

A Thousand-Miler's Journey

It was originally to be a series of day hikes to spend some time with my mom, doing something we both enjoyed. We had both encountered shorter portions of the trail before. My first was with the Scouts in 1986. What a wonderful idea – a trail that wound throughout the eastern portion of Wisconsin (as I then thought), traversing a variety of landscapes, wooded and grassy, even passing through some communities – and who knew what else? Mom had encountered it as well on other occasions, and said to me, “We should hike it together sometime.” The idea stayed in my mind, but it wasn’t until much later, in 2007, that I noticed a portion of it on a map of Verona and thought, “Let’s go check it out.”

It was as everything I had imagined, those first hikes, and countless adventures were to follow. In the Wisconsin Gazetteer I had discovered that the trail wound throughout the whole state. We started out doing some day hikes, roughly between Portage and Kewaskum, out and back, mixing up the locations for variety. I envisioned doing many hikes, throughout the state, but I still thought they would be out and back. We were in it purely for the enjoyment of the hikes, the scenery and the drives. Once we attended some conferences, though, we heard about the Thousand Miler program, and Mom said, “We should do that.” Seems like it was at the snowy annual conference in 2013 that this happened, but it may have been earlier. I was skeptical, but thought, “Let’s go ahead and try it. Never hurts to try.”

I have said that we decided this around 2013, but that is a guess based on our records. It was certainly at that point that we started to hike the connectors and team up with other hikers, to meet people and to cover more ground. I wasn’t enthusiastic about the road hikes, but they turned out to be just as interesting as the trail segments. We had used our bikes to shuttle ourselves in the areas where that was possible, before that. But we realized we would need hiking partners (and/or shuttles) if we were to make significant progress towards our goal. We were also somewhat leery of the hikes in the more remote areas up north, but after a few chapter events, we saw the appeal. We began to take more overnight trips. With my chronic depression, I found it difficult to be motivated to make those longer trips, being away from home, but it was Mom’s enthusiasm that drove me on. And always, once I was actually on the trail, it was worth it. I found a balance between hiking and other life areas, although our pace was still fairly slow.

Around 2017-18 or so, we began hiking with Karen McArdle, another great motivator. While on trips with her, she encouraged us to try new things, leading us to make more and more progress. There were others, as well. We were covering ground more rapidly than we had in the earlier years. When the pandemic hit in 2020, we found there was more time to hike, and we took advantage of that. We were maybe 900 miles in at that point, but we had more time to make more trips. We had done Langlade, Manitowoc, and Kewaunee Counties with help from Karen and others, but 2020-2021 we made remarkable progress in Lincoln and Taylor Counties, as more and more people continued to join us. Our hopes were to finish in 2021, but snowy conditions made hiking greater distances more difficult. We finished Taylor County in spring of 2022.

When Walla Hi had first opened up, we decided to save it for our last hike, as it was one of the segments we hadn't yet hiked that was still within a day's drive of Madison. We finished our journey on May 28 of this year, with a beautiful segment, great weather, and even greater company – hiking partners, friends, and family.

It was an adventure I have truly enjoyed!!

Brief itinerary

2007 – Central Dane Co. segments, Brooklyn, Portage Canal. Some segments in N. Washington Co.

2008 – Lodi and Lodi Marsh, Madison, finished Verona. Devil's Staircase. North-central Washington Co. and southern Columbia Co. segments. Merrimac, Baraboo. Some segments in Waushara Co. while visiting family. Marquette Segment.

2009 – Trip up north to do Sturgeon Bay. Central and southern Washington Co. Northern Waukesha Co. Sauk Point, Devil's Lake.

2010 – Emmons and Hartman Creek, Deerfield, northern Montrose, Monticello and Albany. Worked on Janesville. Waterville, Lapham Peak, Delafield.

2011-2012 – Continued to work on Janesville, Arbor Ridge. Table Bluff, Kettle Moraine Southern Unit, Holy Hill, Forestville.

2013 – St. Croix Falls, Gandy Dancer. Southern Portage Co. connectors. Waupaca R., Skunk and Foster Lakes. Connector from Sauk Pt. to Portage. Montrose and northern Monticello. Whitewater L. Connector N. of Greenbush.

2014 – New Hope to 66. Western Rock Co. connectors, Milton to Janesville, Washington and Waukesha Co. connectors, Point Beach, Algoma to Kewaunee. Gibraltar and connector.

2015 – Eastern Rock Co., central Waushara Co., Dane Co. connectors, Chippewa Moraine area.

2016 – Plover R., northern Waushara Co., more Dane Co. connectors, Eastern Rock Co., Merton, Milwaukee R., Kewaunee R., S. Blue Hills.

2017 – New Hope/Iola and connector south, Firth Lake, Gandy Dancer, Trade R., Straight Lk., Two Rivers area, Milwaukee R., began Marquette Co.

2018 – Rest of Polk Co., N. Waupaca Co., S. Waushara connectors, finished Marquette Co., Parnell, Greenbush, La Budde, northern Manitowoc Co., Kewaunee Co. connectors.

2019 – La Budde to Manitowoc, most of connector from 66 to Hatley, part of Plover R. to Kettlebowl, Kettlebowl, Old Railroad (west of Jack L.), Highland Lakes East and connector, Turtle Rock & GF Falls, N. Blue Hills, Rusk Co. connectors, Timberland Hills.

2020 – Washburn and Barron Counties, Hemlock Cr., N. Blue Hills. Highland Lakes West, Summit Moraine. Plover R. to Kettlebowl finished, central Marathon Co. segments, finished S. Marathon Co. connectors.

2021 – Lumbercamp, Parrish Hills, Lincoln Co., Wood Lake, segments west from Mondeaux Dam through Lake Eleven. Connector from Cornell to L. Eleven.

2022 – Finished Taylor Co., Walla Hi.

Further data: 1119 miles, 15 years, 329 hikes, 70 out-and-backs, 71 trail angel assists, 25 self bike shuttles, 31 hiking partners.