

Ken Haling - Thousand Miler Award Essay

I began my journey on the IAT in 2019, the year I retired from my teaching job after 28 years. I wanted something to do and always enjoyed hiking and the outdoors. For years I saw articles from the Walworth/Jefferson Chapter of the IAT in our local free paper about how they hiked twice a week and everyone was welcome. I decided to give it a try and started to hike every Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning with them. Andy Whitney, Chapter Coordinator and the whole crew were very welcoming. My wife once asked me if I ever thought of hiking the entire trail and I told her I didn't. I have memories of hiking parts of the IAT as a Boy Scout and some of it was tough, especially when I was younger and just started hiking.

The following year after hiking many of the same trails repeatedly I decided to branch out. I saw on the IAT website calendar that the Rock County Chapter was going to do their entire Walk Across Rock County award program, covering 3-5 miles each Wednesday afternoon throughout the summer. The idea of being able to complete the entire County intrigued me. The first afternoon about 25 of us met Dennis James, Chapter Coordinator and other volunteers from the Chapter. They gave a brief overview of the IAT as well as specifically what was in their County. We then carpooled to the starting point and started our walk/hike. It was immediately apparent that people hike at different paces. We all finished and vowed to be back the next week. Well, we had lost a few and by the time we were on our last few weeks we were down to 6-10 hikers. To be fair some stopped coming because they hiked greater distances on their own and finished before we did. This got me hooked and I decided to complete the entire IAT over 4 years. I completed 325 miles that first year.

This is also when I learned about Cold Caches. I had geocached for several years but stopped in 2010 after wanting to practice Leave No Trace principles and knowing several caches required bushwacking to get to them. Cold Caches were great since I'd learn more about the geology of the Ice Age and they were Earthcaches. I ended up finding all 82 while I hiked.

I didn't hike nearly as much the following year, about 150 miles. Covid was in high gear and shuttling was almost non-existent.

In May 2021 I started a Facebook monthly hiking group and I have hiked 610 miles with 21 different hikers from this group. This eliminated the need to line up shuttlers and allowed me and others to hike about 50 miles during 3-day treks. Many of the people I hiked with became Thousand Milers in 2021 and more in 2022.

I have been planning and hiking different segments for so long that it doesn't feel real that I've completed it. I find myself still thinking "what is the next segment and when". I do have the goal of finding all 31 of the Wisconsin Geocaching Association Ice Age Trail Series caches. They began in September 2021 and I did some as I hiked the trail since then. I still have 24 to find throughout the state so I'll be revisiting many segments of the trail over the next few years looking for those.