from home. So in an article in Vermont Life magazine, he dared them to get out and see their state — all 251 cities and towns.

The Rev. George Dupuis happened to see the article. A Roman Catholic priest, he had just moved to Arlington from Springfield, Mass. If he was going to settle down in Vermont, he figured he might as well get to know it.

Fifty-two years later, Dupuis,

82, is one of an estimated 450 "plus members" who have visited all of the Green Mountain State's communities. A few diehards have even gone the extra mile, delving into wilderness areas such as Warren Gorge, which lacks public roads. The reward is a plus-member card and recognition at one of the 251 Club's twice-yearly meetings. Since Dupuis joined, dues have jumped from 50 cents to \$5, and verification rules have loosened. Everyone is on the honor system now.

"We don't have any rules," said Bill Rockford, 72, of Montpelier, the club's secretary for 21 years. "If you tell us you've done it, we'll take your word."

Most members, however, like to prove where they've been. They take pictures of themselves in front of whatever they can find to confirm their location — road signs, usually, or post offices. Lacking those, they improvise. Some scrawl the town's name on a board



PHOTO BY JARED BENEDICT

Corin and Jared Benedict, of Natick, Mass., stopped in front of the Town Hall in Orwell on their 251 Club odyssey.

and hold it up for the camera. If they are traveling solo, they might take a picture with their car, some belonging, or a pet.

Tiffany Searing used her toy troll.

"It's amazing what you can find just driving around," Searing, 24,

of Bomoseen, wrote in an e-mail. "We were taking a drive a few weeks ago, and suddenly, we saw the statue of a giant gorilla holding up a car. I mean, who would have expected that?"

It's all about enjoying the ride. In July, Searing and her parents, who in the last two years have checked off 48 of the 251 communities, stumbled upon the First National Bank of Orwell, which claims the title of "world's smallest bank."

YOU WANNA JOIN?

See evidence submitted to the 251 Club by its roving members at explorenewengland.com.

"We've been eaten alive by deerflies while visiting little farms that raise mini-donkeys and alpacas. We've visited dozens of little general stores, many of which have postcards so old they're curled up in the racks. We've learned that it is possible for even a four-wheel-drive car to get stuck on some of these dirt roads during mud season," Searing wrote. "I have personally banged my head on the rather low ceilings of several historic post offices."

The club's 4,100 members come from 39 states and five foreign countries. Most return year after year to explore a corner of the state they may have missed, simply for the pleasure of being there.

David and Marilyn Perrin, of Charlotte, decided to do the circuit by canoe. They paddled the length of Lake Champlain, the Vermont section of the Connecticut River, and some 116 lakes, streams, bogs, beaver ponds, brooks, and municipal fire ponds. They tipped over eight times, lost paddles, skidded their 16-foot canoe through snow on one of many portages, but always managed to find water.

"It blew me away," Rockford said. "They lugged that canoe into barnyards to put it into water just so they could say they had [canoe] in that town."

Rockford achieved plus status in 1982, and then started over. In

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The 251 Club paddles, bikes, walks, drives the state

Continued from preceding page
Stowe Hollow, he stepped out of his car to photograph the famously haunted "Emily's Bridge," when an oversized pig trotted up, nearly bowling him over.

Dorothy Myer, 78, of South Burlington, did it all by bicycle. A bear streaked by in one town and "a big, white, fluffy dog" led her through another.

Edward Keenan, 85, a physician from Essex Junction, hoofed it, walking in his spare time until he had logged 2,500 miles in a foot-aching odyssey lasting 10 years. He saw moose and deer in abundance; a few foxes even walked with him. When he spied a motorist feeding a fox near North Hero, he ran it over with his car and took it to the state lab. Sure enough, it was rabid. He carried a .22-caliber pistol after that, eventually using it on another fox. He was 60 when he padded into his 251st town. Only then did he join the club.

"There's no road on any Vermont map that I haven't walked," Keenan said, "except the interstate." He would have hiked that, too, if pedestrians were not pro-



PHOTO BY TIFFANY SEARING

Tiffany Searing takes pictures of her troll to prove which communities she's visited.

hibited. The state denied his request for an exemption.

Most members do drive, however, despite gas prices. The Mallorys hit the road as soon as they sold their furniture and funeral home businesses. Eight months and 6,000 miles later, their photographs filled an album that they donated to the Fair Haven Public Library. They said Lewis was the hardest town to find, but Somerset wasn't easy, either.

"We stopped an oncoming truck and asked where it was," David Mallory, 69, recalled. "You're dead set in the middle of it," the

driver told us. 'But there's nothing here,' we said. 'Well, I'm here! Stop at the house over there and talk to my wife and you've talked to everyone in town.'"

The farther afield, it seems, the better the story. Jared and Corin Benedict, both 27, of Natick, Mass., had finished 168 towns when they found themselves in tiny Readsboro. The newlyweds parked their tripod in front of the Post Office, set the

timer, and posed, hugging. Back home, they developed the photo only to find an anonymous prankster mooning them through the Post Office window.

Contact with locals is part of the package. Rockford encourages club members to get out and chat. If you are lost, there's often little choice. David Mallory described the refrain he and his wife often encounter when asking directions: "You must be one of them damned 251ers. Nobody else in their right mind would go looking for that godforsaken place."

Governor Jim Douglas has seen

all but two of the 251; in his previous job as secretary of state, he had to visit each town clerk. In Waltham, he was surprised to find the town records stored in a chicken coop. Several town offices were in the clerks' homes.

Douglas says he's not in a big hurry to visit the final two towns on his list.

"If I go to Somerset and Lewis, you know, there there's nothing left to accomplish," he said. "So in a way, I've sort of held back."

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