

My Ice Age Trail Hike: Mary M. Nennig

Co-Hiker is Terri Riedel

April 3, 2015-September 21, 2021

Life changing...

Strengthening...

Healing...

Exciting...

Confidence building...

Joyous...

Who would have ever guessed that I could hike 1,201 miles through the state of Wisconsin? Although a farm girl, college graduate, and lifelong career social worker, I did not view myself as someone who could actually walk MILES! After finding an IAT brochure at the Pioneer Restaurant near the Chaffee Creek Segment in Waushara County several years ago, I asked a group of women friends if anyone would like to accompany me on some hikes. Luckily, one friend enthusiastically agreed to try this, and so on April 3rd, 2015, we began. Our maiden voyage was to “try a hike” at Emmons Creek, to “see” how far we could hike. It was a cold, blustery, early spring day. We were wearing jeans, long underwear, layers of shirts, jackets, hats, and gloves (we had much to learn about gear, hiking shoes, backpacks) as we set out on our adventure. The wind was sharp! Even after hiking a few miles, we were too cold to sit down to eat our sandwiches; we stood in a protected area, and quickly ate. I remember my freezing cold hands trying to open my thermos for some much needed warm coffee. However, we completed the segment in a surprisingly short period of time, and found we had hiked 7.2 miles!!! Unbelievable! We immediately and jokingly “did the math”, and thought if we could complete 100 miles a year, we could hike the entire trail in 10 years! Hiking through those woods, with large pine groves, streams, and buoyed with success... we were hooked! The quiet solitude, the birds, the wind in the trees, where the scents of the forest surrounded us, beckoned us to return. And so our venture began!

I find it very difficult to describe how deeply this adventure has affected me. The change is “inside” of me, in my heart and soul. Hiking the trail, and having that as a goal and activity these past 6 years filled my life with hope, excitement, laughter, and friendship. The minute I would step into the woods, I felt it envelop me in an almost magical aura, only to find I was disappointed when I had to leave. For me,

many memories, long forgotten from when I was an only child on our farm in Green Lake County, came back to me, via the sights, sounds, smells of the woods, and the earth. Even abandoned farm equipment, tucked into many farmers back woods, brought my hiking friend and I (she also is a farm girl) happiness, as we knew the names of the equipment, and the purpose of its use.

Having had my hiking partner every step of the way was the most important part of this journey. I would not have been able to successfully complete this feat without her. Having “two heads” to find the trail segments via our paper roadmaps and IAT trail maps (prior to using Google Maps for road directions, or Mammoth Tracks>Guthooks for trail directions), along with being watchful and reassuring to each other when we were deep in the Northwoods and hadn’t seen a blaze for a while, was essential. So many times having this reassurance, vs. what I envision hiking alone would have been like for me, helped me feel safe and relaxed. And then there were the conversations shared on the trail: walking and talking through our most important life events throughout these years (what happens on the trail, stays on the trail), was very healing. The trail will forever “hold” these conversations and memories for us. Our trail names were Spark and Plug. We assigned these on a daily basis as to who was feeling most clear minded and full of energy (and maybe had more coffee?!) and who felt sluggish, and wasn’t thinking as clearly? We also named our cars (Camy, Ruby, Scarlett, and Bluebell), our hiking sticks (Eugene and Maxine: both hand carved by my hiking friend’s husband), along with our metal poles (The Twins, and Clarence and Clarice). They all routinely accompanied us!

The trail taught us so much about our State: historically, geologically, and geographically. We could easily imagine our Native Americans peers building teepees in certain areas. We could appreciate, if only to a small degree what Natives as well as pioneers along with our own parents and grandparents, dealt with due to weather and the changes of seasons. Very memorable was hiking through Roznos Meadow (prairie) in mid-Summer. It taught us how very tall the prairie grasses were (we had no idea) and how extremely hot it was in mid-summer. We found that the temperature at ground level on the prairie trail was several degrees warmer than above grass temperature. And then there were the Northwoods, where my Irish grandfather, as a young man, worked in the lumber camps, to earn money to buy a farm of his own. I have a photo of him with his peers and it is simply written: “Near Antigo”. We viewed and imagined the lumber camp workers backbreaking and dangerous work: felling the trees, laying the railroad ties, and then relocating the ties when the trees were gone. So much history to become aware of and appreciate.

Lastly, I am very happy to report, that during these years (and with plans to continue this in the future), that we have encouraged others to begin their own IAT adventures. In addition to a few friends, we also had my 20 something aged daughter join us on several of our hikes: Devils Lake, Merrimac, Kettle Moraine, etc. She, too, is now “hooked”, and ready to start her own adventure. In addition, I am happy to have brought a coworker and several of the adult mental health consumers with whom I had worked prior to my retirement, to the trail on several occasions during my employ, and they continue to speak of those experiences proudly.

I am so very grateful to the entire IAT community, both past and present. So much hard work, planning, upkeep, trail work, shuttling... We had wonderful trail angels (please refer to Terri Riedel’s information), who added so much knowledge and enthusiasm to our hikes. Their selflessness of time and energy is very much appreciated. I now look forward to more hiking, and “giving back”.

Thank you,

Mary M. Nennig