

Not so short essay by Tina Ghislain and Wendy Kelley

In the summer of 2016 while Tina was searching online for hiking trails in southeastern Wisconsin, she learned about the Ice Age Trail. Living here for 56 years, how could she not know about this national treasure in her home state? After reading books about the Appalachian Trail, Tina had dreamed of hiking it. With work and family commitments, that dream would never become a reality for her. But, completing the Ice Age Trail could! The Alliance website was a crucial resource. She ordered her Guidebook, Atlas Maps, and Thousand Miler Map. Then, she recruited her daughter, Wendy Kelley, and was ready to commit to a lifetime goal of hiking the Ice Age Trail.

We began our adventure on October 9, 2016 by completing the Lapham Peak and Delafield segments. Over the next two years, we completed segments from Arbor Ridge through Greenbush. We completed other random segments including Portage Canal and CR just because it was not too far away for a weekend trip. (That's how we became committed to the Eastern Bifurcation). In April of 2018, we went to Sturgeon Bay. Unfortunately for us, a snowstorm the weekend prior dumped 39 inches of snow. After trudging through the trail in Potawatomi State Park, we decided to hike the CR. We have some awesome photos of us in the snow wearing t-shirts with temps in the 60s. In June of 2018, Tina was taking a class at UW-Stout. So, we decided to hike St. Croix Falls. The segment was so beautiful that summer! It also provided us the first opportunity to "ford a river". When we came to that section of the trail, we didn't think we would really be crossing it. We backtracked and bushwhacked, but then observed another hiker and her dog go through. So, we took off our shoes and waded through it. Looking back, that ford was no comparison to the Averill-Kelly segment!!

In 2019, we completed segments from LaBudde Creek to Sturgeon Bay. Highlights included ice cream cones for a quarter at Pine River Dairy, seeing an eagle in Manitowoc, ice cream sundaes at Washington House, and a Chili Cook-off Fundraiser for special Olympics in Kewaunee. In July, we changed from Glampers to Campers, tenting at Straight Lake State Park and completing segments in Polk and Burnett counties. When Tina purchased head nets, Wendy didn't think it was much of a fashion statement. But, she ended up wearing it more often than Tina as the mosquitoes and deer flies followed us down the trail.

Throughout our adventure, we used the two-car method leaving cars at the beginning and end of the planned hike. As we exited the woods on the Indian Creek Segment, Wendy's car was not in the McKenzie Creek Parking Lot. So, we started walking up the road. When we stopped to check the map, our real angel Sue pulled into her driveway. She was familiar with the trail, and offered to drive us to Wendy's car. Thankful to Sue because temps were in the 90s and we had already guzzled the last of our water at the end of the trail. Sue had to drive us to three parking lots before finding "green frog" Wendy's car 9 miles away at the opposite end of McKenzie Creek. (Tina's car is Blue Horse and Peggy's car is Brown Bear-Do you see a book reference?) After this experience, it is always a relief to see our car at the end of the hike!

The miles added up at a turtle pace those first years, then Covid hit. Wendy's busy social life came to a halt and Tina decided to retire early as an educator. So, what did we do? Hike the IAT! We began with day hikes going north from Arbor Ridge. We also completed Barron, Washburn, and part of Rusk Counties. When the miles began to add up quicker, our lifetime goal became a five- year goal to complete our IAT hike. On a hike with Peggy, she asked where we were planning our final hike. Good question! We had already hiked both terminuses and didn't want to end on a CR. After viewing the beautiful photos on the Facebook Wannabees, we decided that Dells of the Eau Claire would be the perfect final hike. On October 8th 2021, Tina's oldest daughter/Wendy's sister Amy and her two children joined us on our hike to make our completion special.

Highlights of our adventure From Tina Ghislain:

*Trail Angels: Sue from McKenzie Creek. Bob Held rescued us after we hiked the wrong way on Bear Lake Segment on a stormy day in July 2020. Mark Ulrich shuttled us to my car as I was barely limping along through the snow at Parrish Hills. Mark, Jeff Pepp, and Barb Letzow also were so kind and patient to wait for us to cross the Prairie River. We were so lucky that on this rare occasion, the river was actually frozen.

