

A path through Wisconsin's past

Ray Zillmer saw the potential, and launched the quest

Wisconsin's last glacier showed up about 70,000 years ago and receded about 10,000 years ago. The retreat was so recent, in geologic time, that the National Park Service notes in its official Ice Age Trail guide, "We can't even be certain that we are not in fact still in the Ice Age and merely enjoying a warm period between two glacial advances."

While you may not need to think about moving out of the shadow of the glacier anytime soon, you can get to know Wisconsin's glacial side by hiking the Ice Age Trail in Dane County at places like Lodi Marsh, Indian Lake County Park and the Brooklyn State Wildlife Area.

The trail is the result of an intrepid group of Milwaukeeans, led by attorney Raymond Zillmer, which in the early 1900s began taking trips to the glacier-made hilly area west of Milwaukee.

Eventually, Zillmer came up with a plan for a national park that would encompass the furthest extent of the most recent glacier, called the terminal moraine. It would be a long, narrow park extending like a ribbon through the state. Zillmer believed this park would be visited "by millions more people than use the more remote national parks."

Zillmer, a big-time player in Wisconsin politics with Teddy Roosevelt-like regard for big outdoor spaces, convinced the state

Zillmer thought the trail could illustrate 'one of the greatest stories in the natural history of North America.'

Legislature to protect some of this area. Thus, in 1937, Kettle Moraine State Forest was established. Later, Zillmer proposed a 1,000-mile-long trail that would ramble through Kettle Moraine and along the terminal moraine of the glacier, from near St. Croix Falls in the west to Sturgeon Bay in the east.

By protecting this natural area, Zillmer forecast, "one of the greatest stories in the natural history of North America could be illustrated and adequately interpreted. Here



is an opportunity to develop a story using features intimately associated with the lives and livelihood of millions of people."

In 1958, Zillmer founded the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, still in existence today, which has

taken on his mission of building and maintaining Wisconsin's own long-distance footpath. Zillmer died in 1960.

Congress eventually authorized the Ice Age Trail as a National Scenic Trail in 1980. Since then, Zillmer's foundation has worked to make his dream become a reality, inch by inch, mile by mile.

— J.M.