

## Thousand-Miler Essay

James Deich

On December 15, 2021, I completed my section hike of the Ice Age Trail. After years of occasionally hiking parts of the trail at various locations around the state, and the forty plus year memory of various educational field trips to ice age sites, I decided I wanted to walk the complete trail. Without a clear picture of how it would happen, I gave it a go. You quickly find out if you have the same interests and time as fellow family members. I started solo hiking with a bicycle, borrowed from my wife, to be used for return transportation. The section hike has primarily been from west to east with a lot of diversions along the way. Starting in northern and western Wisconsin was due to the trail's proximity to home. I decided to keep a written daily log of my progress on the Ice Age Trail. Many years ago, as a young man living in Colorado, I hiked half the Colorado peaks over 14,000-feet but kept little documentation of what I did. Over time I regretted the lapse of judgement. As the government says, if something is not written down or documented, it did not happen.

I got seriously started in late February 2020, hiking the Gandy Dancer Segment in Polk County. The mild winter had left crusty snow and ice on the winter snowmobile route. I met only one snowmobile during the 15-miles of walking. It was the first and last time on a connecting road that a pickup would slow down and ask me if I needed a ride, which I gratefully declined. I learned if it was not too windy, winter was a good time to hike connecting roads. After the Gandy Dancer Segment, I moved onto the connecting road between the Southern Blue Hills and the Chippewa Moraine Segments. At that point "Stay at Home" Covid rules went into effect until the State Supreme Court eliminated most of them in May.

When I continued in late May the weather was good, and the ground had dried well enough to start hiking beautiful northwest Wisconsin. I continued hiking one day per week for the remainder of 2020. Primarily hiking mid-week and adding in the effects of Covid, the trail was quiet for me in 2020. I passed through empty parks, such as Straight Lake State Park and scout camps. With spring weather, wildlife started to be more prevalent. Even though I have lived in northwest Wisconsin for close to thirty years and have had bear damage on property I own, never had I seen a live black bear in outdoors Wisconsin. Just the periodic crumpled black mess along the interstate highway. While hiking in Polk, Burnett and Rusk Counties in June and July, I would see three mother bears and nine cubs. They were all in the open out of the woods. In my travels, I have seen no bears since that time, just the occasional angry dog.

I learned a hard lesson while hiking the Timberland Hills Segment, which winds through parts of three counties. I had not properly secured the key fob for my vehicle in my day pack, slipping out somewhere along the way. A search of obvious stopping locations along the 13-mile path turned nothing up. This forced me to put in a desperation call to my wife, who worked in a southwestern suburb of Minneapolis, to rescue me and my vehicle. Considering the distance, her response was rapid. With my spare fob in Eau Claire, it ended up being a late night of travel. Learned there are a lot of deer in western Wisconsin that come out after dark. The procedures for carrying keys and valuables improved immediately. I was learning.

Ignoring the advice of weather forecasters came back to bite me on occasions. Such as getting a late start to hiking the swampy Grassy Lake Segment when there was a 40 percent chance of a thunderstorm in the forecast later in the day. I got caught in an intense hour-long storm of lightning and heavy rain, all

the while trying to find those elusive yellow markers. Another time while hiking through northern Portage County in mid-March, wind gusts up to 40 mph was predicted in the weather forecast. While riding my bicycle into the wind on a return trip, a gust of wind caught me and stopped my progress dead. Trust me, I am not a light person.

As I progressed eastward, I was getting up earlier and driving farther to complete my day hikes. Later in the year, there was less daylight and more night driving. As I started moving south, I was leaving the large forests for more intensive farming country. It was fascinating to observe the transition in soils and types of vegetation as I moved south. It is difficult not to notice the proliferation in irrigation systems and CAFO's in central and eastern Wisconsin. I had substantial time to consider the possible negative environmental effects of these changes. While walking through Portage and Waupaca Counties the remnants of the small family farms, where families once struggled to make a living in the rocky soil stood out to me. In this area my mind also wandered to thinking about a professor I had in school. I participated in a class at the University Field Station near Clam Lake, WI in the late 1970's during the month of January. The professor Dr. Fonstad, who was one of the instructors, was an excellent cross-country skier who came from the Waupaca County area. He would regale us with stories about small unseen creatures called Boarlitches and Mucklucks (my memory and spelling). I believe the Boarlitches would reach down from the trees and brush pulling your hat off, and the Mucklucks would reach up grabbing your ski or foot and tripping you when on a trail. This was a way to occupy my mind during the long hours, and blame something other than myself when I slipped and fell along the trail.

