

On December 31<sup>st</sup>, 2019, when we cheered the New Year, I remember declaring how fantastic 2020 was going to be. Many family events were in the works, the major one being our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in April. Little did we know at the time how our world would soon change.

In March, when the pandemic closed everything but essential services, we looked for something to occupy our time. A place to go where we could escape our house but not mingle with other people. We knew about the Ice Age Trail but never considered hiking it until then. Looking back, we could have just gone over to High Cliff State Park which is just a few miles from our home in the Appleton area. We could have wandered the beautiful trails there and get the benefit of being outdoors and alone. But the prospect of hiking the IAT was alluring. We decided to start at the eastern end on a day hike and see how far we could go before the isolation was over. It was supposed to be two weeks, right?

Both my husband and I started this at the age of 71. We have a few too many pounds and enjoy our food and drink. We had backpacked in our much younger days, so not completely new to being in the woods, but it had been a long time. We weren't in the best of shape when we drove our two cars to Potawatomi State Park on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020. We staged one car just out of the park and then tried to drive to the Eastern Terminus. The road up the hill was closed. It was snowbound and icy, but we felt like escapees from our prison. Happily getting to the top of that hill and finding the first blaze. After our 4.1 mile hike that day, we weren't so happy. Tired and sore and not equipped well. Patrick fell on a piece of black ice as we crossed a parking lot and I almost fell as I grabbed a tree limb for support. It turned out to be a dead branch that came away in my hand. If I hadn't caught myself it would have been a scary fall.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, we went back. I declared if we got to Algoma, it would be a miracle. We did another 4 miles of the trail. I'm not exactly sure when I can say the trail "got us". But soon we were gathering information and goods. A notebook to log each hike, purchasing the IAT Guidebook, the Atlas, and the large map. We signed into Facebook and soon were on three sites, the IAT, the IAT Alliance, and the Thousand Miler Wannabes. We joined the Alliance. And I've fantasized many times of making a list itemizing each purchase of clothes and equipment made over the last few years.

On April 21<sup>st</sup>, we made it to Algoma. We continued segment hiking in a straight line until August 6<sup>th</sup>. I didn't want to do Point Beach in the summer as I read about all the mosquitoes and snakes. Patrick had also developed ingrown toenail issues that had to be surgically removed and healed. We found that hiking sandals solved that problem as long as we stuck to road sections, he could hike. Fortunately, Manitowoc County provided plenty of road.

The application for recognition asks for section hikers to include a brief itinerary of hikes. This will be quite lengthy for us as we hiked 1158.9 miles and we did it in 273 outings averaging 4.25 miles a hike. We bounced around depending on weather and location. If you draw a big circle around Appleton and stretch it out to a two hour drive, it encompasses a good deal of the IAT. We considered these day trips and beyond that we needed a hotel or rental. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2020 we rented a cabin near St. Croix and hiked the Gandy Dancer. We did it over four days. Back to day trips in Manitowoc County roads and part of Greenbush and one mile of Point Beach. October was more of Point Beach, Dunes, and Manitowoc City. October was back to do the St. Croix Falls, the CR to Gandy Dancer, and Trade River. We did the rest of Point Beach and Walla Hi. We went to Devil's Lake on October 28<sup>th</sup> and took three days to complete. Patrick's knee took a toll and was still sore as we hiked in November, parts of

Greenbush, Parnell, La Budde Creek and CRs. By Thanksgiving we had a straight line from Potawatomi to Parnell.

And this is how our hikes continued through 2020. We had hiked 250.4 miles in 64 outings. Planning day hikes as the weather and time provided. Most always taking two cars, hiking during the week and seldom seeing anyone. For the entire trail we used one trail angel, Joe Jopek to Kettlebowl. We joined a couple hikes, but were always the slowest ones. We joined Gary on a hike around Springfield Hills and that was fun and informative. We had a few times when we would take one car and walk towards each other. We took a few Ubers, and we had a brief trial run with an e-bike until the seat fell off and Patrick got disgruntled with it.

In January of 2021, we hiked Thornapple Creek, part of Portage Canal, John Muir and CR. Patrick's knee finally got the best of him and he had meniscus surgery. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Patrick had to keep it flat and paved and slow. Levee Road and other CRs in the area plus Milton. By the end of March, he was able to do Bluff Road CR where we met Jared Wildenrad and Kris Van Handel. April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2021 started a six night stay at a VRBO in Chippewa County. Harwood Lakes, Chippewa Moraine, Firth Lake, and CR. On the 20<sup>th</sup> was Dells of the Eau Claire, and CR. Then back to Parnell.

