

Visiting and Revisiting Vermont

For members of the 251 Club, every journey to visit and add another town to the list in the state of Vermont (or simply to visit them again in a new light) is a memorable adventure.

Sandgate is just one of the many small and seemingly remote towns that 251 Club members from afar strive to visit. Here, the Methodist Church and the District #2 one-room schoolhouse await the intrepid traveler's discovery. Built in 1840 and the last of its kind in town, the schoolhouse was last used in 1956 when the town voted to send all four prospective students for the forthcoming academic year to school in the nearby town of Arlington.

Story by Marjorie Drysdale
Photos by Melanie Considine

A host of yellow butterflies fluttered around two young sisters as they strolled down a lakeside gravel lane. Their little brother, probably 3 years old, dashed ahead, excited to be the first one to reach the mailbox at the foot of the hill. Then, fascinated by the *click-click-click* sound of a fisherman's reel, he headed for the water nearby. Halfway to his destination, he halted in his tracks, distracted by a large stone. He began to slap it with unadulterated joy. He turned to his sisters in amazement. It was all so new to him.

I knew just how he felt.

It all started with an assignment: to do a story on Vermont's 251 Club—a group of wayfarers who share a common goal: To visit every one of Vermont's 251 towns. I figured I might as well join the club to get the inside scoop. That's how I found myself one hazy summer afternoon at Benson's Landing on the southern shores of Lake Champlain, watching an eager young boy dart about.

Benson's Landing. I had never seen it before. But then, I had never had a reason to go there before. I had never tasted blackberry pie like the slice served up to me at Wheel Inn Restaurant, either, located in Benson proper, four miles inland. It was

chockablock full of berries. They were wild berries, too, and oh so tasty. And did I mention the whipped cream on top?

I knew I was going to like this assignment.

When members of the 251 Club reach their goal, no matter how long it takes, they earn the coveted title of "Plus" member. They also discover that they have accumulated a storehouse of memories. Take Jessamyn West of Randolph, a librarian, media specialist, and Plus member of Vermont's 251 Club since 2010. Jessamyn moved to Vermont in 1996, settling first in Topsham. Before long, she had joined the club and set out

BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE...

After the 251 Club adjourned its fall 2012 meeting, speaker Joel Larsen's daughter, Dinah Larsen, added a postscript to her father's speech: "Dad decided to take my new Prius," she explained, "because it had a GPS navigational system. But that misled them a little."

Her husband Alain Brizard filled in the details. "We were on the southern boundary of Vermont...we wanted to go west, to Pownal. Instead of going through Massachusetts...we wanted to find a shortcut. My son was the navigator, and he thought he saw one." It appeared as a dotted red line on the GPS.

"The road was wide and not very rocky at first, but the sides got steeper and narrower. We found ourselves zigzagging around bigger and bigger boulders. It began to look more and more like a dried riverbed. Finally, we got stuck on a rock. To make matters worse, a large tree blocked the road in front of us. We couldn't go forward and we couldn't go back.

"By walking a little bit away from where we were stuck, I managed to get cell phone coverage. I called AAA. They said that, given our position, there was no way anyone could come and rescue us. Apparently, we were located at the intersection of our 'road' and the Long Trail. It was getting late, and we were afraid we'd still be there after the sun went down.

"Luckily, a fine gentleman, driving a monstrous pickup truck, happened to come by. It had huge tires—not like anything we had on our Prius. (I had already changed a flat tire by that time, too.) With lots of effort we were able to move the tree and he used his winch to get my car to a place where I could drive again.

"We made it out and ended up joining Route 7. We had planned to visit a number of towns that day, but we just drove home. It seems funny now, but the call to my wife, to tell her that we had done some off-road Prius driving, wasn't funny at all."

It was a great tale...one of many that members of the 251 Club love to share.



The more dedicated club members don't necessarily limit themselves to fair weather travel, tackling some of Vermont's back roads during winter and even during mud season, two times of year when following GPS instructions in remote territory and risking unknown road conditions can lead to some unusual predicaments. Melanie Considine documented conditions on one of her back road excursions in this photo, above.

to explore her new home state.

"Noodling around, I found so many neat things off the beaten track!" says Jessamyn. "My biggest surprise was discovering how unique every town was. Towns just a few miles apart looked entirely different." Box stores and chain restaurants, predictable features in most places, were few and far between. Jessamyn had such a good time on her travels that she now "gives back" by serving as a volunteer editor for the club's website. "I like the camaraderie and freedom," she explains. "You can go about this any way you want to."

THE HONOR SYSTEM

"The 251 Club has no rules," stresses its executive director, Sandra Levesque of Bethel. "There is no need to verify anything. There are no records to keep, no forms to fill out. Everyone operates on the honor system, and there is no time limit." You don't have to live in Vermont, either. About 85 percent of the members hail from Vermont, but the other 15 percent represent 39 states and several foreign countries.

There are no rules, but according to the club's founder, former Vermont Historical Society President Arthur W.

Peach, merely driving through a town misses the point. If at all possible, he wrote, one should take the time to meet people, soak in the scenery, and get a feel for the place. Arthur first proposed his idea for a 251 Club in his column, "At the Sign of the Quill" in the summer 1954 issue of *Vermont Life*. Since that time, the club's membership has grown from 2 to more than 4,000. Among those in its current membership, some 200 have completed their quests.

New members are given a map of Vermont with all the towns outlined, along with a checklist. Thanks to the efforts of Sandra, Jessamyn, and webmaster Marc Vance, this map is now online as well; members can click on the name of a town and the corresponding spot on the map lights up. Or, they can click on the map, and the name of the town shows up. They also can chronicle their progress, keeping logs and uploading photos.

