



GOING the EXTRA

Members of exclusive club strive to visit every county in the United States

By Pamela A. Keene

The son of schoolteachers in Georgia, Rodney Pridgeon spent summers traveling with his family.

“My mom would get out a map and randomly throw a dart somewhere, and that’s where we’d go,” says the Tacoma, Washington, resident. “I guess that was the beginning of my love of traveling.”

After heading to Colorado for his undergraduate degree, then landing in Bellingham, Washington, for graduate school, Rodney settled in Tacoma and began a 29-year career with The Seattle Times in circulation administration. He retired in 2008.

“All along, I always traveled, so when my wife, Paula, told me in 2002 about this crazy group of people whose goals are to travel to every county in the United States, you should have seen the look on my face,” he says. “Then I realized that I was already about one-third of the way there, so I said, ‘Why not?’”

In 2003, Rodney joined the Extra Miler Club and began his quest in earnest, with Paula accompanying him most of the time. By August 2015, he had completed all 3,143 counties, becoming the 52nd completer in the Extra Miler Club.

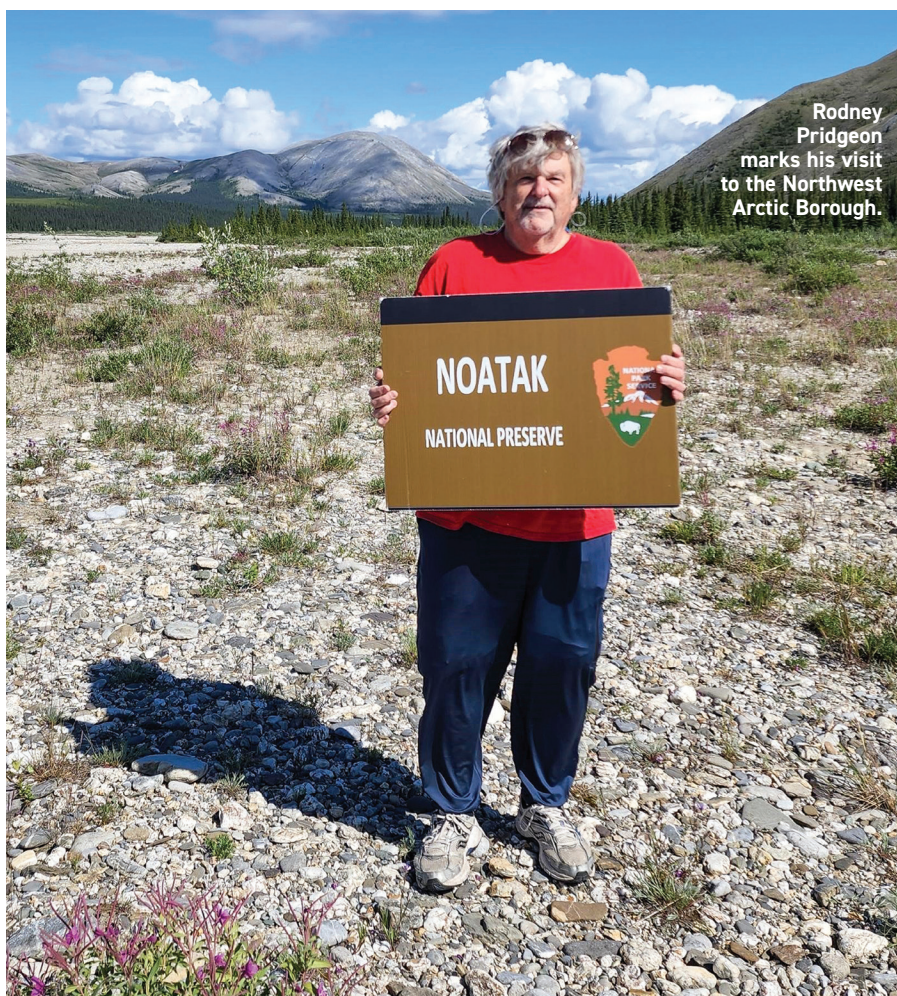
Another 14 people have since matched that accomplishment, making Rodney one of only 66 people who have reported visiting every county.

“For me, the journey is about exploration, finding places that are so beautiful and awe-inspiring,” he says. “Many of them draw me back for repeat trips.”

Among his favorites: The Kalaupapa Trail down to Kalawao County in Hawaii to visit a former leper colony on the north

shore of Moloka’i Island; Monument Rocks, a natural landmark in Gove County, Kansas; and driving to Deadhorse, Alaska, from Fairbanks—a 900-mile round trip on the Haul Road-Dalton Highway.

