

## Thousand Miler Essay

By

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June 2024

My journey of segment hiking the Ice Age Trail (IAT) evolved significantly during the three years it took me to hike it. It started as a rather superficial “something to do” and became an opportunity for personal growth and learning. As I reflected on this journey three themes emerged:

- Personal Growth
- Richness of Wisconsin.
- Nature as a Place for Wonder and Healing.

I will address each of these themes in more detail.

1. Personal Growth. When I decided to embark on a 1000+ hike it seemed pretty straightforward. Get out there and hike. Get the miles done. The first milestone of 100 miles completed was fairly easy. I live in Green Bay so I could get to the IAT in 45 minutes, hike with a friend, and get back home. Depending on what time we left in the morning we could be home early afternoon. Easy! But as the segments close to home were completed and I started needing to travel farther it became a bit more complicated. Longer drives. Longer days. Needing to stay overnight. All of which meant it was harder to find friends to hike with me. At this point not only am I hiking alone (unnerving the first time) but unless I wanted to do double the miles (out and back) I needed to find a shuttle. I don't like asking for help with anything so reaching out to ask a total stranger for help – well it was a BIG deal. As it turns out the first people who shuttled me provided very meaningful turning points in my IAT journey.

I immediately connected with the first person who shuttled me, so much so that we ended up connecting afterwards and hiking together several times (side note: it turns out she knew my parents but it took us several hikes together to find that connection). The second person who shuttled me was Cheryl Gorsuch, Chapter Coordinator for Lakeshore Chapter. During the short time we had in her truck I went from being just another IAT hiker to IAT trail angel! I continue in that role today, shuttling hikers to/from the Green Bay airport or bus terminal to the eastern terminus. It is a role I really enjoy and it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't needed to find shuttle assistance for “my” hike.

During this 3-year journey I also learned that if you decide you really want to do something, you can, in fact, do it. People have been impressed and wowed by the fact that I completed the entire IAT. I viewed it as an exercise in persistence (and fortunately I stayed healthy so could continue to hike!). Necessary tasks were scheduling time to hike, planning the hike (segments, hiking partners or shuttles, lodging, etc.) and then hiking. A sort of wash, rinse, repeat - but for 3 years. There were times when the weather was sublime – those days were easy. Then there were times when the weather was horrible – cold, rain, wind, snow - sometimes all four at once.

That's when I found out how much inner strength (or stubbornness?) I had. Of note, never before have I stuck with a hobby or activity the way I did with the IAT. Having completed it I have new perspective on learning new things. I decided to hike more than 1100 miles and did it. If I decide to (for example) learn a new language, I can do that, too.

2. Richness of Wisconsin. I was born and raised in Green Bay and except for brief stints while attending college, I lived here my whole life. Yet, through my IAT hike I saw and learned more of Wisconsin than I knew existed. And it is a beautiful and rich state!

The geological diversity of the trail and its intersection with our state history amazed me. One example is prairies. I did not know that Wisconsin had prairies. Lots of prairies! Unfortunately when I hiked the prairie segments they were not in bloom. I've made a list of those segments so I can re-hike them when they are in bloom to see all of their beauty (I'm also a master gardener so am especially interested in this).

I was also unaware of the role that logging played in our state. When hiking in Langlade, Taylor and Lincoln Counties I took time to visit local museums and was fascinated with how logging, the rivers, and the railroads led to the establishment of the communities. I increased my vocabulary with words like hemlockery and pinery. I particularly enjoyed hiking the Rib Lake and Wood Lake segments. While hiking I considered what it was like when lumbercamps were in full swing. What the forest looked like (or lack of forest as they clear cut)? What it was like to live and work in a lumbercamp? As I hiked I found myself wondering how these lands went from being privately owned by lumber companies to being public/county lands. I was so please when there was informational signage in one of the segments explaining the transition!

I mentioned earlier about the intersection of geological diversity with state history. As a homegrown Wisconsin gal I have seen plenty of farm fields in my 60 years. It's synonymous with Wisconsin. The fields have a beauty that varies throughout the seasons, but they always have a beauty - and a culture that goes with the farming. My grandparents were farmers so I know this culture first hand. But after learning about how prairies and forests were destroyed for farming, I have a new perspective when I see farm fields. It isn't one of judgement - not good or bad. Just a greater appreciation for how history has impacted the environment in our state.

Other highlights for me during the three years was visiting communities that either I had heard of but had never been to or, in many cases, communities that I didn't even know existed but found to be absolutely delightful. For instance, I was unaware of the deep history of Portage and plan to go back for a few days just to further explore the history there. In other cases my husband and I re-visited some communities because we found them to be so charming. We found them because they are IAT trail communities. I do hope that the trail communities appreciate the economic boost that they get as a result of being a trail community.

Lastly, the people of Wisconsin are truly hospitable and friendly people! The folks in the small (and large) communities that I visited while hiking were welcoming! Local people were welcoming as were fellow hikers (no surprise there!) One day I ran into the same hiker three

times. We ended up becoming hiking buddies and we hiked more than 250 miles of IAT together! Far and away the trail angels that I met during this journey were outstanding! Friendly, knowledgeable and so giving of their time. My hope is that when I shuttle hikers that I am living up to the high standard of the many trail angels who helped me.

### 3. Nature as a Place for Wonder and Healing.

Studies have shown the positive effect nature has on our health. The urban segments of the IAT were nice, but I thrived in nature. My favorite counties for hiking were from the western terminus east through Langlade county, although Devil's Lake was truly magical for me. Time slows down when I hike in the woods. The hustle and bustle of life becomes non-existent. Small things like beautifully colored mushrooms and wildflowers, the intricacies of beaver dams, dainty toads, scaring up deer, seeing a family of baby skunks, snakes slithering, etc. take on new meaning. I believe this happens because I give myself time to slow down and actually see things! Through this journey I saw things and became so interested that I purchased books and learned about the glacial features I was seeing. At other times I saw animal activity or plants that so interested me that I later went back and researched it further. One example is beavers and how they build dams. After hiking through a segment with LOTS of beaver activity I found myself wanting to know more.

Having completed the IAT I now find myself yearning to get back outdoors because I feel so good not only while I'm out there but for several days afterwards. It's become a part of who I am.

So many people supported me through this journey. I went back to see how many trail angels shuttled me through the three years. Here's the list I came up with:

Lisa Maraka, Cheryl Gorsuch, Vicki Christenson, Dave Gramling, Joe Jopek, John Helling, Lisa Delaney, Phil Stenz, Gary (Cross Plains – can't find his last name), Gail Piotrowski, Mike Butterbrodt, Jeannie Georgson, Jenny Jahnke and Debby Capener. There were more but I was unable to track their names through my records. These are truly wonderful people!