

# VALLEY NEWS

The Road to the Middle of Nowhere



Melanie Considine took this photo of Lewis Pond in Lewis, Vt., as part of her project to take photos of every Vermont town in a year. Lewis, with no paved roads, is one of the harder locales to reach. (Melanie Considine photograph)

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We were talking about website traffic, art shows and search engine optimization when mounds of mud appeared before us.

Our drive through one of Vermont's most untraveled places had been uneventful. But then came the dirt piles on the road, cresting at about a foot, leaning slightly forward like a wave. Melanie Considine drove around them. We hit some deep divots. Clouds in the distance threatened a downpour.

"It takes a lot more than this to scare me," Melanie said, and we drove on.

There is a town in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont called Lewis, and it is notorious. Unless you've never heard of it, which is likely.

If that sounds like an odd dichotomy, well, it's an odd place. It is known for being remote. No one has lived in Lewis full-time for more than 100 years. No paved roads run through it. A small handful of cabins and campgrounds and a few signs are the only evidence that people have passed through. But it is wonderfully quiet, with some of the best views in the state.

Melanie needed to get to Lewis sometime before September. Ten months ago, she gave herself a personal assignment to photograph each of Vermont's 251 towns in 12 months. She joined the Vermont 251 Club, people trying to visit the whole of the state, and then gave herself a tight deadline, just because.

Over the winter, she tried to go to Lewis, the club's collective white whale. She saw a sign for a road that supposedly leads to Lewis Pond, one of the town's only visual calling cards. But snow choked the road. It looked like an ATV would have trouble navigating it. She turned around, defeated, and photographed nearby towns instead.



Several weeks ago, I met her at a St. Johnsbury park and ride, curious about the pull of a town with nothing to offer, and accompanied her as she tried to reach Lewis again.

Melanie doesn't do much research before grabbing her camera and heading out. Her destination is usually chosen on a whim, too. She shot her own town, Randolph, for the project on New Year's Day. The night before, cars and benches had been blanketed in snow. She walked down Main Street instead of driving, and saw the architecture in a new light.

We had been walking around West Burke, a village of fewer than 400, a stopover on our way to Lewis. It was 7:30 a.m. and quiet. Melanie took a photo of a sunflower carved out of wood, set against a house with wooden shingles painted a deep red. We passed a post office and residences, the paint old and chipped.

"There's just a rawness, a character about these old towns that really fascinates me," she said, retracting the legs of a tripod.

The weekend prior to our Lewis trip, Melanie had taken photos in eight towns in the Brattleboro area, pushing her over the 200-town mark. She uploads her favorites to a website she created for the project, [www.vermont251in365.com](http://www.vermont251in365.com). Her photos are of landscapes, barns and churches, town halls, and buildings beginning to succumb to age.

Very rarely are they photos of people. In muggy West Burke, after shooting the sunflower, we headed back to Melanie's trusty Volkswagen Tiguan. It was still early, but a group of four men and women were sitting outside a general store. It seemed to me, at least, a good photo op. The way they were pressed against the store's edifice was oddly striking, as though they were part of the shop itself.

But we walked by, and to the car. Melanie said she's somewhat anti-social, and she feels as though taking photos of strangers is an intrusion. She prefers to take pictures, she said, that capture the evidence of people.

Lewis is only about 30 miles from Burke, so we wound along Route 114, passing fields and fading architecture, the sort of rural collage common in quieter corners of the state.

Melanie's parents strongly discouraged photography as a profession, so she majored in economics and went into the investment business, leaving her high school passion more or less behind. In the mid-1990s, she was a portfolio manager for a mutual fund company that was heading downhill. In 1998, inspired by a book on photo marketing, she took a year off to attend Massachusetts's Hallmark Institute of Photography, a 10-month vocational school.

She received a certificate in commercial photography, then moved to Philadelphia with her husband. She freelanced for a while, but the desire to move to the world of fine art nagged at her.

