

The Herald

Serving the Communities of Vermont's White River Valley Since 1874

Randolphian Joins Board of 251 Club

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By Dylan Kelley

Formed in 1954 by the man who had founded Vermont Life Magazine, a modest club of Vermont enthusiasts have maintained the goal of visiting each of the 251 towns and cities in the Green Mountain State.

Now boasting more than 6,000 members, the appropriately named 251 Club continues to shine despite its joyfully “anarchic” tradition of having no rules, regulations, or stipulations, beyond the modest \$10 annual dues to officially call yourself a member.

Two devotees of the 251 Club call the White River Valley home: Jessamyn West, who was recently elected to the organization’s board, and Sandy Levesque, who serves as the club’s executive director.

For West—a librarian, technologist, and self-described nerd—the journey to see all that Vermont has to offer began almost as soon as she arrived in the state in the ’90s.

“I needed a hobby,” she said as she recalled her days of living in West Topsham, alongside Route 302. “I had my Gazetteer and a highlighter pen.”

With that simple, restless impulse, West set out on a decade-long journey to set foot in each town, visit a library or two along the way, and learn just a little bit more about the expansive variety of Vermont communities.

“There’s gores, there’s unincorporated towns, there’s towns with tiny populations—there’s maybe haunted ghost towns,” she laughed. “That’s sort of part of it, you learn about the things you’re really interested in as you go on this quest”

Noting that the 251 Club is among the largest state-specific organizations in Vermont, West said that the club—with the vast majority of its members Vermonters—boasts a relatively significant portion of the state in its membership, including former Governor Jim Douglas and Congressman Peter Welch.

“When you think about the fact that Vermont’s only got 680,000 people,” she said, “6,000! That’s one percent of the state!”

All Together Now

The very goal of visiting all of Vermont’s towns, including the ones that even most Vermonters haven’t heard of, is indicative of what West referred to as an “old-timey” embrace of inclusivity in the Green Mountains.

“If you really believe in, for lack of a better word, the democratic ideals of Vermont—that every person has something to contribute, that we’re all neighbors,” she said, “the 251 Club has those kinds of values. Every town has a thing. Every town matters.”

Sandy Levesque of Bethel, who has served as executive director of the club for the past 10 years, said completing what she refers to as “the quest” is a labor of love for all who cherish the multi-faceted communities of Vermont.

“I’m a Vermonter, I love my state, and I’m happy to do whatever I can to be a good ambassador and promote my state to others,” she said. “It’s really a pleasure and source of pride to showcase Vermont in this way.”

As executive director, Levesque takes particular pleasure in seeing how her fellow 251ers go about completely their own quests, given the lack of rules and regulations within the organization.

“A lot of people find a place to take a photograph in every town,” she said. “If you’re a teacher you often look for a school house. If you’re a fireman, you look for a fire station.”

Some club members opt for simply a photo at the sign that typically welcomes visitors, others seek out post offices, libraries, or microbreweries. Other still have hit golf balls in every town and at least one club member has painted 251 watercolor scenes from her travels.

Many club members, said Levesque, relish the opportunity to connect with residents of individual towns—an opportunity that usually presents itself when checking off particularly small communities.

“In my experience, people in these small towns like ours know when there’s a stranger in the kingdom,” she said of her experiences striking up conversations with curious residents. “We’ve had several people stop us. ‘Hello. How are you? What are you doing?’”

For Levesque, this is the heart of the experience of the 251 Club: learning more about one’s corner of the world.

“Why not get out and get to know your state a little bit better and meet some more Vermonters along the way,” she asked with a laugh. “You can just have it as a goal out there and try and do it in a lifetime.”