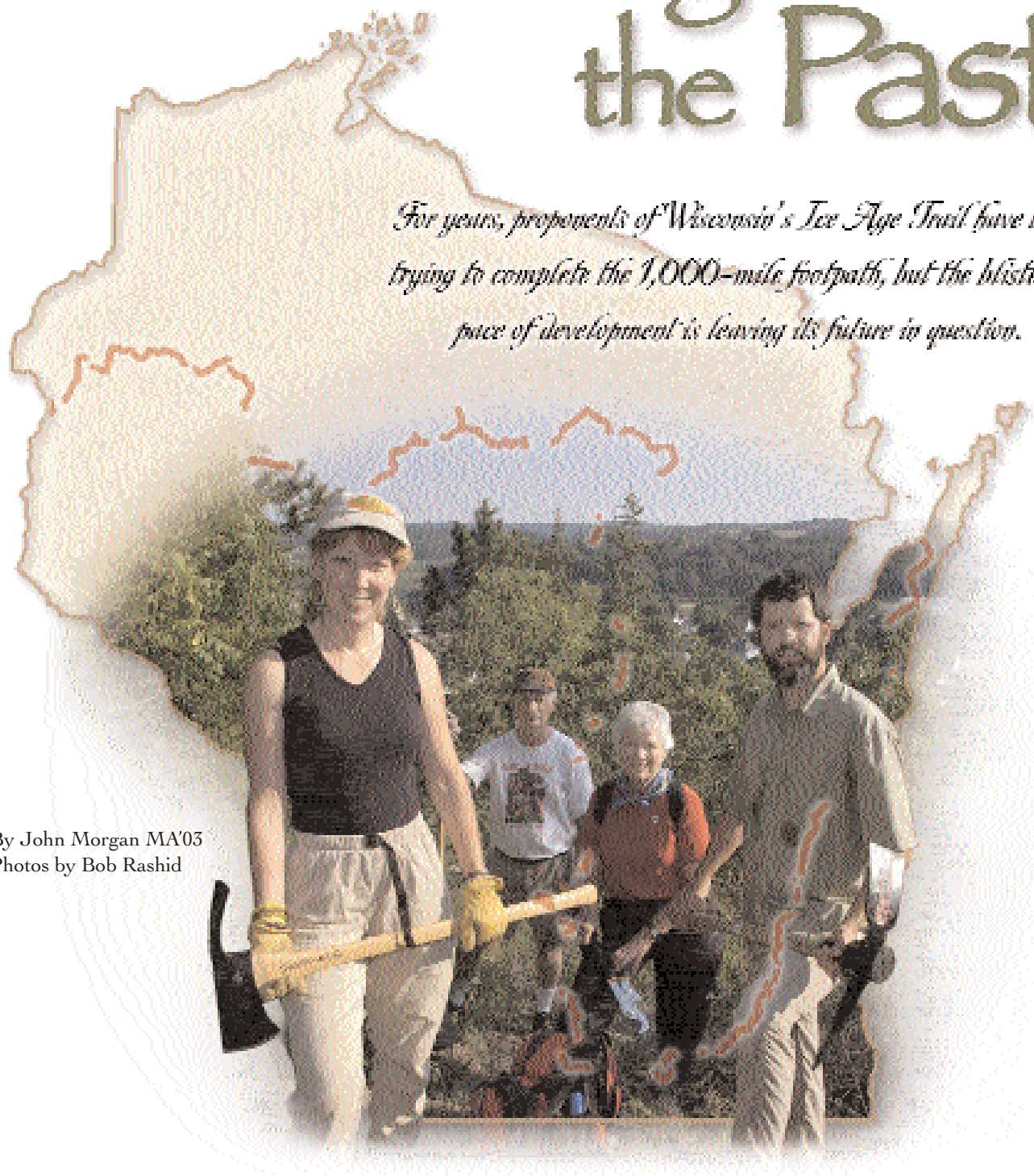


A Path through the Past

For years, proponents of Wisconsin's Ice Age Trail have been trying to complete the 1,000-mile footpath, but the blistering pace of development is leaving its future in question.

