

On the Road Again!

VERMONT'S 251 CLUB



BY STEPHEN MORRIS

PHOTOS BY JACK ROWELL



THE ANNUAL GATHERING of the 251 Club takes place the first weekend in October, at peak foliage time. These are people united by the mission to personally visit all 251 of the state's towns, villages, and shires. Before the formal meeting begins, the topics at the individual tables are the usual—the weather, the foliage, and comparing notes on the state's most obscure places. A popular topic is Lewis, Vermont. Never heard of it? That's because no one lives there and hasn't since 1910, when the population was eight. In addition to no people there are no buildings or roads. Does this sound like a destination for tourists? As one of Vermont's five unorganized and unpopulated towns, however, it represents a crown jewel for the club's "Plus" members, the status conferred upon those who have completed this geographic quest. ▶



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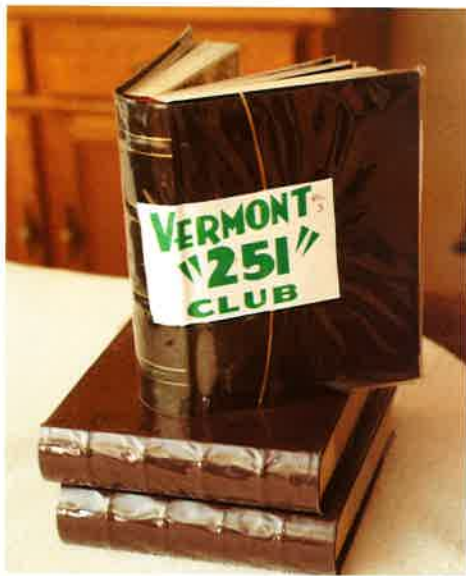
Highlights Along the Way

The club was first mentioned in a *Vermont Life* article by Dr. Arthur Wallace Peach, a writer and former director of the Vermont Historical Society. Peach suggested visiting all 251 towns as a way for individuals to get to know their state better. In his view people should experience the towns, not merely drive through them. The club now has, according to current Executive Director Sandy Levesque, close to 4,000 members, making it one of the largest membership organizations in the state. Levesque has been the director since 2008.

But back to Lewis. "Lewis is the one town that I didn't visit in my Chrysler," says Craig Cota of Stockbridge, who along with his wife Joan completed the circuit several years ago. "I had heard horror stories about getting there," says Cota, a retired superintendent at CVPS, the state's power utility, "so I figured I better take my four-wheel drive."

Cota had already traveled the state extensively in his professional capacity before joining the 251 Club. "I was part of the team that brought the power lines to Victory and Granby in 1963, the last two Vermont towns to get electrified."

Like many 251-ers, the Cotas document their visits with photographs. They've brought a three-volume photo album to the meeting to share with other club members. This is an impressive document, with color-coded lists of towns organized by county seats, shire towns, and unorganized towns.



Clockwise from top left: Drew and Claire Nelson, owners of Board and Basket, joined the 251 Club in the late 1980s. Scenic view beyond a sign. The Cotas' scrapbooks document their travels. Craig and Joan Cota share photos of their adventures.

Occasionally their enthusiasm has gotten them into trouble. Once they were cruising back and forth in Derby Line, looking for the best photo opportunity, when their suspicious behavior attracted the attention of the border patrol, who pulled them over. "Luckily we had brought all our albums with us," says Cota with a laugh, "so he could see we weren't terrorists."

For years Derby Line straddled the border seamlessly. There's even a building (Haskell Free Library and Opera House) where the performers on stage are in Canada while the audience is in the United States. It was intentionally built to straddle the international boundary at a time when the prevailing orientation was to open

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Vermont is home to many styles of signs.

the border. Not so any more. “Homeland Security has changed all that,” says Cota.

He’s a font of Vermont state trivia. Example: “Bennington County is the only one in the state with two county courthouses. Manchester used to be the shire town; now the official shire town is Bennington.” His travel tip: “When in Lyndonville, the place for lunch is the Miss Lyndonville Diner. It’s a must-stop.”

The State Everyone Loves

The featured speaker for last year’s event was Roger Hill, weather forecaster at renowned radio station WDEV. He surveyed the audience on the foliage they saw en route to the meeting. Since attendees had come from all points of the compass, he had a statewide summary in seconds. “Not too good,” is the consensus. Hill agreed, adding, “but I think it’s still coming.” He explains that the trees, inundated by Tropical Storm Irene, “still think it’s summer.” They won’t shed their leaves until the decreasing daylight forces them to shut down for the approaching winter.

The attendees listen politely. Everybody in Vermont is interested in the weather, but when the floor is opened up to questions, it’s obvious that travel, not weather, is the primary focus. A number of people have completed the odyssey



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in odd or colorful ways. It's been done on foot and on bike. It has been done from the air, and Levesque says it has even been done by canoe. It's been done as a continuous journey or in segments spread over many years. The club has no official requirements or verification process but does promote members sharing their stories through the events, website, and a twice-a-year newsletter. "This isn't about setting records," she says, "It's about experiencing a state we all love."

The story swapping continues after the meeting officially ends. John Dumville of Royalton is attending his first annual conference. He loves travel and he loves Vermont. The 251 Club,

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he says, “just gives me an excuse to do something I always wanted to do.” His travel tip? “Whenever you go by Plymouth Notch, stop at the Calvin Coolidge Historic Site to buy some licorice at the general store.”

“We’re All in This Together”

Drew and Claire Nelson are New Hampshire residents who own and operate the Board and Basket Kitchen Store in West Lebanon. Drew spent summers in the state as a youth. He and Claire met while they were attending college in Burlington, he at UVM, she at Champlain. “I have a vague memory of seeing a club emblem on a car when I was at UVM in the ‘60s,” he says, “but my interest was rekindled by a *Vermont Life* article years later.” They finally became members in the late 1980s. It wasn’t until they sold their former business and took a year off that their 251 quest began.

“Our first trips were in Bennington and Windham counties in the summer. We put the top down on our

Jeep, loaded our dog and lunch, and enjoyed driving around the back roads. Claire has an old book about Vermont towns and would read about each on our way there. This gave us hints for places, buildings, or memorials to see and photos for our picture album. Sorting these photos became an enjoyable post-trip experience as we relived our visits.”

Their 251st town? “Wolcott on August 10, 2008,” says Nelson with precision. And Lewis? “Not really a problem for us. We found a road that took us right up to Lewis Pond. It even had a sign!”

Asked why there is not a comparable organization in New Hampshire, he replies, “There is a difference between Vermont and New Hampshire. It’s difficult to explain—sometimes I can just feel it. There’s a feeling of community and mutual support in the small towns in Vermont. It’s never stated but felt and demonstrated. It’s something like, ‘We’re all in this together, so let’s make it work.’” Just not in Lewis. ☺

For More Information

Membership in the 251 Club is \$6 for one year or \$25 for five. More information is available from vt251.com, or by writing to 251 Club, 100 Gilead Brook Road, Randolph, VT 05060.



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