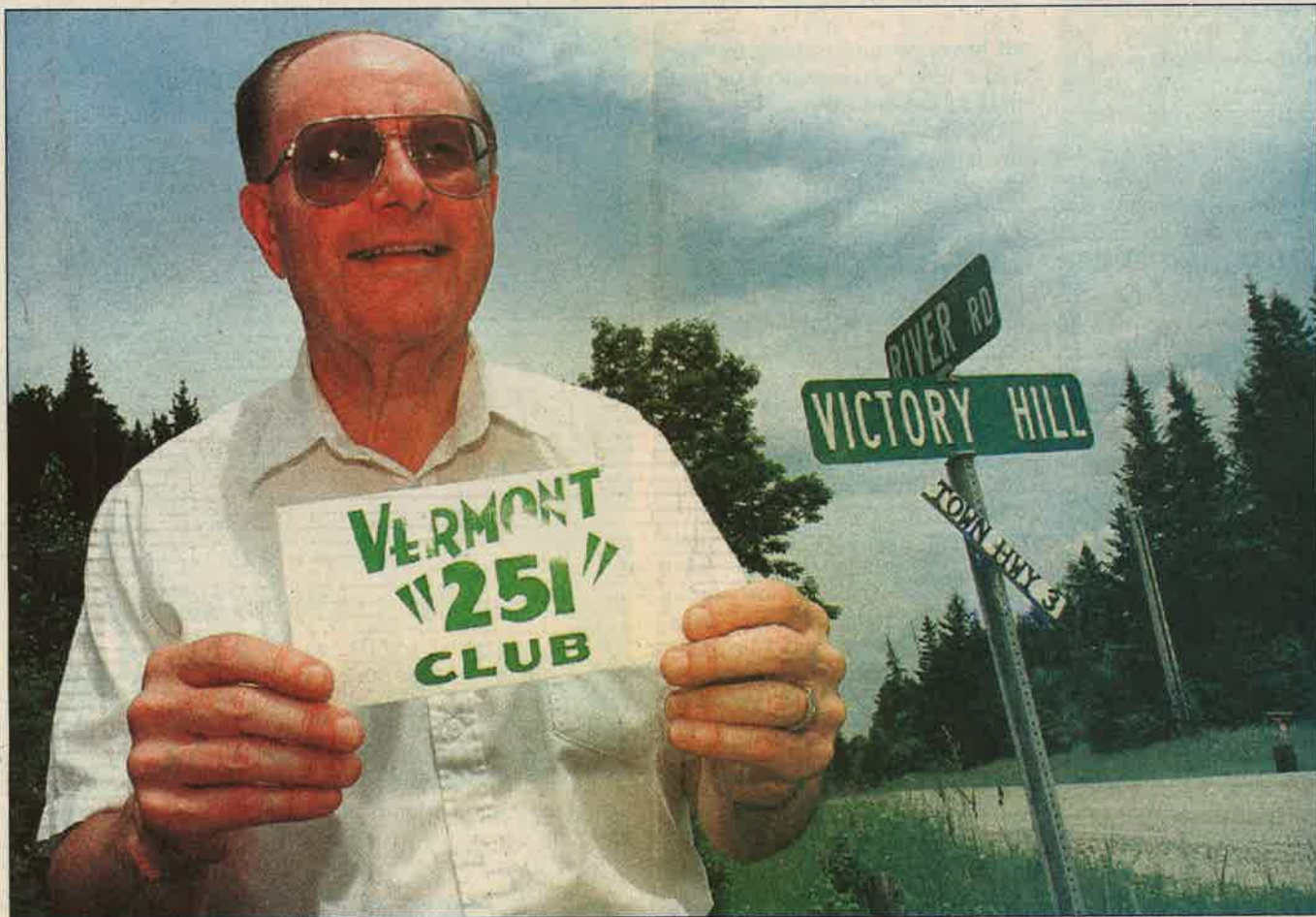
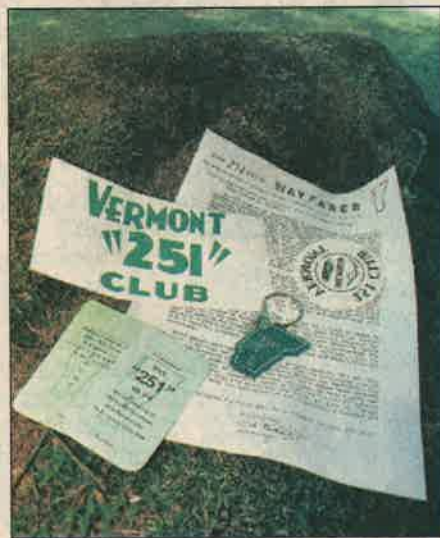


T the back roads

Story by
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The Associated Press



Photos by ALDEN PELLETT, *The Associated Press*

Bill Rockford is the director of the 251 Club. The club is for people who have visited all 251 incorporated towns and cities in Vermont.

251 Club members visit

Vermont's incorporated towns, cities

There's an art to proving you've been in a place that's practically uninhabited. You can't take a picture of yourself in front of the post office because there isn't one. You can't check in with the town clerk for the same reason.

