

# For the Love of Vermont

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*For The Essex Reporter*



Anna Brouillette, left, and Erin Murray, of Essex, visit the Bald Hill Fish Hatchery in Newark. PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

For two kindergarten pals, Anna Brouillette and Erin Murray of Essex, growing up and going to college more than 1,000 miles apart was difficult. But just as tough as being separated from each other was being away from their home state.

“I missed Vermont’s beauty and the way of life here,” said Murray, a geology major at the College of Charleston.

Brouillette had heard of the 251 Club, a group that refers to those who visit Vermont’s 251 towns. A sophomore at St. Lawrence University, Brouillette thought taking on the challenge would be a great way to reconnect with her home state, as well as with her old friend Murray.

“It’s really strange going from seeing someone nearly everyday to only seeing them during school breaks,” Brouillette said. She mentioned the idea to Murray, who was immediately on board. “Spending the day poking around Vermont with my best friend is fun,” Murray said, “so why not?”

The duo started a blog, titled it “For the Love of Vermont,” put together a spreadsheet to track their travels, hopped in Brouillette’s Subaru, and began their journey in early June. Their first trip

took them south, down the windy two-lane Vermont Route 116, to a town called Goshen. The pair wanted their first trip to be to a place neither had heard of, and Goshen, which lies in a remote central part of the state in the Green Mountain National Forest, fit that criteria.

“Goshen, as far as we could tell, was one tiny street off of the main road with only a handful of buildings,” said Murray. “We accidentally drove past it at first, and couldn’t believe that it had so little to it.”

The duo makes day trips to closer destinations, and they share a tent at campsites when they have longer drives—usually to the southern part of the state. They try to visit two or three destinations or so on each trip, posing for a photograph in each town. Their photographs usually feature Brouillette, who sports dark and curly shoulder-length hair, flashing a thumbs-up, next to Murray, with her long, straight brown hair, and fingers in a peace sign. The pair try to get a shot in front of a noteworthy landmark. Those landmarks aren’t always apparent, Murray said, though “usually all it takes is asking a local.”



Anna Brouillette, left, and Erin Murray, of Essex, pose with an old car at Northeastern Speedway in Waterford. | PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

Then again, finding a local isn’t always easy, either. With a population of 164, Goshen has gone the way of so many of the towns that make up the nation’s second least populated state. Many were formed before the United States was founded, and feature the marks of yesteryear—perhaps an old Church, a cemetery full of headstones from the 18th century, a Revolutionary War cannon standing watch on the town green. The manmade elements seem to mirror the landscape—the tombstones and decrepit mills eroding slowly, like the rolling Green Mountains, which form the spine of the state.



Anna Brouillette, left, and Erin Murray, of Essex, waterski on Echo Lake in East Charleston. | PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

And yet, Vermont retains a quiet beauty. Its towns own a rugged New England elegance that seems to become more dignified with age—for Goshen, founded in 1792, that age is 222 years.

It was exactly 60 years ago, in 1954, that an English professor at Norwich University, a military institute in Northfield, Vt., proposed the idea to start the 251 Club. Writing in Vermont Life magazine, Dr. Arthur W. Peach hatched the idea as a way for those who love to Vermont to document that they traveled “to discover the secret and lovely places that main roads do not reveal.”

When the two finally found Goshen, on that first trip, they posed for a photograph in front of an old white town hall. There they ran into the town clerk.

“We talked to her for a while about Vermont and what we were doing. She offered us one of the best cookies I’ve ever had,” said Murray. “It’s rewarding to have an excuse to go to each town and to collect all of these experiences, especially to areas that we haven’t been to before.”

Brouillette and Murray have so far have made it to 23 towns. Already the two women have a loyal following—nearly 500 people follow their trip on an Instagram account that documents their journey.

The 251 Club attracts folks from all walks of life. Members include everyone from retired couples to motorcyclists to bicyclists, says Sandy Levesque, executive director of the club. There are about 400 who hold active memberships, Levesque said, which costs \$13 to join. Levesque, who lives in Randolph, Vt., says the club is of particular appeal to those with a “passion for covered bridges, one-room school houses, Civil War sites, [and] historic sites.”

251 Club members are also likely to share a passion for the people who live in the midst of all these historic sites. Vermonters are the people that President Calvin Coolidge, never one big on words, called “indomitable,” and a group of “pioneers who have almost beggared themselves to serve others.”

“I think Vermont provides an environment that encourages people to be unique and to care about their neighbors and the spaces around them,” said Murray.

As the club celebrates its 60th Anniversary, Levesque says the Club has had real lasting power. “The lure of the road is as relevant today as it was in 1954,” she said, “for those who are under Vermont’s spell.”

Count Brouillette and Murray are two who have fallen under that spell. They hope to stop by all 251 destinations by the time they graduate. They plan to use summer and holiday breaks to crisscross the state. The timeframe to complete the journey varies for each member, Levesque said. “It can take a few weeks or a lifetime.”

The journey is time-consuming by design. Peach, the Norwich professor, wanted to ensure that those who joined the club truly experienced all the nooks and crannies of the state, and didn’t just drive through the many towns. Then again, some towns one simply cannot drive through, as Murray and Brouillette have discovered.

“Warren’s Gore appears to have no roads,” Brouillette said of one remote destination in the Northeast Kingdom. “We’re still figuring out how we’re going to hike into it.”



Anna Brouillette, left, and Erin Murray, of Essex, stand at Bittersweet Falls in Weybridge. | PHOTO CONTRIBUTED



Anna Brouillette, left, and Erin Murray, of Essex, stand in front of the capital building in Montpelier. | PHOTO CONTRIBUTED