

Chasin' the Blaze

I have never been an athletic person! Not being the fastest, most durable, or picked first for a team was my norm. I have, however, always enjoyed and appreciated the beauty of the outdoors. Upon retirement I took advantage of my newly found free time to hike. I enjoyed hiking in several state and national parks as well as local trails. My fellow retiree began to hike with me and that led to discovering the Ice Age Trail!

We started with a few segments close to home (Rock County) and quickly expanded our itinerary to those hikes within an hour of home, Walworth, Rock, Waukesha, and Jefferson Counties. These early hikes were out and back hikes and gave us a taste of the Ice Age Trail. After a few hikes, my hiking partner, Liz Lochner Abel said, "wouldn't it be a crazy idea to tackle the entire trail"? Hmmm, not sure how that would work but why not!! And so it began.

Our hike can be divided into 4 main parts over the two years. The first sections were close to home, mainly out and back or shuttled by our husbands. This included Walworth, Rock, Jefferson, Waukesha, and then moving up into the northern Kettle Moraine as well as to the west, Green, and Dane Counties. We began thinking we would do trails only and later added the Connecting Routes. At this point I had to admit that I never dreamed I would actually finish. Those northern sections were so long and far away! There seemed to be no way in the world this old lady (carrying a few extra pounds) could actually tackle something such as that!! We began to call upon friends for shuttles and learned about those magical "trail angels"! That ended phase one. Maybe we could do this!

Phase two saw us actually plan a couple of overnight treks up into the northeast section of the state, Manitowoc, Sheboygan, and Door Counties as well as surrounding areas. Yep, we were going to do this! The scenery was beautiful, the weather great and the people we connected with were so very kind and helpful.

That would all soon end with our second winter (we did very little hiking our first, fair weather hikers, only!). Well, why not? Purchased winter gear, snowpants, gloves,

hat, good boots and we headed out for phase three. We used this time to head up the eastern bifurcation and complete all the long road walks in the north. Wind and snow blowing in our faces, water hoses freezing, cold fingers were all part of the game. We knew the reward would be the holy grail of the Ice Age Trail, the western segment with its forests, long climbs, desolation and what we hoped would be all worth it! Unfortunately, our winter hikes were cut short due to, well, Winter! The north was pretty much impassable to us "southerners", so we waited it out during March until April.

Did the western segment meet our expectations? Without a doubt, it met and far exceeded anything we could have imagined as far as beauty, remoteness, ruggedness, wildlife and energy expended. Each hike seemed harder than the one before it. We tackled 15, 16, 17 miles in a day. We forded rivers, climbed hills, jumped rocks, slid ankle deep in mud and learned the true value of mosquito head nets! But we did it! Langlade, Lincoln, and Taylor counties were every bit as tough as we imagined. The goal which didn't start as a goal became our obsession and so very proud to say we tackled it!

That was our itinerary and our timeline. I have enclosed the spreadsheet with the actual details. More important than that though, was what I learned. Yes, I learned more than I thought possible about the geology and natural landscape of Wisconsin. I learned about the different areas of the state, their economies, their pastimes. I learned about hunting, fishing, logging, and farming. Most importantly, I learned about myself. I spent hours admiring, reflecting, thinking, and conversing. I truly learned that the phrase "If you put your mind to it, you can do anything" might take time but it is so very true.

I learned that there are absolutely angels on the trail. It wasn't only those who gave us a ride when needed but it was the woman who opened her door to ask if we wanted to come in to use the restroom. It was the woman from Minnesota who pulled up in a camper and offered us cold water and chocolate. It was the countless people who stopped to chat and offer encouragement. It was the amazing group of Ice Age Trekkers whom we met and now consider friends. It was the people we followed online and were inspired by their treks. It was the couple who offered us room at their home. It was the

hours of stories told (and sometimes retold!). It was the true angels with yellow paint, chainsaws, and prairie seeds out working.

I am forever changed by this journey and I offer the most profound thanks to all those who played a part in making it a success.

Barbara Makovec, Thousand Miler!!!