

## Thousand Miler Essay

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“The purpose of life is to live it, to taste experience to the utmost, to reach out eagerly and without fear for newer and richer experience.” – *Eleanor Roosevelt*

Dear Fellow Traveler,

The start of my thousand-mile journey began on a cold, sunny day in January 2020 when I met my daughter in New Auburn, had lunch, and proceeded to the Chippewa Moraine Segment by the David Obey Interpretive Center to hike a few miles on snowshoes. I would later learn what we'd done was called an “out and back”. Shortly after my first snowy hike in January 2020, Covid hit, and changed my hiking plans. I stayed close to my home in Onalaska, and hiked trails and state parks near me. But the Ice Age Trail kept calling me back. It wouldn't be until August of 2020 that I would return to complete that segment. On that day I was serenaded by a pair of loons on Knickerbocker Lake while taking a lunch break on a perfectly located bench. And later, as nightfall was approaching, I was swarmed by mosquitoes on the trail, and quickly donned my bug netting, which saved the day.

In the summer I started hiking more of the trail mostly in Waushara County, my first county completed, doing many bike shuttles and a few out and backs. I met my first fellow Wannabe there and joined the Thousand-Miler Facebook page, learning so much more about this trail from others hiking it. That fellow hiker and I would hike Averill-Kelly segment together in September 2020, fording streams, my first ones on the trail! The prior Christmas, my sister had given me an autographed copy of Melanie McManus's book, “Thousand Miler”, and I eagerly read about her journey running the entire trail, meeting other hikers along the way. I was already a member of the IATA, had done some trail editing (hiking an assigned segment and reporting on any changes from the current guidebook) in 2016, with my husband in Rusk County, and had section hiked on the Appalachian Trail on three trips. I still had so much more to learn about this Ice Age Trail that covered over 1100 miles in my home state, but I was slowly getting hooked on the idea of hiking it all!

I decided to go to the conference in 2020 thinking it would be a great way to meet more people hiking the trail so I might find some hiking buddies. And it would mean less out and backs and bike shuttles! Of course, we all know that Covid cancelled the conference and I was so disappointed, but still I persisted in pursuit of hiking this trail. I got the Atlas and Guidebook, and later the Guthook app. Ok, yes, by now I was committed! And then, I finally started sharing my crazy idea of hiking this entire trail with a few family members and friends, and some even decided to join me on some hikes!

In total I hiked a third of the trail solo, and the rest with family, friends, and other thousand-milers who have become my friends. I covered 357 miles in 2020, and 755 miles in 2021. To share miles with friends who enjoy hiking, nature, and the challenges that travelling on foot in remote areas brings, has been a highlight of completing this trail. I consider many of my hiking buddies dear friends. We shared motel rooms, meals, blisters, ticks, miles together in the woods and on the never-ending pavement. But

through all those miles we had so many laughs, and conversations that I will remember and cherish. We celebrated each other's milestones on the trail and took photos to document each 100-mile mark!

What I have learned is that our state of Wisconsin is such an incredible place to live. To have a National Scenic Trail: The Ice Age Trail, run throughout our state is a huge stroke of luck for all of us who love to hike. Although the road walks were not my favorite thing, I did discover so many gems in out of the way places along these roads: colorful barn quilts, curious farm animals, majestic bald eagles, vocal cranes, beautiful crumbling buildings, quaint signs, a grove of tamaracks shining gold in the sunlight, fields of wildflowers waving their heads. I learned I absolutely love to hike in the woods, and the northern counties were some of my favorite hikes. I also had many conversations with my husband, Randy, who passed away in 2018. The trail became a place for me to go, to find solitude and work on healing my shattered heart. And step by step I learned to find joy in simple things again, like how the sun shining on a snowy field makes it glitter. Or how walking on a trail packed with oak leaves in the fall, made me feel like a kid again, as they rustled under my feet. And how could I not mention those boardwalks, those glorious walkways that carried me over those watery, muddy spots along the trail. I learned a new appreciation for all the hands that helped to build them and realized they are truly a work of art.

Lastly, the trail has helped me learn that I need others, and that the journey is so much more fun when shared with them. Don't get me wrong, I still like, from time to time, to be on my own, hiking in the woods, going at my own pace while stopping to take as many photos as I like, but the camaraderie of hiking with others can't be beat. I found the Ice Age Trail community to be welcoming, helpful, knowledgeable, and tons of fun! I plan to continue hiking with my trail buddies, revisit some segments in other seasons, hike the Western bifurcation which I didn't my first time around, and get involved with trail projects. I hope to meet more IAT enthusiasts at the 2022 Conference!

Some highlights of my journey:

Crossing my first beaver dam on Northern Blue Hills segment. The artistry and engineering of the beavers continues to amaze me every time I see a dam. The double dam on the Wood Lake segment in October was incredible, and I wished I could stay there to watch how they construct them.

Completing Parrish Hills in deep snow and frigid temps with fellow Wannabe's. It was the toughest hike on the entire IAT for me, but the friendships made, and the challenge of this segment, made it a memory I won't forget.

Seeing a bear on the trail with another wannabe, Timberland Hills Segment. It was so thrilling, and when I said, "Hello bear", he just casually looked up from where he was sitting and scampered off.

Doing St. Croix Falls in freezing temps, during a snowfall, on my own, and reveling in the beauty and variety of this segment.

Being with a fellow wannabe on her final hikes as she became a Thousand Miler after starting her journey 21 years before!

Going to a supper club in Casco after hiking CRs all day with fellow wannabe's, and putting my binder of all the Atlas pages on the bar and having the locals guess what kind of a group we were. Their guess: Wedding Planners!

Seeing my first porcupine in the base of a tree on the Southern Blue Hills segment, with a fellow wannabe. And then seeing a second porcupine near the trail while hiking with a group on the Lumbercamp segment.

Walking along the beach enjoying toes in the sand and water along Lake Michigan on the Point Beach segment.

Celebrating my 60<sup>th</sup> birthday hiking Straight River/Straight Lake with my children!

Staying at the Holy Resurrection Monastery in St. Nazianz for 2 nights with a fellow hiker and the monks while hiking La Budde, Walla Hi, and CRs. We ate dinner with them in silence and attended services where the monks chanted all prayers.

My finish, the perfect day on the trail, surrounded by my children, family, and hiking friends. We hiked up West Bluff at Devil's Lake and down to South Shore. It was cold and windy at the start, but the sun came out, and reminded me that this trail is magical. I saved these last few miles for my finish and to honor my husband with a paver installed in front of the North Shore Chateau. Randy and I shared many camping trips at this park with our kids, my parents, and friends. It was such a special place for our family and is still a favorite of mine.

And now, my thousand-mile journey is complete!

With gratitude,

Ellen Kreger, Thousand-Miler

Class of '21