“I made the return trip on a donut tire, and I was really happy when I got back to



Rodney Pridgeon marks his visit to the Northwest Arctic Borough.



within 200 miles of Fairbanks, because then AAA could come and get me,” he says.

Right away, Rodney set another goal: to visit all 423 U.S. National Park units. So far, he has visited all but six, with plans to complete three more in Alaska, plus American Samoa and Rainbow Bridge in Utah, by early 2023.

“I took a hiatus when Paula passed away in 2019, and now my grandchildren travel with me a great deal,” says 74-year-old Rodney. “I found so many places that are so beautiful to go back to, and there are so many more to visit.”

A Lifetime of Memories

In 1980, Stu Stewart started keeping track of every road he had driven. He had no idea then it would lead to membership in the Extra Miler Club.

In June 2018, Stu became the nation’s 59th completer.

“I’ve always tried to drive a different way when I go somewhere, but it wasn’t until 2007 that I heard about a guy who had been to every single county in the U.S.,” says Stu, who lives in Venice, Florida. “It made me think, ‘I wonder how close I am?’ because by that time I’d been marking road atlases to show all the roads I’d traveled for 27 years as an over-the-road truck driver. When I checked back then, I’d already been to somewhere around 1,800 without even trying, so I said, ‘Why not?’”

By the time Stu joined the Extra Miler Club in 2017, he also had worked as a New Mexico state policeman, a drug and alcohol inspector for the Federal Aviation Administration in Texas, and a U.S. Department of Transportation special agent in Wyoming.

Nantucket County, Massachusetts.

Right away, he decided to do it again, this time with a finite deadline.

“I set a goal to finish in three years,” Stu says. “Since I was already in the Northeast, I picked some easy states to start with this time: Delaware with three counties and

Rhode Island with five.”

By the end of 2018, he had completed 1,208 counties.

The pandemic hindered his travels, but by the end of 2021, Stu had completed all but 22 counties. Skyrocketing gas prices in 2022 caused him to postpone a planned trip to Alaska. He expects to make that trip in 2023.

Seeking Personal Satisfaction

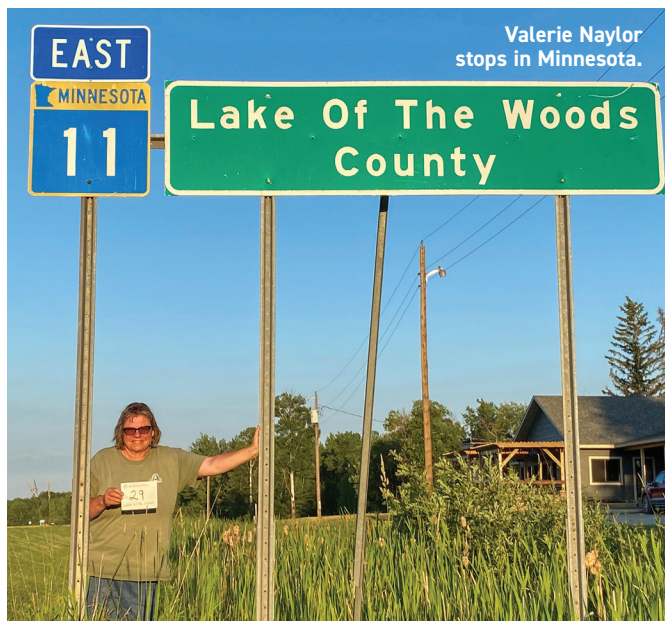
Valerie Naylor, secretary of The Extra Miler Club, is not surprised that Rodney or Stu would set other travel goals.

“That’s not unusual for some of our completers to repeat their county collecting or set other goals, such as visiting

every national park in the nation, going to every baseball stadium or driving all interstate highways,” says Valerie, who joined the club about 20 years ago.

She lives equally in South Dakota, Texas and on the road.

“I’ve been to about 78% of the counties, including those I visited with my parents when I was a kid,” Valerie says. “It was fun to think back to those times, remembering where we’d been and how we got there.”



“I joined because I was interested in other people’s travels,” Stu says, “and I specifically hoped to get information about the best way to complete the county equivalents in Alaska because of the challenges to travel there.”

In addition to his travel by 18-wheeler, Stu and his wife, Donna, journeyed by motor home. Although she died in 2016, he followed through on his commitment to complete the adventure, finishing in

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TIPS FOR STARTING THE ADVENTURE

While visiting the nation's 3,143 counties and county equivalents may seem daunting, it is possible. Here are tips to help you begin.

