

My Ice Age Trail Journey—Soozie Willey December 1, 2023

I live in the Holy Area and have hiked parts of the Ice Age trail for many years. The Kettles even served as a training ground for me when I was preparing to trek in Nepal many years ago. However, I never really thought about hiking the entire trail. But, as I got closer to age 70, I had more time on my hands, and I read more about it. Before I knew it, I was purchasing maps and guidebooks.

I started out keeping track of segments in October 2021, and before I knew it, I had hiked 500 miles. By that time, I had friends who had decided to hike the whole trail, and I kept saying that I wasn't really committed to it, I just wanted to have fun. At 600 miles they told me I couldn't say that any longer, I had to admit I was committed.

So it began. At my age, I don't hike alone. Frankly, I don't worry about animals or other people on the trail; my view is most of them are either friendly or they really aren't interested in me. However, I fear falling and not being able to help myself. My pack always has essential safety supplies even if I'm hiking just a few miles. To me, however, the most important safety step is being with others. So I found others through hiking groups like Get Out the Couch and the Thousand Miler Wannabes Facebook groups. Who knew that I would ever see Facebook as a good thing!

I found that hiking naturally brings people together. I have hiked with so many passionate, compassionate, funny, adventurous people on the trail. Over the miles, I have heard so many stories: the grandmother who told me about bringing home her first baby. The baby came early, and as a young mother she was sent home with a fragile baby and no instructions on how to care for this tiny creature. The woman who told me that she came early as a baby, and at that time her mother was turned away from the hospital because it was thought that her baby—the baby that was born before they got to the hospital—was somehow unclean. The mother who loves her daughter and lacks a magic way to help this precious daughter who struggles with the demons of depression and anxiety. I've heard the story of a couple who had been in love since childhood, married since college, but their love was not strong enough to fix the heart that failed her husband, leaving her a widow much too young. I've heard the stories of women who nursed their partners while cancer slowly smothered the life within them. I have heard women relate how working in health care during the COVID pandemic ravaged them personally, yet they continue to help others. Others have had their own bodies fail them, needing to replace knees or hips. What all these women have in common is a zest for life, a determination to move on, and we take those steps together on the trail. In nature, we find our joy.

My mantra as I walk is 'so beautiful, it's all so beautiful'. We stop and gaze at pristine lakes surrounded by trees so large that I know they have seen much more of life than I ever will. Imagine their stories! We laugh together as we crawl over and around trees that decided to fall right across the trail. We take turns rock hopping across streams, always waiting to make sure everyone crosses safely. And we laugh some more when someone inevitably ends up getting wet.

We hike in all sorts of weather. Hours walking on a trail in steady rain bonds people. It also cleanses. The raindrops wash the stress away. We are all just being. We move forward in life, one step at a time.

Winter brings a new look to the trail. Suddenly we can see where we are! The fallen leaves are akin to windows opening through the trees. We can see the distant kames, the distant water. Our boots make

crunching noises in the snow, the only sound on the trail except a distant crow voicing objection over our presence in his forest.

Spring brings ephemeral flowers to the forest and the marshland, colors of life renewed. We breathe in the scent of spring. We stop. We smell the scent of earth emerging from the winter snows. We spot birds we have not seen in a while. Sometimes we sit on a large erratic with our faces to the sun, feeling the warmth of the season return to our bones.

Summer begins the explosive growth on the prairies and we run our fingers through the feathery seedheads of big blue stem and marvel at cup plants towering over us lighting up the prairie with yellow. We stop. We just breathe. And sometimes a butterfly leads us down the trail.

Atop eskers at the height of fall we see the forest painting a complete palette of color. The leaves form a carpet under our feet, and the color changes as the forest changes from maples to oaks, to birch and aspen. The tamaracks near the distant bogs start to take on their golden hues. We step delicately over piles of acorns that are waiting to feed the forest creatures. Meanwhile the hemlock branches sing in the breeze.

We cross beaver dams together, wondering at the engineering feats of these very busy animals. And we realize that the early fur trappers really didn't kill all the beavers!

We find ourselves discussing books we've read, and we find ourselves reading more about the people who had the vision to create the trail. We find ourselves amazed at the things we find in Wisconsin that we did not know existed. We walk through or near absolutely stunning little county parks that we did not realize were on the map. We learn that almost every northern town in the state has a great Mexican restaurant. We spot a huge hydroponic farm along a CR in Langlade County, we see how sap is transported from maple trees to be turned in syrup in Taylor County, we walk past small Amish farms and huge factory farms. We walk through remnants of the lumber camps that stripped the forest while providing economic prosperity for the state. We are close up with the mighty Wisconsin River--Wisconsin's highway long before Europeans arrived. We experience the friendliness of small-town Wisconsin. And we choose to ignore the signs of hate and all the evil 'isms' that we sometimes see posted on people's property because we can see that this is clearly the exception. Maybe they need a walk on the trail to wash away the hate.

We laugh at all the silly things we've done on hikes---the keys that were on the wrong end of the trail, the car that ended up stuck in the snow, the item that was not packed for the trip. We laugh because it doesn't really matter---the trail is beautiful; the friends are treasures.

I am so thankful for the people who had the vision and the strength to preserve this land for this special use. I am thankful for those who work for the organizations that maintain and add to the trail. I am thankful for the volunteers who show their love of the trail by working so hard to help it stay beautiful. I am thankful for all the wonderful friends I have made on this journey. And I am thankful that the glacier formed where it did just so I could experience all this beauty!