The rest of 2021 is a ramble from one area to another. East side of Bifurcation and many CRs, including the Cornell to Lake 11 one. Back to Polk County in October for Straight Lake, Straight River, Pine Lake, McKenzie Creek. Back down to Greenwood, more of Parnell, Waupaca River, Cedar Lake, Slinger, Albany, Monticello. There was no rhyme nor reason to where we hiked, or what direction we hiked, just as long as they finally connected. We did the CRs as suggested in the Atlas.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, while hiking Arbor Ridge in the beautiful fall weather, a U-shaped root under the leaves caught my boot and with my trekking pole totally in the wrong position, I did a face plant and broke my nose. Oh the blood!! Being more than halfway, I limped along under Patrick's care and we finished that segment. We were planning on doing Devil's Staircase, and that's where our end car was. Luckily, Janesville had a nearby Uber who took Patrick to the car and then we went on to the hospital. My hike on Nov. 13 at Lapham Peak was a little scary with all the roots available for tripping. Bohn Lake, Pike Lake, West Bend, Verona, Madison, Milwaukee River, South Kewaskum, Loew Lake, Hartman Creek, Gibraltar, and Holy Hill. In 2021, we had 334.1 miles in 79 outings.

We didn't hike in 2022 until February 15<sup>th</sup>. Patrick had hand surgery in January, so it was back to slowly easing into this. CRs and Janesville/Milton. Then Clover Valley. By the end of March, we went north and tackled Grassy Lake and Haugen CRs. Holy Hill, Deerfield, Brooklyn Wildlife. In April, another six night stay in the North Country for Indian Creek, Sand Creek, and Timberland Hills. Back south to Indian Lake, Skunk & Foster, Monches, Merton, Emmons Creek. Back north for Rib Lake. South to Whitewater, Blackhawk, Merton again, Devil's Staircase, and miles of CR. This takes my log to the end of June 2022. The remainder of 2022 is another hodgepodge of going in every compass direction and we ended the year with 402.2 miles and 90 outings. [If you would like that written out, please let me know.]

The problem with doing the segment hiking like this is eventually you start running out of so many choices. In February of 2023 we crossed the 1000 mile mark and most everything we had left was in Taylor, Lincoln, and Langlade Counties. At 1000 miles is when I started thinking I wasn't a Wannabe any longer, I was a Gonnabe. We only had New Hope-Iola that wasn't north, and we finished that on 2/18 with the trail being very icy. The other counties were deep in snow, so we went west and hiked Baraboo

and a little of the CR of the west bifurcation. Then in April, we did Underdown and part of New Wood. May was Pine Line and CR, west side of Mondeaux, Timberland Wilderness, New Wood and Camp 27. I don't like hiking with a mosquito net unless forced to. It always seems to take something away from the experience, like taking a picture through a screen door. So we waited for better weather before heading north again in August. From August until our October 29<sup>th</sup> completion, we finished Lincoln, then Taylor, then Langlade County. In 2023, we hiked 172.2 miles in 40 outings. We were getting a little better at doing segments that were 6 or 7 miles instead of 3 or 4 as we did in 2020.

Friends and family did join us on a few occasions. We always go away in October with friends, Amy and Sue, and celebrate our birthdays. 2021 and 2022 they humored us with rentals near segments and they hiked Waupaca River with us and Bear Lake and the south half of Northern Blue Hills. [In 2023, we opted for a trip to Italy.]

Our daughter, Shannon, was our biggest cheer leader, and an ultras runner in her own right. She introduced us to a part of Greenbush that first year with reluctant grandkids in tow. Not reluctant to hike, but being too close to us. The schools had told them who the most vulnerable to Covid were and it was old people like us. They were social distancing and masking on the trail fearing for our safety. But it was the technical trail that was the real problem. Our first introduction to the Kettle Moraine.

Shannon and our grandson, Ian, hiked Southern Blue Hills, Shannon hiked Grandfather Falls and Turtle Rock and Southern Blue Hills along with grandson, Ian. Shannon and son-in-law Andy shuttled us to Kettlebowl and dropped us off with Ian. We went north and they went south, meeting us and hiking back on a cold and rainy day. Andy and Shannon shuttled us to Lapham Peak, we hiked while they ran. Our granddaughter, Erin, also joined us on a couple occasions, driving out west to a CR and another time she was our shuttler in Cross Plains. Last but not least, my Cousin Sharon in Michigan came to shuttle us on Lake 11 and Jerry Lake.

Both Patrick and I turned 75 this year. There were many times that doing this trail to completion was just a fantasy. For one, I have a bad ankle that my doctor says needs complete ankle replacement surgery. He has kept me happy with cortisone shots, but he asks me each time I see him, how many miles do we have left. I wear a brace and have discovered CBD cream helps, too. Patrick has gotten cortisone shots in his hip. After every hike is a survey of what hurts worse. Shoulders from the trekking poles, hips, knees, ankles, feet. Both Patrick and I have fallen a couple other times without breaking anything, and it really hurts!! Then add in Patrick's knee and hand surgeries and the one for my nose!!

On the other hand, we know we are totally blessed to have been able to put one foot in front of the other and say we accomplished something we never thought we'd do. The need for escape gradually went away as the world opened up once again, but the trail had become a life force of its own.

To all those that maintain it, manage it, work at making it better, thank you. We have many memories to look back on because of you and your love of The Trail.