

# *An Interview*

with

## **Melanie McManus**

---



THOUSAND-  
MILER



WISCONSIN  
HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY



**WHS Press** Why did you decide to write *Thousand-Miler*?

After I hiked the Ice Age Trail, I couldn't get it out of my head: the trail's beauty, the profound experience of thru-hiking a long-distance trail,

the transformation that occurs when you're out in nature every day. I also kept thinking about the other thru-hikers I'd met, and about how their trail tales were similar, yet different, from mine. One day I realized combining all of our stories would make a compelling read.



**WHS Press** Was there one part of the trek in particular that speaks to you and/or captures the Ice Age Trail experience?

Many parts of the trail and my trek spoke to me in different ways. But one of my favorites was a segment midway through the trail. I popped out onto the top of a hill and a farm field spread

out below. The farmer had mowed a pretty, curving path down the field for hikers to follow. It was edged by these knee-high, waving grasses. I felt like the trail was acknowledging my accomplishment by unrolling the red carpet for me, so to speak. I was quite emotional as I made my way down the path. It was then that I felt the trail's real power and impact.



**WHS Press** Describe your hardest day on the trail.

Probably the day I hiked from the Albany area to the outskirts of Janesville. I had a raging case of cellulitis on the bottom of one foot, and I changed shoes a hundred times, but my foot still hurt with every step. It was

also very hot and humid for the umpteenth day in a row, and I had to hike about six hours on a connecting road route under the broiling sun with not a speck of shade. The person crewing me did not have any ice, either, so every time I got water it was pretty warm and unpalatable. That was a tough day mentally.





**WHS Press** What do you want readers to most understand about the Ice Age Trail and the people who thru-hike it?

■ The Ice Age Trail is easily accessible. Sixty percent of Wisconsinites live within 20 miles of a trail segment, and out-of-staters can quickly reach a segment from Chicago or

the Twin Cities. So there's no reason not to explore it. Hiking (or biking or snowshoeing or skiing) along the trail is a great way to see Wisconsin on a very intimate basis. The vast majority of people will never thru-hike a long-distance trail like the IAT, but those who do have a lot of physical and mental strength.



**WHS Press** How can this book serve as a guide to the Ice Age Trail or to Wisconsin history?

■ Since the book discusses several hikers' experiences, it gives readers a broad understanding of what you might encounter

on the trail from weather to wildlife, and also different hiking techniques you can employ, as there's no one "right" way to hike the IAT. It also gives a lot of snapshots of Wisconsin history, taking short peeks into everything from logging and rail-trail development to the Spanish flu and, of course, the glacier.



**WHS Press** As anyone can imagine, writing a book is a deeply personal experience. How has your writing of *Thousand-Miler* been so for you?

It can be difficult to put your private thoughts on paper for the entire world to read and analyze. And it was hard to write about the times when I was snippy to people who were crewing me. But you have to be honest about the experience.





**WHS Press** What was your most revelatory experience in writing *Thousand-Miler*?

How so many things in life are really inconsequential. When you're hiking all day,

day after day, and you only have to think about eating, sleeping, and walking, life becomes so simplified and you quickly realize how silly it is to worry about things like holiday plans or cleaning the house.



**WHS Press** Much is said about how being out in nature is good for you. Did your hike confirm that?

Absolutely! My stress levels immediately took a nosedive and stayed inconsequential for five weeks. When does that ever happen in

real life?! Being in fresh air all day was also amazing; the smell and even "feel" of the air is incredible. Not counting blisters, I also felt much healthier overall. And while I often carried a pack, my back felt much better because I wasn't sitting down so much, as I normally do.



**WHS Press** What do you learn about yourself when you hike a long-distance trail?

You learn how strong you are, physically but mostly mentally. And you learn you can rely on yourself. A lot of us who hiked the

IAT also learned that while we can rely on ourselves, it's also nice to lean on the Trail Angels once in a while. They're a wonderful source of support and knowledge about the trail. Letting them assist you enriches your experience, and hopefully theirs as well.

