

RICK HUBBARD
My Walk to All of Vermont's 251 Towns

It was a beautiful sunny day on July 24th, 2020 when I finally walked up to the Canadian border station in Norton, Vermont to finish my walk from and to each of Vermont's 251 towns and cities. My walk totaled 1,666 miles and required approximately 606 hours of walking during 10 of the 21 years since I walked away from the Canadian border in Highgate on Thursday, September 30th, 1999, heading south on Rt 7 toward Vermont's border with Massachusetts.

Although I'm a native Vermonter, I, like probably most of us, best knew the areas surrounding my home town of Middlebury, and when I first started my walk, I'd never heard of Vermont's 251 Club.

Instead, my walk was inspired by "Granny D", a/k/a Doris Haddock, the New Hampshire octogenarian who, beginning New Year's day of 1999 while in her late 80s, walked some 3,200 miles across America to publicize the need to strengthen our democracy by reforming the way huge amounts of campaign money from the wealthiest in America undermines our democracy. These large campaign contributions from just a tiny fraction of donors incentivize our elected representatives in Washington to enact laws, regulations and policies that prioritize the preferences of these wealthiest donors over the broad, common interests of the American people they were elected to represent. I'd long been concerned about this issue, so I followed her journey, which was easy given the large amounts of media coverage it generated.

I even walked with Granny for a week as she crossed part of Kentucky, which led me to decide that the least a then 58 year old could do to help, was to walk 3 sides of Vermont as part of a run in 2020 against Jim Jeffords for the US Senate to highlight this same issue and its importance to Vermont and America. Along the way, I learned of the 251 Club and promptly joined. Walking periodically that first year, collecting petition signatures and talking with Vermonters and the media through all four seasons, resulted in many memorable events and interactions, as I first went south on Rt 7 to Bennington, then across to Brattleboro via Rt 9, and finally, all the way up Rt 5 to the border at Derby Line. Coupled with other walks throughout Chittenden County and from there to Montpelier, I logged 446 miles during those first 12 months.



All that effort may have helped Vermonters think more about the way those huge campaign contributions distorted incentives for our elected representatives, but it didn't result in strengthening America's democracy, which has become increasingly compromised and dysfunctional over the subsequent twenty years. It also didn't result in my becoming one of Vermont's two US Senators. But once started, my desire to walk to and learn more about each of Vermont's 251 towns continued.

The logistics of walking town to town can be complicated. During my Senate walk, I had a supporter following me in my car and lining up appointments and places to stay along the way. When I'm totally on my own, I (very occasionally) either walk with a backpack and camping gear, or much more often drive my car, with a bicycle in back, to where I last left off, then drive that day's route so I don't get lost while walking (as I did once, on a class 4 road walk between Groton and Peacham), park either the car or bike at the end and ride/drive whatever I didn't park, back to the start point, and then walk that day's route to then drive/ride whatever I've left parked, back to the start point. In more recent years, if my life partner Sally comes with me, it's her bike in the car and she can drop me at the day's beginning point, then drive ahead, enjoy a bike ride on back roads, and meet me at the end with the car.

In 2001, I added another 328 miles when I walked from the Canadian border down the middle of Vermont to the border with Massachusetts on Rt 100 and adjoining roads. Coincidentally, I was camping in Shrewsbury on 9/11, the day when the Twin Towers were hit in New York City. That night I attended a hastily organized but very moving candlelight vigil in the Shrewsbury Community Church. Over the next week, I regularly asked Vermonters their reactions to the attack and what they thought the US should do in response. In various ways, they all said during our conversations, "I just hope the United States doesn't over-react." Well, we all know the way that turned out. It's just one more example of the common-sense wisdom of fellow Vermonters.

In 2003, I walked the Champlain Islands from Swanton to South Hero with an old friend. From 2004 through 2009 I didn't walk to any of the Vermont towns, and instead spent considerable time hiking, biking, canoeing and cross-country skiing in other parts of Vermont, the United States, Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

I walked sporadically in only two years between 2010 and 2014, working my way south in Vermont through all the towns west of Rt 7 toward the Massachusetts border and filling in some of the towns between Rt 7 and Rt 100. My total mileage by the end of 2014 finally reached 1088.

Beginning in 2017, I began working my way north from the Massachusetts border, filling in all the towns between Rt 100 and Rt 5. This continued in 2018-19 and by the beginning of 2020, I'd completed everything in Vermont south of Lunenburg, plus everything west of Rt 100 between Lunenburg and the Canadian border. That left just the northeastern corner of our "Northeast Kingdom" to complete. Due to Covid, walking alone in the remaining Northeast Kingdom towns, north from Lunenburg and east and west of Rt 5, was a great way to get some exercise and push to reach my goal. I spent a total of 19 days between mid-May and the latter part of July walking my way 169 more miles up to the border.

Sally drove up with me for my final two days, walking between Canaan and Norton. Since I was almost done, we decided to book a room at Jackson's Lodge on Wallace Pond to celebrate. That evening Sally and I launched one of their complementary lodge canoes, and went over the border to Canada, legally!

Oddly, the east-west US/Canadian border runs right through the water of Wallace Pond with camps along both the American and Canadian sides. So, the obvious question we quickly asked was: "What's the deal? How do we know where the border is when out on the water?" Turns out the border patrols of both countries have agreed that the residents of either country may get in their boats and go anywhere on the lake, except that Canadians are not allowed to touch land on the American side, and vice-versa. So, Sally and I paddled across the border and, just before sunset, canoed in front of camps on the Canadian side, while sporadically having "social and water distanced" conversation with some of our Canadian neighbors before return to our lodging.

The following day, July 24th, I walked my final miles to arrive at the Canadian border in Norton. Town number 251 at last!



I've lots of memories about my trip and I learned a lot about Vermont, its towns, people, and many businesses. For example, I took a nice "honor system" break at the Davies Memorial Library in Waterford, where one can relax, almost like in a comfortable living room, to read or check out a book or periodical, all on the honor system. That Vermont ingenuity and trust felt really good at a time of their limited budget and staff.

While walking up a gravel road to Stannard, I happened upon Black Dirt Farm and got quickly educated about their many different integrated and complimentary revenue streams: compost making, worm farming, raising chickens, hemp growing, and CBD extraction. Who'd have expected that while walking around Vermont.

I saw an especially creative sign on the outskirts of Brighton.



"Whirligigs" refers to proposed nearby windmills.

I'll never forget my walk to the tiny community of Baltimore where I locked my bike to a fencepost near the intersection of Harris Road and Baltimore Road, put the key in my pocket and walked back down Harris Road to my car down near the intersection with Chandler and Dean Brook Roads. When I drove back up to pick up my bicycle, I realized I'd lost the key through a small hole in my pocket. That began first a fruitless search for my key, and then a little sleuthing to find the retired town clerk who directed me to her farmer brother who cheerfully dug out his heavy-duty cable cutters and freed my bike. Later that day I rode my bike way out of my

way to Ludlow where by pre-arrangement and pre-payment, I picked up a new replacement bike lock hidden on a trailer wheel outside the bike shop that had closed an hour before I could get there.

All in all, I had a lot of fun, learned a lot, and got a lot of good exercise while walking to all 251 towns and cities. Although not many people aspire to visit all 251 the way I did, I feel very humble about my own accomplishment in comparison to Edward Keenan, a physician from Essex Jct., who walked every road on a Vermont highway map, in every one of our 251 towns over 10 years, a total of some 2,500 miles. Congratulations to Dr. Keenan, and to those many others who have visited all 251 in “alternative” ways.