

It is said that the hardest part of a journey is taking the first step. Even harder for me was to write an essay that would explain why I first stepped onto the Ice Age National Scenic Trail (IAT) and kept on walking until its completion. Why the first step and why did I keep on walking?

I had to dig deep and rekindle the early memories. I sought answers in essays written by other Thousand Milers. I found that much of what they wrote resonated with me but still left the questions unanswered.

I started out simply enough, following yellow blazes in Waukesha County with two to three mile out and backs. No maps or Apps, no Smart Phone, no compass, no Guide Book or Atlas and no one I knew that hiked the IAT. On one of my early hikes of the wooded Scuppernong segment, in rapidly fading daylight, I doubted if I was on the right trail. I did reorient myself but after that experience I changed my approach. I learned there was an IAT Guide Book available in the public library. I now had maps. I also committed to a headlamp and an essential list of items to take each time. Other lessons followed.

As I extended to the Northern Kettle Moraine segments I relied on my husband, extended family and anyone I knew that lived near the IAT to shuttle me. Aunts and uncles that I hadn't seen in awhile suddenly got a phone call to pick me up. Eventually I needed to reach out for shuttles through the chapter coordinators. Every encounter with them went beyond my expectations. They provided valuable information and advice. If they weren't personally available to shuttle they gave me contact information for other volunteers who could.

By the time I was hiking in central Wisconsin I had discovered the Thousand Miler Wannabe group on Facebook. Now I could share shuttling with other hikers. I enjoyed their company, formed friendships and learned more about the IAT. I never did bike shuttle myself, however, I backpacked once for three days from the Eastern Terminus. The farther north I got, the more strategy and planning was needed. Locating trailheads, designated parking and car camping sites took more planning. The longer drives also made it harder to find time to both drive and hike.

In the middle part of my ten year journey I took a break from hiking and I also retired from my profession. Within a week of retirement I volunteered for a Mobile Skills Crew (MSC) project and found my 'tribe'. I returned that summer for three more MSC projects. I was mentored by welcoming, dedicated, hard working and fun loving individuals. So generous with their time, patience, knowledge and love for all things IAT related. I was also cared for by a hard working base camp crew of individuals who took care of all the behind the scenes needs of home cooked food, hot coffee, portable showers and more.

After a two year hiatus, I resumed hiking the IAT, this time in Langlade County. The words "remote, logging road, bears, watch signage closely" and the mileage of the segments intimidated me. One step at a time, I survived and thrived.

Lastly, I hiked the northwest segments of the IAT in winter, a new experience and one that I enjoyed immensely despite the challenges of snow and cold. It broadened my view of the trail to that of one for all seasons. I hiked to the Western Terminus in December of 2021 but still had over two hundred miles to complete. With me that December day though, was someone special who did complete her journey. Her resilience, goal setting and planning inspired me to finish the rest of the trail. In April of 2022 I took my final steps on the IAT in Langlade County.

My time on the IAT kept me in the present moment and filled with gratitude. At times I was stretched,

stressed and unsure of myself. I made mistakes. Many life events would become woven into my time on the IAT as well. Among them was the love and joys of time spent with family and friends. I appreciated the good health that allowed me to continue hiking. I also met with profound loss and its own challenging journey of grief. Remarkable individuals came into my life and that of my family. They made space for us in their lives and shared our journey. My time on the trail and all of these life moments are one. Within them are the gifts of enduring gratitude, love and resilience.

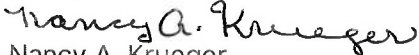
In looking back over my ten year span of hiking the IAT I did find my answer to the questions of why I took the first step and continued on for over a thousand miles. My answer was found in the [Ice Age Trail Guidebook, 2017-2019 Edition, pg.142:](#)

Richard P. Pernsteiner, Ice Age Trail Thousand Miler, had submitted the following:

"I did not hike 1,095 miles to find myself, search for greater meaning, to get in touch with nature or any such similar reason. I hiked because I could, and I wanted to. I wanted to feel tired at the end of the day having pushed myself beyond normal limits; to see the beauty of God's creation in the wilderness of the Trail, of rural people, and of their communities; and to appreciate the slightest act of kindness given. I had a convenience store lady give me a banana. I find as much amazement in that as any other offer."

I cannot imagine not having taken that first step onto the Ice Age National Scenic Trail. Though everyone 'hikes their own hike', in my last 100 miles I felt that I had some understanding, or at least a glimpse, into why some hikers might choose to repeat the journey.

Happy trails,



Nancy A. Krueger

Thousand Miler

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I would be remiss not to thank the Ice Age Trail Alliance, Chapter Coordinators and members, donors, shuttle drivers, Mobile Skills Crew volunteers, fellow hikers, local communities and anyone who picks up sticks on the trail.