



Photos by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

William Rockford of Montpelier holds a photo of him and his son at the pond in the town of Lewis. For members of the 251 Club, trying to reach every town and city in the state, it's perhaps the toughest destination.

# Happy 50th, 251

## Vermont's visit-every-town club marks half century

By KEVIN O'CONNOR  
Staff Writer

Most families arrange photo albums by date. The Rockfords of Montpelier sort snapshots alphabetically by destination. There's father and son at the Addison Four Corners Store, the Albany post office, the Alburg Methodist Church. By the time you flip to the Worcester Town Hall (with mother still behind the camera) you might wonder what sparks such behavior. The family has a simple answer: Vermont's 251 Club.

William and Frances Rockford joined upon moving to the state after their son's birth in 1970. They didn't face raise-your-right-hand oaths or must-attend meetings. Instead, they simply began visiting Vermont's 251 cities and towns.

Today the couple boasts a grown son, a groaning scrapbook and a golden anniversary: The 251 Club turns 50 this year.

### 'Linger a bit'

William Rockford, a 69-year-old retired banking administrator, is secretary of a fellowship of more than 4,000 modern-day explorers, all propelled to drive, walk, cycle or paddle the state one community at a time.

"The objective of each club member is to visit each one, and visit means not to just drive through, but to linger a bit, talk to someone who lives there, visit a store or the post office, take notes for a diary, perhaps stay overnight — at least



William and Frances Rockford of Montpelier look through some of the snapshots they've taken showing their family in every town, city and unorganized parcel in the state. They are longtime members of the 251 Club.

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pause long enough to look around a bit," Rockford writes in a letter to prospective members.

But a half century later, many are detoured by misconceptions. You don't, for example, have to visit all nine cities, 237 towns and five unorganized land parcels (Averill, Ferdinand, Glastenbury, Lewis and Somerset) before or when you belong to the club. You don't have to visit any of the state's four gores (Buels, Averys, Warren and Warners Grant) at any time. And you don't have to submit confirmation of your travels.

"We're not a high-pressure group," Rockford says. "We don't require you to get pictures, affidavits or postmarks. It's the honor system."

But that hasn't stopped people from submitting proof.

"Dear Mr. Rockford," one California surgeon wrote on hospital letterhead. "Enclosed is the documentation of our journeys throughout Vermont in our quest to be admitted to the honorable 251 Club ..."

The family of a retired Vermont Air Force major mailed a two-volume photo album picturing each town.

"I'm always amazed," Rockford says. "You could just say you've been to all the towns and no one is going to question you."

## 'You're there'

The club started in 1954 when Vermont Life magazine commentator Arthur Wallace Peach suggested "a plan to visit every town in the state."

"Years ago, before the auto, I knew men who had never been 50 miles from their village or farm; now, there is no excuse for a Vermonter's saying that he does not know his state from top to bottom," Peach wrote in the magazine's summer issue.

"I propose to organize a 251 Club to be made up of Vermonters and others who can show that they have visited, not merely driven through, the 251 towns in the state."

The club began before the interstate highway. But even with today's throughways, members face hurdles. Take the unorganized Northeast Kingdom town of Lewis, which many club members place last on their to-do list.

"There are no highways or residents or any definitive markers," Rockford says of Lewis, population 0. "Go to the pond and you know you're there."

But the pond is reached only



A snapshot shows that William Rockford and his son, members of the 251 Club, visited the post office in Lower Waterford.

Photo by Jeb Wallace-Brodeur

by a logging road that's currently gated and padlocked. One New York stockbroker discovered this and cell-phoned Rockford in distress.

"I said, 'You're close enough.'"

But so many have complained (this is the club secretary's most frequently heard question) that Rockford sought help from member James Douglas (who, in his role as governor, regretfully reported the private road was out of his jurisdiction).

## 'Next conquest'

Other members hail from 39 states and five countries as far away as Australia. Some 450 current members have visited all 251 communities.

Miss Vermont 2000 Hannah Nelson did so by car as "one of the most active Miss Vermonts in the state's history," the Web site [www.missamerica.org](http://www.missamerica.org) reports.

Edward Keenan Jr. of Essex Junction, 83, walked every public highway in the state — a two-decade, 25,000-mile feat.

"Except the interstate," the retired doctor clarifies. "They would not allow me on that, even when I went to Governor Dean. They said others would want to get on for one reason or another."

Alan Wilkins of Barre rolled through every town on his

Harley-Davidson motorcycle before dying of leukemia in 2002.

David and Marilyn Perrin of Charlotte made a splash by paddling in water in every community, from the Connecticut River and Lake Champlain to farm and fire ponds in drier landscapes.

"The object was to float the canoe," she says.

"There were several challenging times," he adds. "We tipped over in Stockbridge without wetsuits when the snow was still coming off the mountain."

But some people aren't content simply with visiting all 251 cities and towns. Rockford says one man is returning to collect a rock from each, while one couple is driving every road on the map. And that California surgeon writes, "Our next conquest — all the name-places within the towns. Mosquitoville will be first on our itinerary!" (It's just a swat from the Barnet town line.)

## 'Stay left'

Rockford himself has stuck to family outings by car. Born in Schenectady, N.Y., he lived as far away as Santa Monica, Calif., before moving to Montpelier after the birth of his son, William III, in 1970.

"We frankly wanted a better place to bring him up."

And so after settling in the house they still live in, the Rockfords started traveling the state. They drove their new car through a beaver pond in Lewis and dodged a pig that tried to run them down in Stowe, all the while snapping Polaroids to ensure their pic-

tures of all 251 places came out.

"Otherwise, it's a long way back."

Rockford joined the club's board of directors in 1977 and became its secretary in 1985, following founding scribe Lillias Bailey, who served to 1977, and John Brewster, who took over for the next eight years.

Rockford collects dues (\$7 to join or \$19 for five years), sends out thrice-a-year newsletters and sets up summer and fall luncheon meetings that can draw more than 500 people.

"We don't sell our membership lists or anything like that."

Indeed, it's all upstanding, asserts the Rev. George Dupuis, pastor of St. Margaret Mary's Church in Arlington, who joined the club in its first year after moving from Massachusetts.

"I said, 'If I'm going to live in Vermont, I want to learn about it,'" says Dupuis, 79. "For 50 cents you became a charter member, so I sent them 50 cents."

(Dupuis, now one of nine directors on the board, says he still has "eight or 10" towns to go.)

Rockford doesn't know of any other state with such a club. After all, there aren't many ways you can claim Victory just by driving through the so-named Essex County town of 55 people.

"People are in a big rush today," Rockford says. "Get off on that dirt road and stay left. You'll come out somewhere."

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## To join

People in or out of state can join Vermont's 251 Club by mailing secretary William Rockford at 40 Clarendon Avenue, Montpelier, Vt., 05602 or e-mailing [thevt251club@aol.com](mailto:thevt251club@aol.com).