By John Morgan MA'05
Photos by Bob Rashid



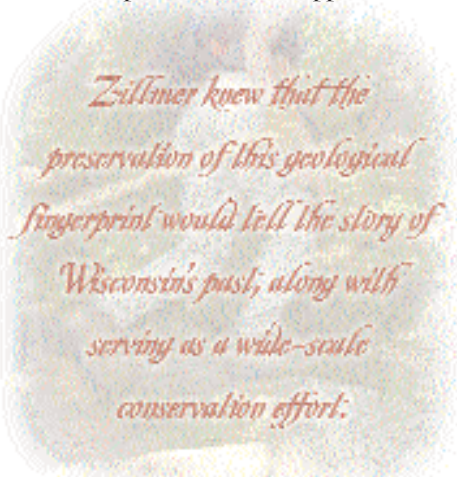
Raymond Zillmer LLB'10 was a dreamer. He wished the world would slow down. It was the 1930s, and Zillmer was a Milwaukee attorney who enjoyed not only adventuring to the great parks in the western United States and Canada, but also leisurely weekend trips to a hilly area just west of Milwaukee. Now called the Kettle Moraine, these hills and valleys and streams and lakes are the indelible marks of the most recent glacier to blanket and retreat from Wisconsin nearly ten thousand years ago. And it was this geological gem that Zillmer sought to permanently safeguard.

Known as a terminal moraine, the formation resulted when the mile-tall bulldozer of ice called the Wisconsin Glacier stopped and dumped its contents. (*Moraine* is defined as debris, such as boulders and rocks, deposited by a glacier. *Terminal* refers to the outline, or terminus, of the glacier.) The giant ice sheet's retreat blessed the state not only with Kettle Moraine, but with the Baraboo Hills and the rambling, camelback formations in the Northwoods.

Zillmer's dream was simple: he envisioned a thousand-mile footpath that preserved this terminal moraine. It would be called the Ice Age Trail — a U-shaped route stretching across the state from the western border just north-east of the Twin Cities, down to near the Illinois state line in the south and back up to Potawatomi State Park in Door County. Zillmer knew that preservation of this geological fingerprint would tell the story of Wisconsin's past, along with serving as a wide-scale conservation effort in a state destined for more and more development. He was adamant that, with such a park, "one of the greatest stories in the natural history of North America could be illustrated and adequately interpreted."

Barbara Woodhouse, volunteers Don Ferber '88 and Sharon Bloodgood MS'75, and Drew Hanson inspect part of the Ice Age Trail near Cross Plains, Wisconsin. The red route on the photo at left reveals gaps in the footpath. In 2004, volunteers logged 87,000 hours building and maintaining Wisconsin's answer to the Appalachian Trail.

Zillmer predicted that the trail would be visited by "millions more people than use the more remote national parks." Today, many thousands of visits are made annually by local residents, school groups, and others wanting to see a section of the trail that passes through their neighborhood, just as myriad visitors set foot on the Appalachian Trail each year. Actually, because most of the hiking along the two thousand-plus miles of the Appalachian



Trail is an experience shrouded in a canopy of trees, the vistas along the Ice Age Trail could conceivably make its more well-known, bigger sibling a bit jealous.

Like the trail, Zillmer's dream has had many twists and turns since the beginning. After tenacious lobbying, he convinced the state legislature to form Kettle Moraine State Forest in 1937. Today the forest includes some fifty thousand acres along the terminal moraine, stretches through six southeastern Wisconsin counties, has more than two hundred miles of hiking paths, including the Ice Age Trail, and hosts millions of visitors annually.

Although Zillmer was unable to convince the legislature to continue the park along the entire thousand-mile route, he believed that the Ice Age Trail was still attainable. In 1958, he formed the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, a non-profit citizens group that continues its original mission of building and preserving Wisconsin's thousand-mile footpath. In 1980, Congress designated the Ice Age Trail as a National Scenic Trail. As such, it falls under the umbrella of the National Park Service.

But completion of the path has been stymied by legal hurdles, and today, proponents are still waiting for the trail to become a reality. It's been left to people like Zillmer's son, John LLB'52, to pick up the torch. John remembers childhood days spent with his father in a countryside that is now protected, and he believes that every family, regardless of income level, should have the right to enjoy outdoor recreation. He views resources like the Ice Age Trail as low-cost ways for people to enjoy the natural environment.

Zillmer stresses that Wisconsin's Ice Age remnants are the best in the world. "[They aren't] just the best in the United States or the Midwest. They're studied by people all over the world," he says. "If you're studying geology in Sweden or India or Japan, you come to Wisconsin."

