

## 'Mapster' finds 1,488 towns in Michigan to visit

Kathleen Lavey, Lansing State Journal 10:12 a.m. EDT April 20, 2016

Unfold the AAA-issued map of Michigan that Ken Dunlap carries around in his red Ford Focus, and angular holes appear at the creases. It's been well used.

Since 2011, Dunlap has used the map – plus others and a bulging, well-worn county atlas besides – to locate, visit and photograph 1,488 places in Michigan. That's every settlement from ghost towns to Grand Rapids, cities, towns, villages and sometimes even crossroads.

He never set out to visit every hamlet in the state.

“I just stumbled into it,” said Dunlap, who lives in Okemos.

“It was a good stumble,” said his wife, Donna.

Dunlap agreed: “It was great seeing so many different places and going to different places in the state I haven't been to before.”

Dunlap's travels have taken him from thriving cities to long-dead towns where little is left but a road sign or a graveyard.

“There were places where you couldn't even tell any town existed,” Dunlap said.

He took a picture of at least one place in each, something with the town's name on it. He's sharing them on his web site, Michiganmapster.com. In fact, he initially counted 1,565 potential towns, but had to write some off as they had no signs remaining.

In the Thumb community of Bay Port, that meant a blue-and-green banner decorated with a cartoon fish and the slogan: “Home of the Fish Sandwich Festival.” In Detroit, he picked the Comerica Park; in Grand Rapids, the Van Andel Museum Center. In the Upper Peninsula community of Germfask, he picked the metal-roofed, brick fire department. A cemetery sign represents the Livingston County community of Plainfield.

At 96,716 square miles, Michigan is the 11th-largest state, and Dunlap came to respect the magnitude of the challenge he had set for himself.

Born in Ann Arbor, Dunlap, who now is 66, moved to Lansing at 13. He has lived in Okemos for the past 28 years.

His journey around the state started as he was preparing to retire from a 30-year career as a computer programmer at Auto Owners Insurance. His mother, who lived near Traverse City, and his brother, who lived near Chelsea, both were sick, and he visited frequently.

He got bored with highways and started choosing less-traveled roads.

That, it turns out, made all the difference.

By the time he retired in October 2011, the idea of visiting each town in the state was firmly implanted. He cross-referenced his original AAA map with a Michigan Department of Transportation map. The AAA map had more towns listed, but the MDOT map included about 40 towns that weren't on the other map.

He has thick stacks of pale-green pages torn from steno pads, planning his routes. He has maps with color-coded areas showing places he already had been to. He used a pencil to color in a circular mark next to names of towns he'd visited on the legend of the AAA map.



A map used by Ken Dunlap, who has visited every town in Michigan and taken a picture there, to plan his quest, in his Okemos home. (Photo: Kevin W. Fowler/for the Lansing State Journal)

“After six months or so, I looked at the big picture and said, ‘I can make this in three years and not have it be a full-time job,’ he said.

Donna, a retired Okemos teacher, has been on a few trips with him, but mostly he has traveled alone.

He spent the first two years covering the Lower Peninsula. He had to replace his original car, a Honda Civic, with the Ford after a crash in April 2012.

“It started out pretty easy, because I was going on a straight path somewhere,” he said. After picking off nearby towns, he had to plan harder.

“I’d have to drive 30 miles before I hit my first new town,” he said.

In 2014, he headed to the Upper Peninsula, a treed and rocky landscape peppered with small cities, tiny towns and turn-of-the-century ghost towns left by the decline of lumber and mining.

“Finding most of them was a challenge,” he said. “And some of them are just gone.”

He regrets not taking a ferry to a small Lake Huron island of Neebish to visit Oak Ridge. It was raining, and there was a 90-minute wait for the ferry. He asked locals if there was anything in the town with its name, and they couldn't think of anything, so he bailed on the mission. Later, he went back, and wound up following a resident along a narrow road to the only Oak Ridge sign the resident could think of. They had to pick up the toppled sign and replant it for the photo.

He has one town left to visit this summer: North Manitou, on North Manitou Island. It's part of Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

Look across the country, and you'll see that Dunlap is not the only person on a quest.

A man named David Williams has visited every one of the 493 municipalities in the state of Washington. A New Jersey radio broadcaster is in the midst of a quest to capture a snippet of sound from every one of New Jersey's 565 town and cities.

Then there's the 251 Club of Vermont, a loosely organized group of folks who have visited each of that state's 251 towns. Established in 1954 by Arthur Peach, director of the Vermont Historical Society, it encourages people to wander the state.

“The road systems were just being improved,” said Sandra Levesque of Randolph, Vermont, executive director of the club which now has 6,000 members. “He extended the invitation to Vermonters and to those outside of Vermont's borders to explore.”

Most people check off their 251 by driving, but some have walked, biked or even kayaked to as many spots as possible, she said. Some, as Dunlap does in Michigan, take photos in each town.

“I just got a letter from somebody who completed it by finding wildflowers in each town,” Levesque said.

Some people try to pack visits to all 251 towns into a short period of time. Levesque sees value in taking a more leisurely approach.

“It's a way to slow down and really appreciate the beauty of the state and the people that live there,” she said.

Dunlap is not sure what his next retirement project will be. Some have suggested that he should tackle California, where his and Donna's daughter, Amanda, now lives. That would be 482 currently incorporated municipalities and hundreds of ghost towns spread over more than 163,000 square miles.

He laughs at the idea.

“I think I'll just sit for a while and reminisce,” he said.

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