*We cannot express enough appreciation for the volunteers who maintain the trails and built boardwalks We love boardwalks.

*It was three and a half years into our adventure, when we met our first Wannabe Laura Hinesh at Doolittle County Park. Since then, we have enjoyed meeting, hiking, and sharing meals around a campfire (favorite is veggie wraps cooked over the fire) with new and now lifelong friends.

*I learned that I don't need fancy hotels and luxuries. I am even comfortable car camping. Well, we do enjoy a few luxuries.. I bring my electric coffeepot for our morning coffee which earned me the trail name "Java". Wendy earned the name "Crockpot" because she would have a meal cooking in the crockpot so our dinner would be ready when we finished hiking.

*Mother and daughter roles reversed as we became committed to completing the hike. Initially, I planned our hiking trips. In the final year, Wendy did the planning to fill in our gaps often relying on the Guthooks App.

*Of course, being immersed in nature is always a highlight. In the beginning, we just enjoyed our hikes through woods, prairie, farm fields, ect.... Later, we began to appreciate the unique geology. Special memories include realizing we were crossing over our first beaver dam on Northern Blue Hills and having lunch sitting on a Leapold Bench atop an Esker on the Jerry Lake Segment.

*Besides hiking the trail, we enjoyed exploring communities near the trail. Finding coffee shops and ice cream were priorities. A coffee shop in Rib Lake even has a delicious coffee drink named for the Ice Age Trail!

*The best part of my journey was that I was able to share this experience with my daughter Wendy. We learned so much about the trail geology and how to be more efficient backpackers and campers (including building a fire!). We changed from fair weather hikers to be willing to hike through rain, snow, cold, and heat. More memories were created with our off trail adventures including cooling off at a waterpark in Taylors Falls (twin city to St Croix Falls), wandering small towns like Wild Rose with scarecrow displays (favorite was a State Farms

masked Scarecrow “Be a good neighbor, and stay over there”), Walls of Wittenberg, Stevens Point Sculpture Park, Cave Point in Sturgeon Bay, and Murder Mystery Dinner at Fox Hills Resort.

Completing the trail was bittersweet. We accomplished a major goal, yet didn’t really want it to end. Well actually, it didn’t end because we needed to complete the Mammoth Challenge. So, what’s next? We want to complete the Western Bifurcation and continue to explore more communities after re-hiking segments. We feel it is important to become involved in supporting and promoting the trail. No one should be 56 years old before learning about this gem of a trail!

Unforgettable Moments by Wendy Kelley:

A five-year journey has left me with so many memories (the good, the bad, and the ugly), but unforgettable none the less. Where do I begin? I would say the most valuable memory is the fact that I was able to complete the entire journey with my mom and if it wasn’t for her, I wouldn’t have known anything about the trail to begin with. More memories (in no particular order) are as follows:

- THE GOOD:
 - Meeting Peggy Hess! We met Peggy in the summer of 2020 when we met Laura Hinesh (a remarkable hiker that recruited a team of like-minded people to join her experiences) at Doolittle Park Campground. Peggy was one of Laura’s recruits and was brand new to the trail, hiking her very first IAT segment with us. Peggy is a real hoot and is one to put a smile on anyone’s face. One of my favorite IAT memories was after completing our planned hike for the day, we headed to our hotel to hit the hot tub. However, when we arrived at the hotel Peggy realized she made a mistake and did not have her swimsuit. She still wanted to join us in the hot tub, so she put together the goofiest swim attire one could imagine. This is still a conversation that comes up every time we see each other and we can’t stop laughing over it. We even created our own “Peggy Swimsuit Hiking Day” where we tried to recreate her silliness on the trail and we even recruited a couple others to join us in wearing these crazy outfits on the trail. Members of the “Peggy Swimsuit Hike” included Peggy Hess, Laura Hinesh, Roxanne Bowers-Dunst, Tina Ghislain, and Wendy Kelley.
 - Trying new coffee shops all around the state of Wisconsin. The top findings were “Java Journey” in Rib Lake, “Julia’s Java” in Milltown, “Jenn’s Java” in Manitowoc, and “Sweet Thyme” in Antigo.
 - Meeting the “Magnificent Seven” while hiking in Washburn County in July of 2020
 - Naming our vehicles after characters from the children’s book “Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See.” Peggy had Brown Bear, Tina had Blue Horse, and I had Green Frog. Many hikes ended with the phrase, “Blue Horse Blue Horse, What do you see? I see the ladies excited to see me!”

