

To Check the Trail

- Thomas W. King 28 February 2008

Trails and hiking are important in our family's daily lives. As residents of Solon Springs, Wisconsin, our family and we have been fortunate that our rural homestead borders a local Douglas County segment of the 4,500-plus mile North Country Trail. Our home and barn are on a high bank overlooking Upper St. Croix Lake and Crownhart Island, which we view many times every day, every year. This is truly paradise.

In winter, ice cover permitting, we hike, skate, or ski around the Island nearly every early morning before we head off to work. We and our dogs love the freedom to roam on the ice in those starlit hours, and know it is our shared, silent time each day to give thanks for this source of life, beauty, and peaceful inspiration.

We hike a lot. And some of our best friends once lived just down the timeworn trails from our quiet, old growth forest haven. We will always remember them, our good neighbors, "Leon" and "Edwina". They had built their own new home about two blocks south of our land, and were enjoying their retirement years there. As Debbi and I got to know them, Leon and Edwina proved to be among the finest people who ever befriended us. They always had time to welcome us to their under-construction home, to feed us, and to chat about the many questions, problems, and fears in life we had as a soon-to-be-married couple.

Leon and Edwina, then both in their mid 70s, were hard workers, and led aggressively active lives every day. They grew a huge, lush garden, the likes of which we had not seen. Leon was able to coax, into full production, celery, melons, and other sensitive crops, which at that time in the early 1970s, did not grow well in the northwest corner of Wisconsin. Edwina baked bread, cookies, and other goodies, making their home so cozy.

Any chance we got to visit our Solon neighbors, we did. And we always came away well fed -- and well advised about so many things we needed to know. Leon and Edwina were there at just at the right time, when we, as young adults, needed some fill-in grandparents. They served the role well.

Leon often told of their trips to Hawaii, and how Edwina loved sitting in the sun, while he surfed, well into his 70s. He would animatedly doff his worn railroad cap, and show us the several skin cancer spots on his balding head. "You just gotta keep these covered," he would say, while telling of his adventures on the beaches and riding the waves.

Debbi and I made mental notes every time we got together with Leon and Edwina. These were folks we wanted to be like. They were the finest, nicest people, and so active and engaged with this world and their varied lives. Unfortunately, our own careers soon took us to other parts of the country, and we lost touch with them for several years. Though we wrote back and forth, we did not get to see either of them before their passing on.

At one point, Edwina had told us in a letter how Leon took a late afternoon hike nearly every day, returning to their home by way of the well-worn forest trails connecting our

properties. Several large Norway pine trees towered in a clearing on the south side of our land, and she told of how she would check down the trail there at suppertime to find Leon on the last part of his route home. He would often sit on the soft, mossy ground, leaning his back up against one of our giant pines so he could nap in the sun. She'd wake him, and they would walk home hand in hand for supper.

One day, she said, he had not returned for supper on time. So as usual, she went to check the trail and look for him. Up ahead, she saw Leon asleep in the sunlight against one of our big pine trees. She walked up and tried to wake him, but could not.

Leon had fallen asleep for eternity in that serene, sacred place. He had left her on that brilliant day to go on ahead to check the trail and surf the stars. We knew, in all her sadness, Edwina was glad for him, and for how he could spend his last moments in the forest he loved so much.

We walk those same trails nearly every day now, and we revere Leon's tree each time we pass it. Our active dogs need much exercise, so as we leave for a hike, we always say to them, "Let's check the trail!" Checking the trail has become their daily job and our joy.

Someday, a long time from now, I trust, when the sun is shining in the giant pines, and it seems a good day to hike away, I will think of Leon and Edwina, our good friends and many-faceted mentors. And if you are looking for me that day when I don't come home for supper, be sure to check the trail.

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