During 2021, I seemed to run into a significant amount of road and utility construction on connecting roads. Generally, the length was short and the workers friendly as long as you stayed out of the way. I observed the extent invasive plants have spread across southern Wisconsin, and still was amazed at the huge effort put forth to control them in the Lodi Valley and Dane County.

In mid-July, I discontinued doing return trips from hikes by bicycle. My wife Faye freed up more time and became my personal "Trail Angel/Coach/Trainer." Due to length of travel to the trail, I shifted to two day hikes every second week. A hornet stung me while working in my vineyard and I was given a steroid to relieve the swelling, which cleared hip pain I had over the last couple of years caused by hiking on the paved surfaces. Not having to worry about a bicycle ride back to starting points and the loss of hip pain, allowed me to increase my daily hike distance. I temporarily bypassed the section of trail from Monticello to Milton, to save the southerly area for winter hikes.

Extending the length of hikes and going on consecutive days, I learned about the hiker malady called blisters. But the trip through the Kettle Moraine area went quickly and was very enjoyable. There were unexpected things, such as hearing the roaring engines of race cars practicing at Elkhart Lake. The beautiful rivers flowing toward Lake Michigan were a treat. Getting to Manitowoc and Lake Michigan and being able to walk along the lakefront bike trail as eleven Segway scooters in caravan cruised past me was fun. Point Beach State Forest has always been a special place for me. I hiked along the beach thru the southern half of the park, seeing only one lady with her two angry dogs. A special treat was going through Michicot, as the community was getting ready for the Pumpkin Fest. At the same time the annual salmon run was occurring on the East Twin River. Just below the dam young boys were excitedly lining the bank, with a few in the river, attempting to catch salmon swimming upriver. I held a personal, unscientific survey of drivers along the Ice Age Trail, and found the drivers of Manitowoc County the most considerate of walkers.

The tourism season was over, but the harbor towns of Kewaunee and Algoma looked good. North of Algoma, the Ahnapee State Trail to Sturgeon Bay was covered with 3 to 4 inches of fresh snow, first of the year. In Sturgeon Bay, I paid a quick visit to "Woolly" the steel mammoth statue. On my walk-through Potawatomi State Park to the Eastern Terminus monument, I slipped on an exposed wet tree root. The Muckluks were still out. Faye was there to meet me at the eastern terminus monument. Back to Rock County to finish the trail.

Previously skipping 50-miles of Rock County with hope for milder winter hiking weather later in the year, made me feel like I knew what I was doing. Over the three-day period in December, the temperatures got into the 50 to 60-degree range. The frost was coming out of the ground, making slippery conditions on portions of the Arbor Hills Segment. The hike through Janesville proved to be another notable example of the effort put forth to develop an enjoyable and safe trail system through an urbanized area. Other urbanized areas that have done an outstanding job would include West Madison area and Verona, Delafield, Hartland, West Bend, and Manitowoc/Two Rivers. On December 15<sup>th</sup>, I completed a short hike to finish the Ice Age Trail at Central Park in Milton. My wife was there at the end to greet me, and a Wisconsin Central train that just happened to be passing by the park at the time appropriately sounded its horn to celebrate the moment.

A significant part of segment hiking the Ice Age Trail is an exercise in organization. Many hours of enjoyment were spent researching and laying out proposed hikes and reading weather reports. In the end, I solo hiked over 93 percent of the Ice Age Trail and returned by bicycle or walking 52 percent of the time. The special memories that will stick with me are the great evenings at restaurants with my wife, after her days spent exploring the present area and trying to find the best bakery in eastern Wisconsin. Her pick was the Oostberg bakery. I always devoured any evidence of the bakery visits at the end of a hike. Meeting people was part of the fun, such as thru-hiking thousand miler "Storm Trooper" in Lincoln County, or Langlade County Chapter board member and County Surveyor Dave Tlusty, and many people working along the trail that I have no name. Also, the special moments as unexpectedly observing the "Ring of Fire" solar eclipse early on the morning of June 10<sup>th</sup>.