

In 2019, between Christmas and New Year's day, while my family was otherwise disposed while I was home, I decided to walk a portion of the IAT. The temperature was adequate and I had time to travel the ~1 hour from rural Racine to Stoney Ridge in the Southern Kettle Moraine. My intention was to do it as an out and back, which happened, but I also added the homesteads across the road and Big Hill. I remember taking a picture from Big Hill and sending it to Dawn, my wife. I was inspired two-fold - I had taken the initiative to do this on my own and the sights were quite incredible. I was hooked from the beginning - I would hike the IAT.

I've lived in Racine County my entire life. Rural Racine. As a child I would walk the farm fields, creeks, and woods finding the beauty - appreciating the adventure - each day brought. I was fortunate to have this in my youth. Of course, it wasn't recognized at the time, but certainly is now, as it prepared me for both hardships and the appreciation of nature.

I crossed creeks in four seasons, found fossils under bridges, built forts in woods, and learned to appreciate the diversity of life around me. I shared my haunts with others and others shared their's with me. There weren't real boundaries. Some were defined by signage and others were anecdotal. At age ten feign ignorance and all boundaries fade away.

Stepping onto Stoney Ridge took me back to the days of my youth. I needn't worry about the boundaries in my adult life as a defined trail was lain out before me while respecting landowners' wishes. I could literally play in others' backyards with permission at age 50 while discovering new sights, growing an appreciation of the state I live in, and selfishly reaching for a goal of finishing the entire trail through segment hiking.

Two and eight months later, here I am. I've hiked the the IAT. All of the times I've travelled by car from Racine County to the northern segments I've reminded myself that while long by car, I've walked that distance and at least two-fold. Over 1100 miles within one state is impressive. Not by mileage, necessarily, but it gives a sense of just how large this country actually is.

I fear I've hit the point where is actually too much to write. What I've gained from hiking the IAT is almost immeasurable. First, but not foremost, is the appreciation I have for the state in which I live. For 49 years I drove/rode the streets of Wisconsin looking toward the woods. I like to refer to my hike as seeing Wisconsin from the back door - looking to the streets from the woods or prairies. Of course there are CRs where my reference would make no sense, but if not for the IAT putting me in place I'd have not experienced the towns or rural byways defined by the route.

There is, of course, an educational aspect to the IAT. Driftless area, kettle, moraine, esker, lobe, etc.. There's found great explanation of what is being experienced while hiking. Add in the local chapters which may include tree identification and local histories through signage along the trail, there is much more to learn. Specific to me I've identified nearly 100 bird species and countless wildflowers / plant / fungi species using online apps while hiking.

Through introspection I've learned I'm uncomfortable being comfortable. Hiking the IAT I've learned that while uncomfortable, I recover quickly. Uphills eventually even out providing time to recover and regain breath. Rain eventually stops providing time to dry out. Hectic roadways eventually fall back into the woods to allow concern and noise to fall away. I also learned I grow stronger as the day grows longer. The mind is an odd cohort.

There are events in one's life which define who one is or who one may become. The IAT has been a 1150 mile stream of discovery and definition. If willing it can take one to move outside his/her comfort zone in many, many different ways. It introduces one to new people, to new visuals, to new hardships, to new joys.

I'd be remiss to not write a bit more about the people I've had the privilege (yes, privilege) to meet while on the trail. These people range from the Uber drivers who assisted the hike to those "few" I hiked multiple segments. These people are the hoteliers, the business owners, the restaurateurs, and the random families who invited me to their picnics. If one wants to experience people at their best go on a hike. Don't be afraid to initiate a conversation. Pay attention to what others have to say. Be a nice person. It's really quite simple and the rewards for the minimal effort come back ten-fold.

If pressed for a single word to describe my experience I couldn't do it. But, I can summarize it two words: humbled and awed. I am and will be forever grateful this line in the dirt exists. To those who manage and facilitate the trail - my many, many thanks.

Sorry to be done but happy to have completed,

Michael Hourigan

I've walked beyond hurt.
Beyond muscular pain,
Beyond mental pain,
Of both myself and others'.
In attainment of "having done".
Nothing more.

Well, there was visual stimulation,
New smells,
Awkward conditions,
The meeting of people,
Playing humble while secretly boasting,
And regret of aforementioned.

And there was beauty and ugliness (of both self and others).
Mushrooms, deer, and bear.
Evergreen pines and deciduous forests,
Green in infinity of color and texture;
Tannin, amber, oxide, yellow, gold...

On One Leaf!

Rainbows suspended between blades of grass,
Wild, see-through insect homes,
Nests, defined by materials available
Mud.
Clay.
Loam.

Elements of life being lived...
Thankful to have witnessed.