Logging on to vt251.com, I began to appreciate the variety of approaches that people have taken. Some have traveled by bicycle, snowshoe, motorcycle, and even by foot. Dave and Marilyn Perrin of Charlotte managed to paddle their Old Town canoe in every town, even if the



Photographer Melanie Considine's ambitious 251 odyssey began in late September 2012 and concluded before the end of September the next year. Along the way, she took this picture (above) of the green at Irasburg and a welcome sign to illustrate in part the type of photographs 251 Club members typically take to document their visits. The photograph at the right was captured at the peak of foliage season when Melanie happened upon Craftsbury Common.



only body of water they could find was a cow pond. Over the course of 4 years, they paddled on 116 lakes and ponds, a great many rivers, the entire length of Lake Champlain, and the entire stretch of the Connecticut River that borders the eastern boundary of Vermont.

Then there are folks like me, who just jump in the car and go. Incentives can help, though, like choosing a deadline, or a specific theme. Mine was this story, of course. For Mary and Fred Pierce of Morrisville, it was covered bridges: They visited all 106 of them. For Milton firefighter Robert Lombard and his wife, MaryLou, it was fire departments: They photographed every firehouse they found. The sky's the limit. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if eventually somebody tried to skydive into every town; you never know.

251 IN 365

Photographer–web designer Melanie Considine of Randolph began a particularly ambitious project on September 29, 2012, when she set out to visit and photograph all 251 towns in one year. She completed her quest on September 22, 2013 and has created a portfolio of fine-art photographs from her travels, as well

as a 2014 calendar. These are now featured on her blog, 251 in 365, A Photographic Journey Through Vermont (vermont251in365.com/blog).

Often, Melanie was taken aback by a town's visual beauty, as was the case late one autumn afternoon when she happened upon a settlement of white stores, white houses, and a white steepled church, all neatly arranged around an expansive town common. Burnished fall leaves arched over a white wooden fence that ran around the perimeter of the common. "I didn't know where I was," she says. "It turned out to be Craftsbury Common."

Some 251ers, after completing their journeys, experience a "Now what?" moment. It is like finishing a good book and missing the characters. So, they start out all over again, but with a different theme. Perhaps the most unusual of these second-time-arounders is Joe Cook of Dummerston. For his first quest, which took him 25 years to complete, he rode his touring bicycle the full length of every paved road on the Vermont State highway map. So what does he plan for an encore? Why, to tackle the dirt roads, of course!

Twice a year, members of the 251

Club get together to enjoy a good meal, compare notes, and share photos and stories. Last year's autumn meeting attracted 190 members and guests to the cafeteria of the National Life Insurance Company in Montpelier. There, against a backdrop of Vermont's legendary mountain, Camel's Hump, diners raised their glasses to their own legend, John Goodrich of Littleton, New Hampshire, one of the club's original members.

FAMILY AFFAIRS

Back in the 1930s, when John was living in Greensboro, his father Maurice cooked up the idea to visit all of Vermont's towns. This was long before there was such a thing as a 251 Club. "We finally finished up with all the gores and grants," John muses, "in June of 1954." Soon thereafter, the 251 Club was chartered, and the Goodrich men became two of its first Plus members.

John enjoyed himself so much that he decided next to visit all 234 towns in New Hampshire. "In those days, he says, "there were some places that you simply couldn't



drive to. You had to walk on old logging roads." Now, his three children and their families are close to completing their journeys in both states. "And," he adds, "I have a great-granddaughter on the way. That could make five generations!"

Since that meeting, great-granddaughter Chloe Lane Elizabeth Alto has come into this world, daughter of Sarah (Goodrich) and Mike Alto of Lisbon, Maine. John wasted no time enrolling her in the 251 Club. Also seated at John's table was Dinah Larsen, whose father Joel was the evening's first speaker. Joel's adventure started back in 2003, when he first moved to Shelburne. There, he met a fellow by the name of Ken White, who invited him to a meeting. "I attended," recalls Joel, "and I was hooked."

Joel's quest soon became a family affair, with son-in-law Alain Brizard and grandson Peter Larsen also participating. "We had a lot of fun!" explains Joel. "Some towns were so small you didn't even know you were in them. Somerset had a population of five. We drove back to the same place from three different directions before we found the right road. We saw no houses, no buildings, no markers. So, we just got out of the car and ran around it five times."

"One time," continues Joel, "we noticed on the map a road that looked like it would be a shortcut. So we took it, but the condition of the road kept getting worse. Finally, we got hung up on a boulder. We were in my daughter's car, too, and it was brand new!" This story drew appreciative laughs from the audience. People turned to each other with knowing head-nods, as if to say, "Been there, done that."

Hmmm. It looks like my adventure will turn out to have challenges greater than butterflies and blackberry pies. So be it. As Joel Larsen says, "I'm hooked."

After the meeting adjourned, it was time to meet and mingle. Folks wandered about, sharing stories. The room filled with laughter and conviviality. These revelers were living proof of the truth of the words that founder Arthur Peach had written more than 50 years ago: "A swift turn from one of our main roads, and you are on your way to the rewarding experience of a lifetime...." ¶

Marjorie Drysdale is a writer, editor, choral conductor, singer, and music teacher. A graduate of Middlebury College and the University of Michigan, she lives in Randolph with her husband, M. Dickey Drysdale, editor of *The Herald of Randolph*. They have two grown sons.



Just the facts

The 251 Club

100 Gilead Brook Road
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Call (802) 234-5039 or visit vt251.com.

A one-year membership is \$8 plus a one-time \$5 enrollment fee.

Photographer Melanie Considine's 2014 wall calendar contains 13 images, one from each month of her project, and opens to 9 x 13 inches. To see images and to order calendars, visit vermont251in365.com or call (802) 431-0096.