- Taking in so much natural beauty, especially on segments such as St Croix Falls, Devil's Lake State Park, Gibraltar Rock, Turtle Rock, Bohn Lake, Plover River, Chippewa River, and of course Dells of the Eau Claire
- THE BAD:
 - Getting lost many of times and having to back-track/tack on extra unplanned miles
 - TOWER ROAD! One of the few dirt/gravel roads in the Northwood's that were not fun to drive on and left Tina with a flat tire TWICE!
 - Planning a November hiking trip during opening weekend of gun deer season. We were not knowledgeable on hiking during hunting season and after reading what segments were closed for hunting on the Alliance website, we thought that the segments that were not listed as closed meant there was no hunting on those segments. Therefore, I planned our trip based on segments I THOUGHT would be safe. However, we learned through this experience that just because the segment is not listed as closed, doesn't mean that there are no hunters. We had some scary hikes through a forest full of hunters on the Lumbercamp and Harrison Hills segments. After two days of terror, we changed our plans and hiked a CR for our last day of that trip.
 - Hiking through a foot of snow with frozen toes on Parrish Hills in February 2021. My mom was barely moving by the end and would have never made it to my car, but we were so fortunate to have met Mark Ulrich, who had his vehicle parked after the Prairie River crossing and gave us a ride back to my car.
 - Getting my car stuck in an IAT parking lot due to snow/ice on the Thornapple Creek Segment
 - Trying to cross the swap at Storrs Lake on April 2nd 2018
 - Leaving my keys in my mom's car while hiking at Holy Hill and not realizing it until we arrived at my vehicle at the end of our hike and did not have any keys. Luckily, we were able to call for an Uber even if we had to wait 40 minutes for it to arrive. After that incident, it became a priority to always check that everyone had keys before we began hiking.
- THE UGLY:
 - Getting lost while hiking the Holy Hill Segment and essentially doubling our planned mileage for the day (not to mention it was all uphill). This was another experience that left Tina barely hobbling to the car by the end. We may have renamed this segment for a bit after this negative experience, but we won't go into the details of that. LOL
 - Primitive camping at Straight Lake State Park and hiking the segments in the area in July of 2019. The bugs were HORRIBLE at this time of the year in this location. The mosquitos and deer flies would not leave us alone. After applying what felt like pounds of bug spray combined with sweat from the 90 degree temps, left us just wanting a shower. However, we were camping at a state park with no showers or real bathrooms (just a couple of pit toilets). After feeling absolutely disgusting, we decided to go bathe in the lake.

- Accomplishing the three river crossings on the Averill-Kelly Segment on March 20th 2021. We crossed Kelly Creek first which was cold, but shallow and not terrible. However, crossing Averill Creek and the New Wood River were a little scary with a freezing temperature, waist high water levels, and a strong current. We were very happy to cross that one off the list of completed segments!
- Lastly, probably the biggest obstacle while on our journey was making a huge mistake and parking in the wrong lot for the McKenzie Creek Segment in the summer of 2019. As mentioned earlier in this essay, it was a 90+ degree day, we had just finished our water, and thought we were done for the day. But, to our surprise, there was no car waiting for us in the parking lot where we thought we had parked. After hiking down a long, hot road for a couple more miles thinking the car had to be just up the road, we stopped to check our map. Fate brought us right in the middle of a woman's driveway to check the map as said woman (Sue) was just returning home from picking up a prescription. After chatting with her for a couple minutes, she was so kind to drive us to three different IAT parking lots until we finally found my car NINE MILES AWAY! We are forever thankful for Sue; she is our true Trail Angel!

In Conclusion, this journey of five years may have had its ups and downs, but each one of the good, the bad, and the ugly times on the trail have made for unforgettable memories that we can now ponder on and laugh about. Would I do it all over again? For now, I am going to stick with MAYBE!