

251 Club celebrates 50 years



ALISON REDLICH, *Free Press*

Todd Pritsky and Stefanie Otterson of Fletcher stand on the green at Fort Ethan Allen in Colchester on Monday. They are new members of the 251 Club, and are committed to visiting all 251 towns and cities in the state of Vermont.

Members visit every Vt. town

By Erica Jacobson
Free Press Staff Writer

Arthur Peach issued a challenge in the 1954 summer issue of *Vermont Life*: Get out and explore Vermont.

All of Vermont.

Each and every one of the state's 251 towns.

Peach, who was then director of the Vermont Historical Society, thought the idea would never take off with the state's residents and instead beseeched summer visitors to make the circuit. But Vermonters and visitors alike have heeded Peach's call for 50 years. They have

logged hundreds of thousands of miles, crisscrossing Vermont and ticking off town after town.

Most travel by car but some have made the rounds on foot, in canoe or by bike. Their standards for a town visit vary. Some make a point of stopping to talk with townsmen. Others snap photographs or jot down quick, quirky impressions of the town. Now there are about 4,100 club members counting travelers both young and old, musicians, retirees and at least one priest.

"I have a map in my of-

Web extra

How many Vermont cities and towns have you visited? Use the full list of 251 Vermont towns at www.burlingtonfreepress.com to find out. Click on "Vermont towns."

rice," said the Rev. George Dupuis, pastor of St. Margaret Mary Catholic Church in Arlington. "I just look at it once in a while and I think, hmm, I've got to get up in there."

Charter member

In 1954, Dupuis was a young priest in at St. Xavier

Catholic Church in Winooski.

He read the article by Peach and sent in 50 cents to become a charter member of the newly formed 251 Club. A Connecticut native, Dupuis had been ordained in Burlington just a few years earlier after spending time in Ottawa and Massachusetts.

"If I'm going to live and work in Vermont," Dupuis said he remembered thinking, "I better find out what these towns are about."

For the next 50 years, Dupuis climbed into a series of Pontiacs, Chryslers and Plymouths and logged uncounted thousands of miles

251: Club celebrates 50 years, Vt. towns

Continued from Page 1A

roaming the state on his way to and from meetings. He was reassigned to parishes in Richford and Orwell and explored the towns in those areas. Dupuis learned a little about each town — when it had been established, how many people lived there — when he visited.

Above all, he engaged in creative navigating. He left the maps at home and took left turns when he knew he needed to turn right. He charted such sweeping routes that one took him from Richford to Montpelier via New Hampshire.

"That was a really long way," Dupuis said. "It was my day off anyhow."

Dupuis, even after 50 years, is still considered a "minus member," with between eight and 10 towns left to visit. Most of the towns are in the Northeast Kingdom and the 80-year-old figured he could probably finish off the list if he stayed overnight in Newport. But why rush things?

"It's beautiful, no matter what place," Dupuis said, "if you like to travel and you don't mind getting lost once in a while."

Trio tour

Janet Polk found herself visiting Vermont's towns with a bassoon and sheet music between 1984 and 1986.

The Vermont Symphony Orchestra had decided to celebrate its 50th birthday by having its musicians play in each town. As a member of two woodwind ensembles, Polk played in 67 towns from Jericho to the remote, largely unsettled towns of Glastenbury and Somerset. Polk traveled to many of the state's smallest towns because the woodwind trio was small enough to fit anywhere — churches, town halls, a clearing in the forest, the edge of a reservoir.

One time, they played next to a roaring wood stove the size of a Volkswagen bus and sweated while the audience shivered. In another town, they rehearsed in a firehouse.

"Down in Mount Tabor, we played in someone's home because there was no other venue," Polk said. "We were never really quite sure where we were going to be."

Unlike with a concert hall performance, the musicians were in direct contact with their audience.

Some hosts stuffed the or-



Photo courtesy Todd Pritsky

Todd Pritsky and Stefanie Otterson and their dog, Cairo, all of Fletcher, are trying to visit all 251 towns and cities in Vermont. On this day, June 11, they visited Canaan.

chestra members full of lasagna and blackberry pie. Others held barbecues. In Lowell, a little old woman with braids piled on top of her head told Polk she was so excited by the musicians' visit that she couldn't sleep the night before. An old man in Peacham told the musicians that he was going to combine coming to their concert with a trip to the dump.

"You never knew what was going to happen," Polk said.

Loon and bear

Dorothy "Dot" Myer doesn't own a car and hasn't driven in years.

Yet the South Burlington woman was determined to visit Vermont's 251 towns.

So Myer, then 65, climbed onto her bicycle in 1994 and began her journey through Vermont's towns.

Over the next seven years, she mixed day trips around northern Vermont with longer voyages through clusters of towns in the southern and central parts of the state. She stayed at bed and breakfasts, friends' homes and the occasional campground. All along the way, Myer jotted quick notes about the towns she cruised through.

"The town begins right where the pavement ends," Myer wrote of a June 1997 visit to Landgrove. "A nice fluffy white dog who followed me for a while."

She passed countless cows in Franklin County and marveled at cars using the floating bridge in Brookfield. In Lewis, a remote, unpopulated town in the Northeast Kingdom, Myer and a friend encountered both a loon and a bear.

Myer finally finished her 251 town journey in July 2001 by coasting into the town of Washington. She had planned to have a celebration, but Myer kept the occasion low-key before heading home to South Burlington.

"I might have got an ice cream cone," said Myer, now 76, "or something simple like that."

New blood

Jared Benedict and his girlfriend, Corin Tierney, are part of the next generation of 251 Club members.

The twenty-something couple has been touring Vermont's towns for the past five years, just heading out to towns near their home. It was pretty easy at the beginning because the couple moved a lot, living in Burlington and South Royalton before finally settling in Halifax in the far southern part of the state.

"The fact that we've moved around allows us to go in the areas just around our house," Benedict said.

The couple has visited 153 towns so far.

They keep track of their

251 Club

To Join the 251 Club:

■ Call: 229-0253

■ E-mail:

thevt251club@aol.com

■ Write: club secretary Bill Rockford at 40 Clarendon Ave., Montpelier, VT 05602.

Dues are \$7 for one year.

progress on their Web site, marking the towns they've visited on a map and posting photographs from their voyages. To document their visits, they try to take a picture in each town with some sort of sign — fire station, town hall, creemee stand — that bears the town's name.

"When we don't have plans for the weekend, it's the perfect fallback to hop in the car and drive around," Benedict said. "My biggest worry has been what I will do after we finish."

Who cares how long

Stefanie Otterson and Todd Pritsky won't have to worry about running out of towns for a while.

The Fletcher couple started their 251 Club adventure this summer.

"It's primarily been my wife's interest to go do stuff and get me out of the house," said 34-year-old Pritsky. "I'm a misanthrope."

Pritsky wants to spend more time in some of the towns he zips through on Interstate 89 on trips to Massachusetts. Otterson would like to explore Brattleboro and Montpelier. They've already crossed Brighton, Cabot, Canaan and Norton off of their list and have decided to visit other, more remote towns first.

"We live in Fletcher," Otterson said. "Why would we want to start with Fletcher?"

"We see Fairfax every day."

The couple already has agreed that visiting Vermont's 251 towns is definitely a multi-year project. Just how many years it will take, Otterson said, really doesn't matter in the end.

"It's the process, not the destination," Otterson said. "It would be nice to someday say we've seen them all, that would be nice."

"But if it takes many years, so be it."