- ▶ Review your travel photos, maps and notes from trips you already have taken, such as family vacations from your childhood. Talk with traveling companions to jog your memory. You can only count counties you are certain you visited.
- ▶ Use paper maps of each state rather than atlases to track your travels. Consider using detailed map books, such as Gazetteer. Mark your routes and add notes. Avoid GPS tracking, which complicates record-keeping.
- ▶ Travel by car, truck, train, boat, bicycle or foot. You could in-line skate or skateboard from one county to the next. Because you must be physically present in each county, flyovers do not count. However, landing in an airport does count for the county in which the airport is located.
- ▶ Take time to enjoy your travels. Every new county can bring a new discovery, so venture into each one to see what's there. Photograph not only what you see, but of you visiting—either with selfies or by asking someone you meet to snap your photo with a good identifiable background.
- ▶ Allow extra time for Alaska because of transportation and access challenges.
- ▶ As with any travel, let someone know where you are and where you are going. Have a companion, if possible.
- ▶ Although it doesn't matter where you start, it may matter where you choose to finish. Pick a place where you have someone to celebrate with when you reach your goal.

For more inspiration, join the Extra Miler Club and receive a quarterly newsletter, access the county tracking system and earn certificates for reaching milestones.



While in Blue Earth, Minnesota—once home to a Green Giant canning plant—Rodney took a photo of the 55½-foot-tall Jolly Green Giant statue.

As collectors, we travel by cars, bicycles, trains, planes, hiking and ferries. The one big rule: You cannot fly over a county and claim it.”

Some places are easy to reach. Others are much more difficult.

“Alaska is a large state but only has 30 county equivalents,” Valerie says. “Accessibility is a real challenge, not only because of the sheer land mass, but also because several places are only accessible by boat or small plane.”

Isn't there a risk people will fudge?
“Not at all,” she says. “It's a badge of honor, pride and personal accomplishment to travel to this many counties, no matter how long it takes. There would be no satisfaction in cheating. County baggers are very concerned about accuracy.”

She says anyone with a desire to collect counties or who has specific travel goals can join the Extra Miler Club. There are modest annual dues, a quarterly newsletter and club merchandise, plus access to a private Facebook group.

Extra Milers Keep Moving

Marty O'Brien, who lives in Redwood City, California, has collected approximately 2,200 counties so far. He created the Extra Miler Club website and developed a tracking program in 1997 that is used by many members.

“Anyone who joins can sign up and track their counties,” Marty says. “It really makes it easy for people.”

He finds new friends during his travels, including a visit in October 2018 with

Santa—also known as club member Brian Reynolds, who lives in Hastings, Michigan.

“A great thing about the club membership is having friends everywhere you go in the U.S.,” says Marty.

He set a pace of about 100 counties a year, which he says is “a reasonable goal.”

“That’s about three vacations a year,” he says. “It makes life interesting to have a goal, and there’s no judgment about how long it takes to become a completer.”

Valerie, a retired National Park Service ranger and superintendent, travels in a small camper van with her three cats and one dog.

When she first started collecting counties, she says she wasn’t forthcoming about her travel goal.

“It was hard to explain—and it’s kind of a weird hobby—so I didn’t say much about it, but now I do and it’s fun to hear people’s reactions,” Valerie says. “About half the people think it’s silly or crazy and ask me

why I would even do such a thing. Others think it’s really interesting and start asking all kinds of questions.

“It’s a great way to see the country and to encounter people, places and things that you’d never know about otherwise.”

Rodney encourages people who are putting off travel not to wait.

“Just go,” he says. “In 2020, I flatlined for six minutes and woke up in the ICU. After having lost my parents and Paula, it was an even bigger motivation to keep on traveling and enjoying life. After all, you never know when your time will come.”

Valerie notes some people have a wanderlust, while others are creatures of habit who never get too far out of their usual routine.

“For us Extra Milers, it’s all about the adventure,” she says. “Our motto is, ‘The shortest distance between two points is no fun.’” ■



Marty O'Brien, right, meets with Extra Miler Club member Brian Reynolds—known by friends as Santa—during a 2018 trip to Hastings, Michigan.



Rodney also visited Alaska's Kobuk River Delta.

BY THE NUMBERS

Three men founded The Extra Miler Club in 1973: Ed Dietz, who completed the feat in 1976; and Roy Carson and Tony Burdett, who achieved it in 1985. All three are deceased.

The club holds annual meetings around the country: The next one is July 1, 2023, in Denver. If you want to plan ahead, the 2024 meeting is June 29 in Lansing, Michigan; the 2025 meeting will be in June or July in Tulsa, Oklahoma; and the 2026 meeting is July 18 in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

Number of completers: 66.

Number of dues-paying club members: approximately 350.

Membership dues: \$12 for individuals; \$15 for families.

Occupations of members: attorneys, physicians, truck drivers, government employees, retirees and many others—who often are joined by their cats and dogs.

Age range: infants to nonagenarians.

For more information or to join, visit extramilerclub.org.