

Excerpt from 'Thousand-Miler: Adventures Hiking the Ice Age Trail'

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from the book "Thousand-Miler: Adventures Hiking the Ice Age Trail" by Melanie Radzicki McManus. In thirty-six thrilling days, McManus hiked 1,100 miles around Wisconsin, landing her in the elite group of Ice Age Trail thru-hikers known as Thousand-Milers. In prose that is alternately harrowing and humorous, McManus takes you with her on an "into-the-wild" Ice Age experience through Wisconsin's forests, prairies, wetlands, farms, and far-flung small towns.

Abridged excerpt from Chapter 19: Home-Field Advantage

The Ice Age Trail is an eleven-hundred-mile footpath that gently traces the edges of the last glaciation in Wisconsin. One of just eleven National Scenic Trails, it's in the same vaunted company as the Appalachian Trail, which runs some 2,181 miles from Georgia to Maine, and the Pacific Crest Trail, which winds 2,650 miles from Mexico to Canada, passing through California, Oregon, and Washington along the way. It's also one of just three National Scenic Trails to be coiled entirely inside one state, the other two trails being in Florida and Arizona. Although the Ice Age Trail is a state and national treasure—it's no easy feat to become designated a National Scenic Trail—many people are unaware of its existence, even Wisconsinites. And more than 3.4 million of us live within an hour's drive of some portion of the trail.

... About a year before I began planning my hike, I was one of the clueless who had no idea what the Ice Age Trail was, despite having hiked, skied, and run along numerous [sections] of the trail for years. Sure, I'd seen the name before, along with the trail's signature yellow blazes. But I never stopped to ponder that I'd used something called the Ice Age Trail in the Kettle Moraine State Forest in the eastern half of the state, and at Indian Lake County Park near my home, and over at Lapham Peak in Delafield, west of Milwaukee, and up at Devil's Lake, Wisconsin's most popular state park. But once I learned what the Ice Age Trail was, I became entranced with the notion of following a one-thousand-plus-mile path all around the state—through hardwood forests and pine plantations, across waving grasslands and lumpy farm fields, over rivers, along a Great Lake, through trail towns big and small. I could get to know my beloved state on an intimate basis, step by step, in a way few other people ever would, unearthing its hidden secrets, inhaling its heady scents, listening as it spoke to me through the sighing wind, the rustling prairie grasses and the creaking forestland. I could become part of the landscape, and the very earth could become part of me. As someone who has always felt a primal connection to my home state, the thought was intoxicating. Seductive. The trail was singing a siren song, and I couldn't resist.

So here I am ... [and, now] I'm worried anew about my feet. No, not the cellulitis. Everything else. All of this endless walking and running has turned them into pulpy shreds of their former selves. Nearly every toe sports a puffy, fluid-filled area, and several nailbeds are tender to the touch. Nickel-sized blisters adorn my heels, while the bottoms of both feet ache in pulsing flashes. I try my best to help them endure this sudden boot-camp experience, which they didn't ask for or expect. At the end of every day's hike, I immerse them in an ice bath, then gently pat them dry. I carefully drain blisters, dab on antibacterial ointments, and daintily prop them up on pillows. I've heard your feet protest initially when embarking on a long-distance hike, then toughen up and take the daily onslaught. But mine seem caught in a painful, rebellious loop.

Every morning I gird them for battle, applying more salves, bandaging tender areas, making sure dry socks and extra shoes are easily accessible in the car in case my feet tire of the originals. They squawk for the first mile or two, then seem to settle in. I think, "Yes! I've finally broken them in!" But at the end of the day, the minute I decide I'm finished hiking, they begin to wail, and they don't stop for the rest of the night. What if I'm ruining them for life? Is this possible? Can you hike your toes or feet into permanent deformity or pain? I don't

know the answer to this, and it's making me nervous.

My friend Terie Cebe joins Team Valderi for two days, shepherding me from Albany over to Janesville. I hike the twenty-ish miles along the same connecting route where Hiking Dude used his GoLite Chrome Dome Trekking Umbrella to shield himself from the unrelenting sun and heat, Papa Bear following behind with his cheap, black Walmart version. The temperatures are in the low eighties, not the sizzling nineties Papa Bear and Hiking Dude faced, but still uncomfortably warm. And I have neither a GoLite Chrome Dome Trekking Umbrella nor a cheap, black Walmart imitation to shield me from this misery. I begin chanting a mantra I adopted at some point in this odyssey: One day at a time. One hour at a time. One step at a time. One day at a time. One hour at a time. One step at a time.

I smile only once during the five or so hours I inch along this road, when I see a sign near the Disch Family homestead, established in 1975, proclaiming it to be Belly Acres. Mostly I grimly chant my mantra and wonder why, oh why, did all of these property owners never once think to plant some nice shade trees right here, next to the roadside? Sure, the roads are mainly for cars. But you never know when someone might need to hike twenty miles out here in the heat and sun. And then, you know, it would be nice if they could rest for a bit in the cool embrace of a leafy shade tree.

At the end of the day I make it through the Arbor Ridge [area] on the west side of Janesville. Janesville. Another milestone. Tomorrow, as I wind my way through the city, I will pass the southernmost portion of the Ice Age Trail before beginning the march up north to Sturgeon Bay and the eastern terminus. I'll be more than two-thirds of the way finished. The thought of reaching Janesville was what pulled me along the beastly hot road all day. Now, I'm here. I did it.

One day at a time. One hour at a time. One step at a time.

