

As the world took a dark turn during the pandemic, I, like many, turned to the trail. Experiencing frustration over canceled travel plans, lockdowns, and an artistic block led to a deep desire to get air and space. Away from cell phone service, news programming, and the general overwhelming topic of conversation. I just couldn't take all the heaviness of the world and needed to run.

I grew up in the Northern Kettle Moraine, so this seemed like the perfect time to check out the rest of the trail and be a tourist in my own backyard. Initially, I set out to see all the colors. I wanted to know each rich shade of brown earth or how many different ways I could find blue. I have taken photos all of my life, so I thought that if I could not paint right now, I'll capture the pictures and record the details. Surely someday this could come in handy, inspiration will have no choice but to arrive.

I thought I could complete the trail in 3 years. It actually took just over. I could have finished sooner, but I found myself revisiting favorite segments under different conditions. Back to La Budde for fall, or Merrimac to Gibraltar in a soft but saturating rain. Greenbush in the fog, or Mecan after a heavy snow. John Muir when the lupines bloom, I could go on. I started returning to spots with friends at times, to relive moments of first discovery through their eyes. About halfway through, inspiration struck. I challenged myself to illustrate parts of the trail, something from each segment. This will definitely keep me busy for a while.

Soon I found myself collecting the moments instead of just logging the miles. I started turning the overnights into adventures, and seeing quirky and beautiful parts of Wisconsin I never imagined existed because what if I never make it back to this place again? This led to car camping, tent camping, hotels, motels, tiny homes, dome houses, farm stays, bed n breakfasts, staying at a haunted hotel in Kewaunee, and an interesting overnight in Thorp. I'd stop at every cheese house, ice cream parlor, and cafe I found. I would search out the most local lunch spot to try the special, or check out the area attractions, random roadside gems, all the city parks, and points of pride. It was as much of a culture trip as a segment hike. The trail unexpectedly led me to find lavender farms, sunflower fields, orchards, artisans, shops, dive bars, supper clubs, the best pastys around (in Tigerton!), to helping harvest grapes at a vineyard, and even speaking at the annual conference. All things I never imagined as I first stepped foot out on this journey.

I had done most of the trail alone, but now found myself reaching out to strangers because I became addicted to hearing their stories. There is an incredible

community within and around this trail. It's been an eye opening experience connecting with others based on this common interest and goal, (mission?) instead of the proximity in which you've lived or worked.

I intended on St Croix Falls to be the end. I wasn't able to complete a few sections before my planned weekend in the area, but if the trail has taught me anything, it's that the best laid plans... ("of mice and men often go awry"- Robert Burns, 1785) Plans could change, Wisconsin weather rapidly changes, one could lose the map or run out of phone battery. Miles accrued lessons, and crossing counties amassed unexpected friends. The final few days of hikes pushed me the hardest and proved to be some of the most unforgettable. Sand Creek to the Western terminus was an absolute dream of a weekend, as well as marching through the heaviest of snowstorms this past winter. But as by some sort of magic, the beaver dam at Camp 27 ended up to be the perfect spot to end.