Typically, when Congress establishes national trails, citizens must build and maintain them. So, if hikers want the Ice Age Trail, they have to build it themselves. The Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation currently has more than five thousand members, some of whom logged more than eighty-seven thousand volunteer hours in 2004 alone — eclipsing most other units of the National Park Service. These volunteers devote their weekends to building and maintaining trail.

"You just feel like you're a part of something good and something big and something significant. I mean, this is a National Scenic Trail," says Barbara Woodhouse '83, a volunteer trail builder and cancer information specialist with the UW Medical School.

Woodhouse is a part of the elite trail-blazing arm of the foundation, called the Mobile Skills Crew, which includes only a few dozen individuals. She stresses that while her crew has lots of fun, trail building is a serious business — the result of detailed planning and engineering. Trail construction leaders undergo extensive training in tool use, safety, and managing volunteers, some of whom have never picked up a shovel before. For Woodhouse, the experience of being a member of the elite crew and working on the trail has been life changing.

On a steamy weekend last fall, Woodhouse and a contingent of the crew were working atop a wooded bluff just west of Madison. The group spent the day moving hundred-pound blocks of limestone — remnants from a nearby abandoned quarry — into place for use as retaining walls. Called “rock work” by the group, the backbreaking effort took about eight hours.

“It’s overwhelming sometimes to think about that, to think we knock off little one-half- to one-mile sections of trail at a time. And you think, ‘Oh, my God, we’ve got another four hundred to go! How long is that going to take?’ ” exclaims Woodhouse.

Indeed, the trail is only about 60 percent completed, and the volunteers are in

a race against time. Because more and more vacation and retirement homes are springing up across the state, and because people are increasingly willing to commute greater distances to work, undeveloped land along the trail’s planned path is quickly disappearing. Even in Zillmer’s day, the shadow of development was growing closer to the Kettle Moraine area. Today, the entire state is seeing development pressures.

Nevertheless, “I thoroughly, in my heart, believe that it will be done. Completely,” says Christine Thisted MS’95, executive director of the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation. Her statement is more an unblinking guarantee than a hopeful estimate — an echo of Ray Zillmer’s steady determination. But just

as Zillmer faced a multitude of hurdles and barriers, Thisted’s task is no less trying. Her job includes frequent trips to Washington, D.C., to testify before Congressional committees about the importance of trails and their funding. She explains that this is critically important in a budget climate that is growing more frugal and less favorable toward the preservation of natural resources.

Thisted finds her job fascinating, although it can be frustrating as well. “It’s challenging, and it’s trying to do something that nobody’s ever really done before,” she says. She credits her graduate work at UW-Madison for preparing her to tackle that challenge. Her study of public-private partnerships has served as a guiding principle in the relationships she seeks to forge with the National Park Service and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, as well as a long list of local governments along the trail route.

Tireless work on forging these partnerships has led to some important recognition from Wisconsin politicians, including Governor Jim Doyle ’67, who called the trail “a great national treasure.” And since 2000, the Wisconsin congressional delegation has routed more than \$10 million from the federal budget to buy land for the trail. In a statement regarding the acquisition of \$1 million in the 2005 federal budget, Representative Tammy Baldwin JD’89 said that “preserving this trail is a gift and a duty to future generations. It is urgent that we preserve this land before it is developed.”

Traditional preservation efforts in the United States have been large scale and reflect more of a Teddy Roosevelt regard for immense open spaces. To understand the importance of a thirty-inch-wide footpath meandering through the woods of Wisconsin takes the ability to think more creatively about what conservation means.

“The conservation movement in America is at a crossroads. For a hundred years, we’ve been so focused on the spectacular — preserve as many spectacular places with the highest level of protection that we can,” says Drew Hanson ’89, who is the foundation’s railway director. “But in the