A small sob escapes my lips as I pull my tight calf sleeves over my battered feet. Definitely the most painful times of the day are pulling these compression garments on in the morning and pulling them off at night. I turn my left foot over and inspect the infected patch of skin below my toes. It should be healing now, after six days on antibiotics. But it's not. It's still an angry purplish-red, still sore to the touch, and it seems as if, maybe, it's starting to spread. It's certainly not receding. I don't think this new, non-bloating antibiotic is effective. And that's not good. I know the smart thing is to deal with this now, while I'm in Janesville—a big city that has a lot of pharmacies and is in my HMO network. Sighing, I gather my innumerable belongings at the doorway of the inn and wait for Terie to pick me up.

The Ice Age Trail winds roughly fifteen miles through and around Janesville. It enters the city of sixty-five thousand on the west via the Arbor Ridge, which rolls through the Robert Cook Memorial Arboretum, a beautiful nook where ancient bedrock hills poke their heads skyward, Marsh Creek merrily burbling at their base. From there the Devil's Staircase [section] pushes hikers deep into a steep wooded path high above the Rock River. In the 1930s, Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) workers built trail in this very spot, but it deteriorated over time until it was rebuilt by the IATA with assistance from dozens of other groups and individuals. Part of the trail here passes along a stone retaining wall, believed to be set by the CCC. The Janesville segment proper starts at the city's attractive Riverside Park, making a U-shaped scoop through the city as it follows the Rock River on the west, then runs along part of the city's extensive recreational trail system from the base of the U and up its eastern arm. Somewhere at the base of the U, shortly after the trail crosses South Main Street, is the southernmost portion of the Ice Age Trail. [It] ends after leading you over bustling State Highway 26 via a pedestrian bridge on the city's far northeastern edge.

Janesville must really love the Ice Age Trail, I decide as I wind my way through the city on yet another steamy late-September morning. I pass several large, wooden trail signs making various boasts: "Hike or Ski the Glacier Path of 10,000 Years Ago on Wisconsin's 1000 Mile Long Trail."

And: "Part of Wisconsin's 1200 Mile Trail." (A little mileage dispute here.)

And, helpfully:

"Potawatomi State Park 324 Miles >"

"< Interstate State Park 776 Miles"

Green street-sign-like "Ice Age Trail" signs also line much of the recreational trail on the path's eastern



Melanie Radzicki McManus on the Ice Age Trail. (Photo Courtesy of Melanie McManus)

route. I feel so welcomed by the kindly folks of Janesville that I almost forget today's main mission: call my doctor. Pulling out my cell phone when I'm almost at the segment's end, I spill out my problem to the nurse who answers: "I'm hiking eleven hundred miles. I had cellulitis in one foot, and now I have it in the other. The antibiotics I had for my first round of cellulitis worked well but caused a lot of bloating, so I asked for a different kind for my current bout. It's not working, though. Will my doctor please call in a prescription for the original antibiotics I had? The White-water Walgreen's would be great."

She agrees to inform my doctor of my request, but cautions that physicians normally don't prescribe antibiotics over the phone. I know this. But I've known my physician a long time. He's a runner and competitor, too. I'm hoping he trusts me and will prescribe the medicine. All I can do is cross my fingers and wait.

Milton is softly thump, thump, thumping. The beat pulses rhythmically, pulling me along the trail. Soon, strains from a brass section float across the still air, and I realize I'm hearing band music. And that this is the first music I've heard in twenty-eight days. The trail leads me past Milton Senior High School, the source of the music, just as my phone chimes. It's my doctor.

"I'd really prefer you have someone look at your foot," he says sternly. "Can't you find a clinic in Janesville?"

"I'm already past Janesville, and the clinic in White-water will be closed by the time I get there tonight," I say in what I'm hoping is my most pleasant, reasonable, persuasive voice. "I already lost a few days when I first got cellulitis in Antigo. I can't afford to stop hiking again. I only have one week left, and then I'll set the women's thru-hike record."

"You won't be setting any records if you've got something worse now, like MRSA," he retorts. "That can be life-threatening, you know."

I don't know much about MRSA, or Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus, but I do know it's considered to be a "superbug"—some mutant kind of staph infection that's resistant to many antibiotics. I'm pretty positive I don't have MRSA; if I did, surely I'd have a fever and feel tired and achy and things like that. The bottom of my foot just hurts.

In the end, he agrees to prescribe my initial, harsh antibiotic if I promise to see a doctor as soon as I can. I promise.

But I don't add that my definition of "as soon as I can" is "when I finish hiking the Ice Age Trail."

Editor's Note: Melanie did finish hiking the trail in a record-breaking 36 days. Read more about her harrowing and humorous, "into-the-wild" Wisconsin adventures—and how her feet finally fared—in her thru-hiking memoir from Wisconsin Historical Society Press, "Thousand-Miler: Adventures Hiking the Ice Age Trail." Visit www.wisconsinhistory.org/whspress for more information.

Courthouse

But the highlight for many is simply to don an authentic judge's robe and bang the gavel. A classic photo opportunity — with all declared guilty!

Designated as a Main Street community since 2005, the downtown Monroe district is home to more than thirty retail shops and nearly two dozen spots to enjoy local foods and beverages, including Baum-

gartner's Cheese Store and Tavern, home to the famous Limburger cheese sandwich. Tours and tastings are available at the nearby Minhas Craft Brewery, Distillery and Winery. Key attractions include the Monroe Arts Center and Green County Historical Museum.

The Historic Green County Courthouse is open to the public week-

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days 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Visitors are welcome to explore the building, open offices, former courtroom and a small history room. Larger groups are invited to contact the Green County Tourism office at 608-328-1838 to set up a welcome and short presentation.

Visit greencounty.org to learn more about Monroe and the surrounding area.



Left: During the early years of the historic Green County Courthouse, which was opened in 1891, horses and buggies were the standard mode of transportation. Today's visitors, arriving by car, bus, or motorcycle, are often surprised to find that the building is open to the public. The courthouse is open weekdays 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. (Photo courtesy of Green County Tourism)