

Vermont 251 Club really sees the state

Rockford keeps up with trekkers seeking Lewis

By Kathryn Haralambous
Free Press Correspondent

MONTPELIER — Driving around Vermont has become more than a weekend activity for William Rockford Jr.

It has been a binding force for his family, ever since they joined the Vermont 251 Club in 1974.

A self-described "informal group of Vermontophiles whose objective is to visit the 251 towns and cities of the state," the 251 Club can't merely be described as a group of people who enjoy "driving around."

"The idea we promote is don't just drive through. Linger a while," Rockford explained.

"Really look at what's around you. Learn about the state you live in. I don't mean just the physical aspects, the beauty of Vermont, but the people. If you draw them out they'll share what they love about their town."

The group began in 1954, the result of interest generated by Vermont Life Magazine writer Dr. Arthur W. Peach, who suggested forming such a club.

Since 1985, Rockford has been club secretary with his wife, Frances, out of their Montpelier home. Every four months, the couple send a newsletter to the club's 3,000 members across the nation, as far as the Virgin Islands.

The club meets twice a year for dinner, to share experiences and meet other members. The meetings also serve to honor the club's "plus" members. "That's the guy or gal that's been through all of the towns. They'll call and say, 'Bill, I made it! I got to Lewis!'"

Deep in the heart of the Northeast Kingdom, with a population of zero, according to the Vermont Yearbook, "Lewis is usually the last place to get to," the ultimate 251 challenge, Rockford explained.

Members are given a map of the state and a sheet with an

William H. Rockford Jr.

Born: April 23, 1934.

Residence: Montpelier.

Family: Wife, Frances, supervisor at New Hampshire Insurance Co. and 251 Club co-secretary; son, William, senior at Montpelier High School; mother, Catherine, 86.

Occupation: Director of financial institutions regulation at the Vermont Banking and Insurance Department.

Interests: Photography; coin collecting; fishing.

alphabetical list of the 251 towns. Most folks check off the names of places they've visited until the entire list is crossed off. There are numerous ways to keep track of where one has been.

A heavy scrapbook is the Rockford family's testimony. It is filled with photographs Frances took of Rockford and their only child, Bill, 18, beginning in 1978. "We tried to get a picture that was representative of each place," Rockford said. "The Polaroids were our checklist."

Throughout the dog-eared scrapbook, which Rockford hopes to pass on to his son, are photographs, in alphabetical order, of the father and son standing in front of the Addison Four Corners Store, the Albany post office, the Alburg Methodist Church, the Andover town office/library, and so on.

"Lewis Pond was our landmark for Lewis," he said, "because there is no post office or road, just camps and bears."

The passage of time is evident in these photographs. In earlier shots, a little boy stands by his father, holding a stuffed toy frog or whale. In later pictures, the top of his head now almost reaching his father's shoulders, the boy is older, wearing an "I Love Vermont" T-shirt.

Also inside the album is the Rockford family list with each town checked off. "Aug. 18, 1982, in Somerset at 3:51 p.m.," an inscription commemorates their final town, 4½ years after they

began their quest.

Prospective 251 Club members need not worry they'll need such elaborate records. "We're not going to interrogate them or make them have an album like mine," Rockford said. "Mutual interest is the only criterion" for joining.

A criterion for a town to be crossed off the Rockford's list was that the whole family, including Rockford's 86-year-old mother, Catherine, went together — usually during warmer months, when school was out, and they could take along a picnic or fish for a while.

"We'd visit maybe a couple or three places in one day," Rockford said. "But when we went to Lewis we went to Lewis. We started early and finished late and it was fun."

And, to be sure, each 251 member has his or her own way of getting there. "This is a fetish with me," Rockford admits. "If you go one way to get some place you get back a second way — and avoid traveling on interstates. Dirt roads are better.

"An old Vermonter told me once, 'You just get on the road and hang a left and you'll get someplace.' It's true, even if it's a barnyard you'll get to."