



### *American Bittersweet*

- *A twining woody vine with poisonous leaves. It bears clusters of small orange fruits with bright-red fleshy seeds.*
- *An emotional feeling that is a mixture of both happy and sad.*

This Bittersweet Vine presented itself ¼ mile from the end of my journey. Symbolically true, I was happy and sad. A tear at the beginning of that day's hike and a huge smile at the end. Lots of stops for final pictures offset by something close to a sprint across the finish line.

***Bittersweet, Literally.*** My hike is complete. I am a Thousand Miler. I've trod every mile of the Ice

Age Trail; and with each step I've fallen deeper in love with all it represents. I'm adjusting to home after being gone roughly 50% of the last several months. I've unpacked...really unpacked.... The contents of my "grab-n-go" trip packs are now neatly stowed for easy access. My summer and fall clothes stored for winter; winter clothes are front and center. It snowed, we shoveled. I'm rekindling neglected friendships and commitments. Life is returning to normal.

***Bittersweet, Figuratively.*** My journey is unending. I will carry the 99% good and 1% not-so-good memories with me. I will miss that time on the road. After our common bond of hiking the trail has been completed friendships will change. I will miss my Wannabe hiking buddies. I am changed. I am more focused, resilient, confident. I am proud of my accomplishment. Non-hiking friends have labeled me the brave and adventurous one. In their eyes I am also the insane risk taker. I have more love than ever for my non-hiker husband Steve. He was and is my rock, my biggest advocate, supporting me every step of the way.

I was so often asked how long it took me to hike the IAT. The truest answer is just a month shy of 62 years. The shortest answer is about a year once I truly committed. The nuanced answer is ***Bittersweet***.

- **2006.** Bill Bryson's book "A Walk in the Woods". I envisioned myself thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, 40-pound pack on my back. Over time, all that sounded less and less fun. I like the simplicity of beds and restaurants.
- **August 2014.** St. Croix Falls Segment with an acquaintance. We hiked uphill-north to south. Without benefit of enough water or nutrition. Hospital Esker almost killed me. It was August...what was I thinking...was I thinking? Steve and I move from the Twin Cities to Cumberland, WI. Life began taking me in the direction of the Ice Age Trail.
- **May 2015.** Grassy Lake with a friend. About a mile in I bent to tie a shoe. I was covered...literally covered...with ticks. Sprint back to the car and a flat tire. Really??? We didn't know anything, so much to learn.
- **Winter/Spring 2016.** Time to solo hike. Off I went to Bear Lake. I looked into the woods and continued driving...too scary. A few weeks later I drove to Timberland Hills, parked my car, walked into the woods about 100 yards and realized I might get my feet wet and it was still scary...hike abbreviated.
- **Winter 2017.** My education begins. I bought some books, did some group hikes, got involved in my local Superior Lobe Chapter. Now I am ready for a solo hike! Back to Bear Lake I go with my pups Juno and Barney in tow. Went for a nice out and back snowshoe hike with Juno off leash. She kept rubbing her snout on the ground. Upon inspection I realized she had had a close encounter with a porcupine. A visit to the vet. Leashing lesson learned!
- **May 2018.** The joy of retirement. A friend to hike with, glory be!!! Learned that when leapfrogging cars on Northern Blue Hills, it is easier to cross a beaver dam than doubling back to the starting car. Who knew you could cross a beaver dam??? Well...most hikers know that and I know that now.
- **April 2019.** IAT Annual Conference in Baraboo. Devil's Lake, Gibraltar. Hiking the entire trail starts to seem achievable.
- **December 2020.** Wannabes in Cumberland. I joined them for a hike. That led to an overnight trip, hiking parts of Jerry Lake, Lake 11, East and a few more. Continually wondering IF NOT NOW, WHEN?
- **February – November 12, 2021.** Amazing memories. Albany and the ethereal flute, Firth Lake (am I lost?), Harrison Hills with brother and nephew, Lincoln County solo hikes, Parrish Hills winter splendor, the magnificence of Point Beach (and the drone), Western Bifurcation in early fall, never ending Verona and its water tower! The sense of accomplishment associated with "closing the gaps".

Advil, Band-Aids, bug spray, car –gassing up again, deep and not so deep discussions, dehydration cramps, Guthook, hiking poles, hiking shoes, hydration pack, logistics of leapfrogging, "my money is in the car", motels, permethrin, the sound of silence, skorts vs. shorts, sunglasses, sore feet, sunscreen, supper clubs, 975 miles in the past 10 months + 140 prior miles = 1115 miles at completion. Many more miles not counted.

*Bittersweet. So very much in our lives has changed since those initial thoughts of long-distance hiking just 15 years ago. Our beloved parents have passed. We've built a home, moved, retired. Like the wildflowers on Liebetrau Loop, new friendships have blossomed, others have faded. We've had some of our own health scares. We've gotten healthier. The clock keeps ticking. Life goes fast.*

*What are your goals? Ask yourself "IF NOT NOW, WHEN?"*