

By John Bordsen, Travel Editor
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A Quest

Hobbyists hike and hunt for thousands of letterboxes hidden coast to coast, including some in Mecklenburg County

Debris from December's ice storm had been cleared, but the nature preserve was cloaked in fallen foliage. Signs occasionally showed we were still on track; between them we followed the ribbon of tiny mashed oak leaves that wound between saplings.

To one side was a high outcropping on the far side of a rivulet; on the other were woods as thick as anything from "The Blair Witch Project." Except for my son and me, this beautiful nowhere was deserted. Tommy held the sheet with the clues after we passed the third bench, looking for the snag that is "bent over like a pointing finger." He is 13 and able to pull missing homework from a rat's nest of a bedroom. But what's a "snag?"

He found it: a large tree that had grown sideways. Using the final clues—including a passage from Leviticus—he found the small container, tucked under a mat of leaves. **INSIDE IT WERE NOTES** left by M&R from New York, James from Georgia and Jan from South Carolina. In the bottom was what we were seeking: a small stamp engraved with a fleur-de-lis.

Unusual? Consider this:

- Hundreds of people may have followed the same clues and found this same box—or the other one hidden at a Mecklenburg County nature preserve. The information, after all, is posted at www.letterboxing.org, the Letterboxing North America Web site.

- So are clues to 60 other letterboxes concealed around North Carolina, including two more in Mecklenburg County.

- Fact is, the Web site lists clues to more than 2,500 letterboxes from California (162) to Maine (71). At least 291 are stashed in Ohio. And in Connecticut, where letterboxing is something of a mania, there are clues to finding 947 of them.

- You find them in tree hollows, under rocks and behind statues, etc. Digging is never involved.

And if all those hidden boxes were placed end to end... well, that wouldn't be any fun, would it?

Letterboxing combines hiking, mystery/puzzle solving, hunting and stamp collecting. You can do it solo or in groups. Get the clues off the Internet and all you may need is a compass and your wits to locate letterboxes.

Finding detailed information about this hobby may be more difficult: Its fans seem to bask in their obscurity and eccentricity. No hard-and-fast figures exist about the number of 'boxers or 'boxes. There are guidelines and etiquette, but few clubs or organizations; Internet discussion groups but no national fan mags. This, after close to 150 years.

It started in southwest England when a hiker named James Perrott stashed an empty jar under a pile of stones out in the wild, wind-swept heaths of Dartmoor—the eventual setting for "The Hound of the Baskervilles." He provided friends with clues: Could they find what he left there? Could they leave a card to prove they'd actually been there?

The activity grew by word of mouth and changed with the times. People now hunt for plastic boxes (more durable than glass jars) that hold a distinctive stamp and a stamp pad, so finders can mark their logbooks—portable proof-of-discovery ledgers. A letterbox sometimes also includes a notepad that stays with the box, on which finders can write a message.

Dartmoor today is a 368-square-mile national hiking park and home to more than 3,000 boxes. Clues to the whereabouts of some are pretty straightforward. Others require Sherlockian intellect.

Word of letterboxing reached the United States in a brief Smithsonian magazine article published in April 1998. Interest in the hobby fanned out over Internet message groups, and letterboxes were hidden in New England, Tennessee and Oregon. Thousands exist now. In the first week of December, clues to 17 new ones, from Altadena, Calif., to Simsbury, Conn., were posted on the Web.

Clues and comments at letterboxing sites are rarely posted by people with straightforward names. Many use aliases that have a Tolkien-esque or New Age-y touch (TeamGreenDragon, The Vermont Viking), could be used by a trucker for a CB handle (Funhog) or by a Grateful Dead camp follower (Silent Doug or Psychokiwis). The Web master at www.letterboxing.org didn't want his real name revealed and was barely comfortable being ID'ed as a software engineer in the Philadelphia area.