

A Few Hundred Years, A Thousand Miles & An Ice Age Ago

The Ice Age Trail is finite, tangible. It starts or ends at the eastern or western terminus with a defined path some 1140 miles between, marked by trusted yellow blazes and navigated by detailed maps. When I started the journey, it was another “box to tick”, a one-upper which started as casual running that led to a ½ marathon to a marathon to a 50k to a “what’s next”? A quest for another accolade to outdo the last one. It started similar to others, beginning at the Eastern Terminus on a cold December day, but finished so differently some two years later at the Western Terminus. There was no sponsored finish line party filled with time clocks or bananas & beer or bands playing or spectator crowds or sponsors selling the latest goods while prize winners were announced.

That moment on the beautiful St Croix Falls segment was largely reserved for our small group of 4 that shared this journey and formed new bonds in our friendship while chuckling at the simpleness of our original goal to “tick another box”. Mother Nature and history will always hold the 1st place prize for this trail, with its endless evolution and events that no single trekker can surpass. For the better part of two years, we were simply privileged to have immersed ourselves in the whole thing and to have gained an enormous sense of personal accomplishment from it, while physically contributing little more than a few specks of shoe rubber and sweat in our wake.

We are grateful to the forefathers with the insight to preserve our history by shaping this trail, the volunteers who work endlessly to maintain and build trails, and initiatives that encourage sustainable conservation practices for the natural resources of our great state. We purchased the Guide Book and Atlas at the start of our journey. I laugh looking back at one of our first questions, “What does the word hummocky mean”? We learned quickly, and can definitively bust any myth that Wisconsin is flat. In fact, we know a good deal more about Wisconsin and the glaciers, even if we still need to consult our book when asked the difference between an esker and a drumlin, or if we can’t say with confidence that we really did identify that ice walled lake plain.

Friends and family ask the usual questions. What was the most difficult? What was your favorite segment? Which segments would you do again? How long was the trail again? Each of those questions illicit a long pause, as I cannot put the flood of reminiscences of our journey into a simply answer. I write below to what flashes in my mind at this moment. Ask me later, and there’s more to tell.

I think the Stagecoach Road is my favorite historical site along the trail. That, and the small cabins that housed various Scandinavian couples and their large broods of children. There are numerous historical markers documenting the history of Wisconsin that could be anyone’s favorite. Isn’t it wonderful that they all qualify as conversation starters? The thought of the early settlers bumping down that rutted, wheel- and back-breaking road made me appreciate our ability to travel with ease to see great places with little discomfort. Those roads were more a lifeline than they were a smooth road for joy rides or a quick visit to faraway family. Now, just a shape of a road can be made out through the vegetation that tries to replace it with new life.

A less enjoyable cold spring run in minus temps through a muddy farm field just outside Mishicot (don’t fall or you will smell like the manure spread last fall) proved to hold my closest encounter with wildlife. We were on the lookout for eagles and were admiring some flying in the distance. By chance, I looked up and stood in awe. Straight up and looking down at us from about 15’ in a tree was an eagle perched on a branch, holding its ground and not budging. I interpreted that as a nice gesture on his part and got

my phone out to capture the moment. My phone didn't sense the camera, so this event forever remains the "big fish" tale of my journey, with my running partner and the eagle as my only witnesses.

From the eastern terminus all the way through Casco Junction segment, my thoughts were consumed by memories of my childhood stays at my grandparents' home and family events in Door and Kewaunee counties. What a gift to relive those sentiments fully enveloped in the place where they happened decades ago. We 'dropped by my aunt and uncle's place on short notice', as we used to call it, and visited for several hours, talking about our trail endeavor and times gone by. Nearby family caught wind we were in the area and showed up. We had a wonderful time and said we must do it again soon. That opportunity doesn't present itself as often as it used to. This was a lot of favorite things!

My favorite terrain is any segment in a pine forest with a soft trail of evergreen needles underfoot. These stretches are the quietest, with little noise from man or beast. Any noise is usually a soft wind that only adds tranquility to the setting. In this terrain, my mind tends to wander to Native Americans, who would've traversed this landscape so silently as to not disturb it. My pounding feet resonating like tumbling boulders brings me back to the present. I wouldn't have survived a week back then.