For most people who roll through Victory, or Lewis, or Ferdinand, or one of the other Vermont towns that's either totally or practically unoccupied, that doesn't matter: proving you were there isn't a goal.

But for William Rockford, it's a reason for being.

Rockford is a director of the 251 Club, a 4,000-member organization whose members strive to visit all of Vermont's 251 incorporated towns and cities.

Rockford himself achieved that goal more than 10 years ago after traveling the state with his wife, Fran, and their son Billy, who is now 27. Now, as a director and editor of the club's Wayfarer newsletter, he's mainly responsible for organizing the 251-ers' twice-yearly meetings and mailing paraphernalia such as tote bags and keyholders to members and would-be members.

He's still passionate about the quest that got him into the 251 Club in the first place. He and Fran are thinking of doing it all again.

The 251 Club was started in 1954 after Dr. Arthur Peach proposed the idea in Vermont Life magazine, said the Rev. George Dupuis, 74, of Arlington, who has been a member since the beginning.

Dupuis joined after moving to Vermont from Springfield, Mass., to become the priest at St. Francis Xavier church in Winooski.

"I said, 'If I'm going to be in Vermont, I'm going to learn about it,'" Dupuis said. "(The club) helps people get acquainted with the different areas of Vermont."

The club has about 4,000 members in 233 Vermont towns and 39 other states, and five foreign countries, Rockford said.

Members of the 251 Club receive a newsletter three times a year with trivia about Vermont and news about members. Twice a year, the 251-ers get together for annual meetings in Fairlee and Rutland where they hear presentations on Vermont history, welcome new "plus" members (those who have visited all 251 cities and towns) and talk about their travels over lunch.

To Join 251

To become a member of the 251 Club, send your name, address and a \$6 check or money order to: 251 Club, 40 Clarendon Ave., Montpelier, Vt. 05602. Membership includes an identification card, maps and a subscription to the newsletter.

Readers: Let us know

Vacation Vermont, a quarterly publication, is due out Sept. 13. We are compiling an extensive calendar of things to do in the state geared to the fall season.

If you are putting on an event open to the public, let us know. Whether it's a concert, bazaar, craft festival or antique show, send us your listing. We need the name of the event, the date, the location (with a street address), the hours, the price and a phone number. If the event is free, please state that as well.

Mail your listing to Vacation Vermont, The Burlington Free Press, 191 College St., Burlington, Vt. 05401. Deadline is Aug. 24.

Rockford and his family joined the 251 Club in 1975 and right away began seriously to pursue the goal of becoming plus members. Visiting all the towns took about five years.

"We were going at it pretty good," Fran Rockford said. "We worked at it every weekend, every holiday."

The Rockford family usually packed a picnic lunch, and sometimes Bill Rockford did some fishing, too. When they were hitting towns far off in southern Vermont, they tried to do three or four in a day.

It's not enough to drive through a town. To count it as one of the 251, you have to stop there, Bill Rockford said.

"What we recommend is people stop and visit with somebody — if you can find somebody," he said.

It doesn't matter if the town has no store, post office or town clerk's office.

"You can go into somebody's yard," Bill Rockford said. "People are usually glad to see 251-ers."

The Rockfords have a photo album with snaps of Bill and Billy Rockford posing in every single town. When they couldn't find a post office or store with the town name on it, they usually found a church, a grange hall, or, in Victory, a rock.

Ultimately, no proof is needed. The list works on the honor system.

"We don't require an affidavit," he said.

All this traveling has given Bill Rockford, a native of Schenectady, N.Y., who is retired from the Northfield Savings Bank, a close look at the state where he has lived for 25 years.

"I think the main objective is to go out and meet your fellow Vermonters," he said. "And enjoy what we've got here while we've got it."

There's some adventure to be had, too. The couple likes to recall their trip to Lewis, an unorganized town in the Northeast Kingdom with no population at all, accessible only by logging roads. There was no town center and nothing to photograph to show they'd been there. Eventually, they found a sign marking Lewis Pond, and posed near that.

"We drove through a beaver pond," Bill Rockford recalled.

Visiting Vermont's unincorporated towns and gores is optional for 251-ers, "but if you can get to them, that's cool," Bill Rockford said. "Some of them don't have any roads."

The only other similar club the Rockfords know is in New Hampshire, which they've heard has a 234 club for people who've been to every single New Hampshire city and town. To belong to that club, Bill Rockford said, you have to go to the towns first.

"So they only have three members," he said.

The Rockfords have heard of some 251-ers who accomplished the goal of visiting every city and town, and are now trying to hit every single road.

"What an achievement," Bill Rockford said.

Alan Wilkins, 50, has visited every single town on his Harley — one of the first to achieve plus status on a motorcycle, he said.

Wilkins, another 251 Club director and owner of a Harley dealership in Barre, devoted the summer of 1991 to visiting every town, putting 10,000 miles on his Harley. He's also visited every covered bridge in Vermont — or at least every one he knows of.

Now he plans to visit all the towns again, this time with his wife.

"If you're just going to go down the paved roads and interstates, you're going to miss a lot of Vermont," Wilkins said. "There are little towns hidden all along the way."