ICE AGE TRAIL FOUNDATION

TRAIL TRIBULATIONS

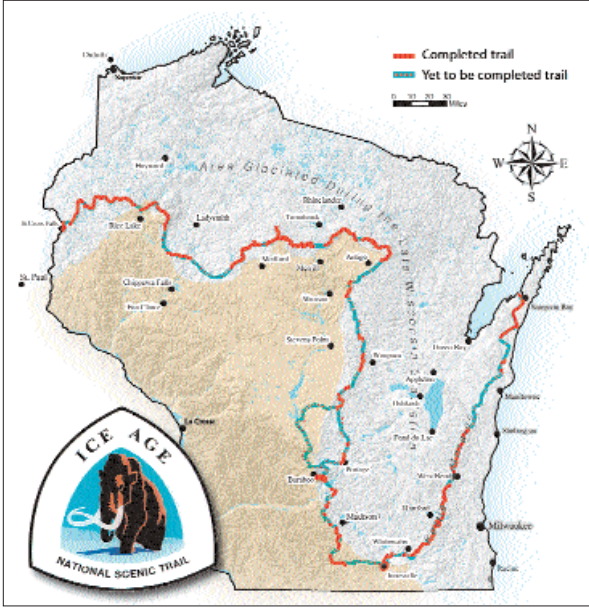
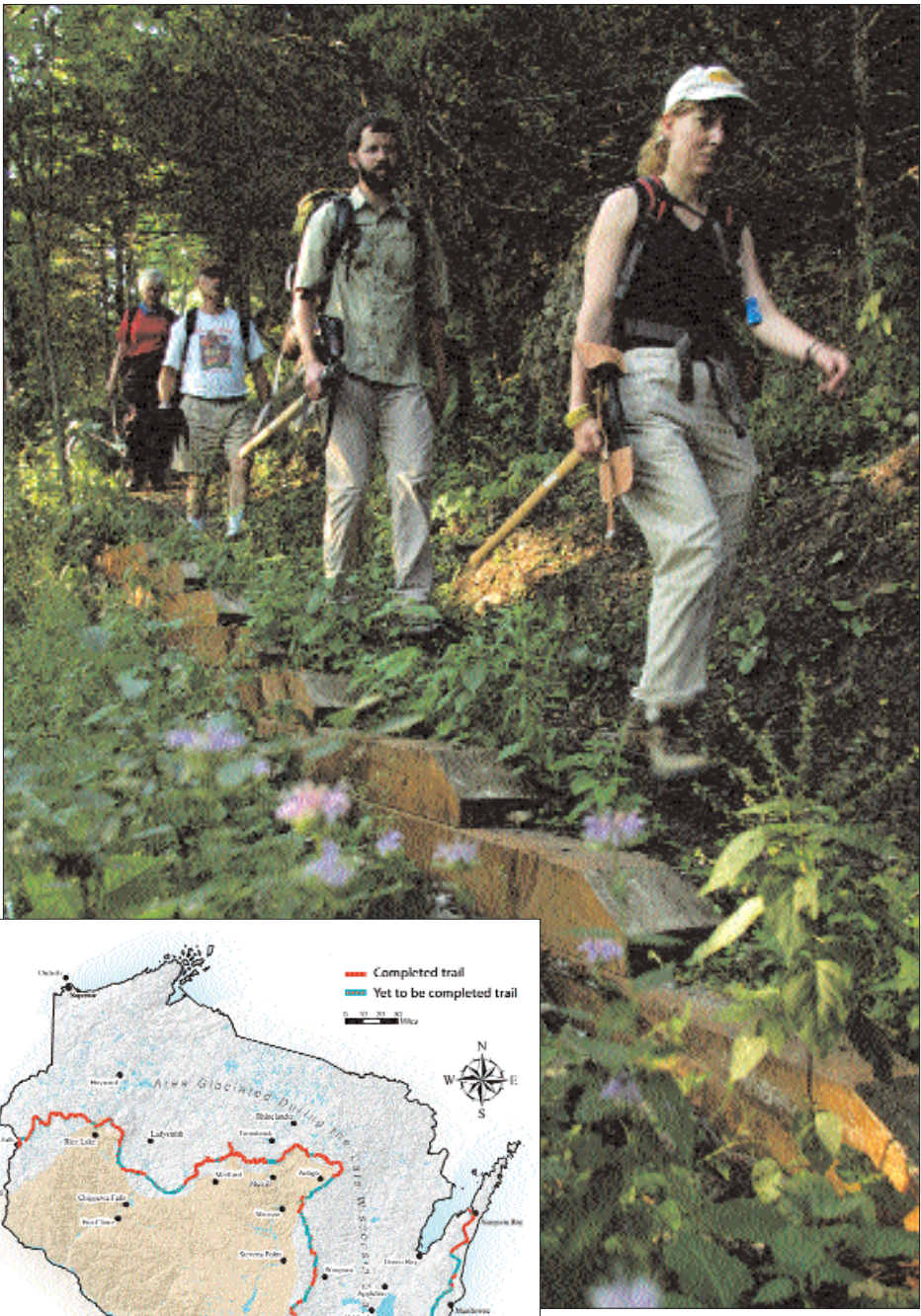
Complicating the completion of the trail is a legal snafu that hampers the acquisition of new land. Wisconsin’s congressional delegation, including Tammy Baldwin JD’89, Herb Kohl ’56, Dave Obey ’60, MA’68, and Russ Feingold ’75, are doggedly pushing to simplify the process. They hope to pass the Willing Sellers Bill, which would allow the National Park Service to purchase land from private owners who would like to sell all of their property, a piece of it, or an easement. Currently, such transactions are not allowed. Instead, the majority of the trail’s land purchases are made by the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation, which utilizes grants and donations, or the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, which matches federal funds along with state money.