Turtle Lake and Grandfather Falls was one of the most difficult terrains we ran on (if one could even call it running at that point). It was winter and a wet layer of deep snow, which hid the greasy mud and rocks underneath, sloped downward into the icy Wisconsin River. We were so exhausted and focused on finishing the trail, we never thought about looking for Turtle Rock. However, while commenting how brutal it was, we also found ourselves saying, "I bet this is gorgeous in summer and fall". We plan to return to find Turtle Rock in a different mindset.

Wood Lake took us the longest to finish and was the only place in the journey where my running partner was reconsidering his personal requisite to run the trail contiguously (he did not succumb). Due to deep snow, closed roads, and cold, it was one of two out and backs we did, and took us three long car trips to finish. The other out and back was at Tisch Mills early in our journey, where the thought of crossing a stream in winter was utterly ridiculous. We laugh now. Just a short year later, we were hardened and crossed Averill-Kelly like pioneers because doing an out and back was just too time consuming. I recall some muttering under our breath about it being dumb as we rushed to put our frozen feet back into dry socks and shoes. Options change, and what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Speaking of killing and such, I am a bit of a scaredy-cat. Well, a lot of a bit of a scaredy-cat, actually. I share the success of this journey with my favorite team, Pat, Ric & Amy as I never would've started had it not been for them. Together we traversed the miles with early morning starts, overnight stays at campgrounds and inns, and sharing delicious meals at the end of the runs. The support Amy & Pat provided in mapping out trails and being exactly where we needed them to be was essential, and Ric patiently stuck with me throughout the whole northern part of the trail.

When we reached the northern segments, my fears heightened and bears and wolves were on my mind. All the time. We chided each other about being the fastest runner and would say our good-byes before heading out on the remote trails, along with apologies to each other should they find themselves to be the slowest. At the start of Camp 27, the trail asked us to follow a set of wolf pack tracks (yes, pack) and continue following them into the depths of the forest. It was fresh snow, and they were fresh tracks. We didn't really mention them much until we were past them. Like not saying anything made them not be there! On the Mondeaux Esker segment, we ran through what looked like the very scant remains of

a deer, thankful that the pack that killed it had full bellies, and jokingly hoping they weren't contemplating some dessert as they spied us through the trees. Surprisingly, tracks were all we saw, but I have confirmed my limitations: I love nature and to be immersed in it, but only in the safety of numbers and with one person slower than myself.

Expanding on this whole fear thing. There was one segment I ran alone and should've been just afraid as any other but wasn't, and that was the Point Beach Segment. Maybe the first stretch being my favorite terrain put me at ease. Maybe it was the majestic view as the trail spilled out onto the Lake Michigan shoreline. The enormity of the glaciers to form our massive Great Lakes in their wake is mind blowing. Here, too, I saw a pair of eagles (and did get the photo) perched just a few hundred yards from me. I followed the footprints of a small mammal making its way down the beach, thinking how it knew exactly how to get to its destination while I was at the mercy of locating the next yellow trail blaze. Most segments share similar attributes, but this segment is the only one like itself on the entire trail.

Which brings me to my favorite things about the town and city segments along both urban and rural stretches. I love history, and could return again and again to weave through these city trails and adjacent towns without tiring of visiting every little landmarks, museum, or attraction that documents all things Wisconsin. We did ponder how a few townships came to choose their street naming conventions. Just north of Portage, we had to consult our guide as to whether we were correct in turning on Oak St, Oak Ave, Oak Lane or Oak Dr. Further north outside of Birchwood, the city blocks were detailed down to the 15/16ths of a numbered street name. The Janesville segment stands out with its beautiful route through an expansive park, as does the Hartland segment, which was one of the few evening runs in my journey. Most towns on the trails were a sure bet to find hot breakfast and coffee after our early morning runs in what we coined the oldest national chain, The Main Street Café. We soon learned that one simply has to ask the locals a question, which is an invitation to a condensed history of their town, its claims to fame, and the places we simply must visit before leaving.

We strolled downhill to a gorgeous fall view at an Interstate State Park scenic outlook cheered on by family. I realize now that the finish line cheer was present for us at the end of each and every segment with whomever was with us. In summary, all the trails are my favorite 'something' and I'm sure I'll remember myriad things well past dropping this in the post box.

As we drove home from the Western Terminus, we started to tally up the numbers for the journey as we usually do after a big event:

86 runs
71 car trips
1140 miles
Avg run 13.2 miles
Shortest run 6.2 miles
Longest run 21 miles

The best parts of this one definitely lie between the numbers.

Terrie Sanders
Thousand Miler - 11/6/2022