In the early 2000s, when digital photography began to take off, Melanie doubled down in film. She started taking moody black-and-white landscapes. She transitioned into doing art shows while opening up a web design company she still runs.

She didn't do digital photography until last September, when she bought her 36-megapixel Nikon D800 and decided to canvas Vermont for photos.

Island Pond, Vt., had snuck up on us, a sudden burst of unexpected development, the last true town center before Lewis. Melanie had stayed at a motel in Island Pond during a winter trip to the Northeast Kingdom. When she left at 8 a.m. to take photos, she said, she saw people ice fishing and drinking beer on the pond.



Things quieted again, but fields gave way to dense tree lines and woods. We passed a moose observation platform. We went into the Silvio O. Conte National Fish and Wildlife Refuge visitor station to get a map of Lewis and its dozen or so roads.

A college-aged man named Frank, a member of the Student Conservation Association who was manning the station, told us about 10 people come by a day, for any number of purposes. Melanie told him she was a member of the 251 Club, which he recognized, and then mentioned she'd be shooting photos.

"What are you taking pictures of?" he asked, which by all accounts was a pretty good question.

The map took us along Stone Dam Road, narrow but easily traversable. We parked after crossing a one-lane bridge. Melanie set up her camera and snapped a few shots of a stream flanked by tall trees. We headed back to her car, fighting off scores of deer flies. Besides the insects, she said, the trip had been easy. Maybe Lewis' famous inaccessibility was overblown.

We pulled out a book of maps, which demarcated town lines, and compared it with the Lewis map from the visitor station. As it happened, we were still within the Bloomfield, Vt. town line, though we had entered the nature preserve a few miles back.

"So we're not even in Lewis," I said.

“Yeah,” Melanie responded, heading back to her car.

“Maybe the worst is yet to come,” I said.

“Oh, we’ll keep driving,” she said. “We’re definitely doing this today.”

The mud appeared shortly after, and the clouds were suddenly menacing. Melanie dodged the mud, but hit several divots. I realized we were probably 10 miles away from any human — the handful of cabins we saw looked pretty empty — and if the skies opened and the roads washed out, we might be in trouble.

A dump truck passed us. It was the first sign of life we had seen on the preserve, and was oddly bittersweet. On one hand, if a flash flood turned Melanie’s car into an ark, there would be a guy nearby with a bigger vehicle. On the other hand, the truck’s rumbling broke the illusion of Lewis as blissfully quiet.

We managed to reach Lewis Pond’s access road without any catastrophe. Trees arched over the road, casting it in an incredible darkness for 10 a.m. I got out at one point to move a low-hanging branch poised to scratch the windshield.

The tree canopy did thin out eventually, and Melanie parked on a bed of rocks about 30 feet from the pond’s tiny little beach. We headed to the water, and looked around.

The clouds formed a gradient of grays, silvers and whites, stretched into a sky-long canvas, backlit by a hidden sun. For photography purposes, the dull weather actually worked — harsh, late morning sunlight would have reflected off the pond and hurt the quality of the pictures.

Melanie headed to a short, rickety-looking dock, removed a stray white bucket draped atop one of its posts, and began taking pictures. It started drizzling, but inconspicuous rain drops slid through the water’s surface. Neither of us even felt them.

I hung back on the beach, as it were, as Melanie crouched on the dock with her camera. A bird flew along the surface of the pond, breaking a spell of deep quiet for the first time since we arrived. It was movement, but everything somehow felt still. Maybe it was because the motion was entirely natural, part of the landscape.



The thunderclap of a vehicle, perhaps the dump truck, ricocheted through the area, shrouding the pond in noise. And then it was gone, and the moody beauty of the place was reset.

Melanie went back to her car to retrieve another lens, and I stayed at the water. I walked the length of the dock, for maybe 10 feet. It was surprisingly sturdy. Past the pond, beyond the trees and probably across several town lines, a sliver of light penetrated the cloud cover and outlined the peak of a distant mountain.

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