Passage of the Willing Sellers Bill would allow the Park Service to directly petition for federal funds and then buy the land. Currently, the process is more circuitous, taking up valuable time. And time is of the essence: Drew Hanson ’89, railway director for the Ice Age Park

and Trail Foundation, estimates that there are still some one thousand private parcels along the route that need to be purchased.

The history of the willing sellers restriction is curious. The first national trails — the Appalachian and Pacific Crest — were authorized in 1968 and had no such restriction. But a contingent of Western senators developed the mindset that large-scale trails meant more publicly owned land, which isn’t popular in states where the government already controls huge amounts of territory. So in 1978, an amendment was passed that restricted the government from buying land for any national trails. Since 1987, no new trails have been subject to this restriction, but of the twenty-three national trails, nine — including the Ice Age Trail — had the bad luck of being established between 1978 and 1987.

The past several sessions of Congress have failed to pass any bill to reverse the willing sellers restriction, and the fate of any future bill remains uncertain. — J. M.



The Ice Age Trail is only about 60 percent completed. Trailway director Drew Hanson estimates that the Ice Age Park and Trail Foundation still needs to purchase 1,000 parcels of private land in order to finish it. The map shows the projected path of the completed trail.

Midwest, we have a huge population base of people who are clamoring for more places to recreate. And this trail, I think, can satisfy a great need Midwesterners have for outdoor recreation, as well as protect an enormous amount of natural areas, water supply, and agricultural lands.”

Hanson hails from the northeastern corner of Wisconsin near Marinette, from a family that has held its land for five generations. He stresses that conservation can’t occur in a vacuum, solely preserving a desert here and a mountain there and holding farming and develop-

ment as separate variables. Instead, he calls for a melding of them all.

“A great deal of America’s public lands encompass mountains and desert. A nationwide map of federal and state lands shows that most public lands are in the west, where soil and water resources do not approach those that we take for granted here in the upper Great Lakes,” Hanson laments. Because the Ice Age Trail is in Midwestern farmland, completing it will result in the secondary benefit of protecting watersheds and fertile agricultural soil, since in some spots, the protected area on the sides of the trail is a half-mile wide.

People like Ray Zillmer, John Muir x1863, and Aldo Leopold earnestly believed that a thing like a trail would make the world and the people who hiked it better. Hanson warns that if this isn’t the case, and if industrialized progress always wins over preservation, then humans will suffer great and irreversible losses in the future.

“It can’t be that way. If a hundred years from now, we’ve developed everything except mountains and desert and whatever else happens to be in the current model for national parks, I think our country is going to be in a world of hurt,” says Hanson. “We need places to grow food, and we need water. And that’s what the Midwest can provide. That’s completely compatible with the Ice Age Trail.”

And thus, others have adopted Zillmer’s dream of preserving Wisconsin’s prehistoric jewel. It’s interesting how some challenges never change. Raymond Zillmer wrote in the March 1959 issue of the *Wisconsin Alumnus*, the precursor to *On Wisconsin*, that the land must be preserved soon, “before the hills are pre-empted by private homes and the land becomes too expensive. It will cost us little now. It will pay our children and theirs much hereafter. We spend a lot to go faster. Let us spend a little to go slower.”

John Morgan MA'03 is a Madison environmental journalist. He and his spouse, Ellen Shumaker '95, MS'97, co-authored *50 Hikes in Wisconsin* (Countryman Press), which includes eight hikes along the Ice Age Trail.

