

A THRU-HIKE ADVENTURE
ON THE RIVER TO RIVER TRAIL

FROM

West

TO

East

BY
GLENN LAWRENTZ

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In memory of
Glenn H. Lawrentz Sr.,
John O'Dell,
Don Wall

“And into the forest I go, to lose my
mind and find my soul”

“In every walk with nature, one re-
ceives far more than he seeks”

—JOHN MUIR

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Preface

In the quiet corners of our souls, there often lies a yearning for adventure, a thirst for the untamed and unknown. For some, this yearning remains dormant, buried beneath the weight of obligation and the busyness of everyday life. But for others, like the man I am about to introduce, that yearning becomes an undeniable call, a beckoning to embark on a journey that will test the limits of their spirit.

This is the tale of a man, whose name we shall soon know, and his friend Joe. Two kindred souls bound by a shared love for the great outdoors and the allure of adventure. Fate had brought them together, and now it was time for them to answer the call of the wild.

Set against the backdrop of the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois, their journey would take them along the River to River trail, a winding path stretching 157.7 miles across diverse landscapes and through the heart of nature's majesty. But before they could immerse themselves in the wilderness that awaited, a series of events unfolded, setting the stage for their grand adventure.

Life had been a whirlwind for our protagonist, consumed by the monotony of routine and the pressures of an unfulfilling

existence. The spirit of adventure that once burned brightly within him had been dampened, smothered by the demands of society. But the universe has a way of nudging us towards the paths we are meant to follow, and so it was for this man.

Amid his daily grind, a serendipitous encounter brought Joe into his life. With a shared love for the outdoors, they formed a bond, kindling the flames of adventure that had long lay dormant. Conversations turned to dreams, and dreams turned into plans. The idea of a thru-hike adventure began to take shape, and the man felt a flicker of excitement ignite within him once more.

As fate would have it, the River to River trail stood before them, a gateway to the wilderness and the unknown. The man and Joe meticulously prepared, pouring over maps, researching gear, and studying the lay of the land. They knew that this journey would demand not only physical endurance but also mental fortitude—an opportunity to rediscover themselves and find solace in the embrace of nature.

But the path to their adventure was not without its obstacles. Life threw its curve balls, testing their resolve and questioning their commitment. Doubts crept in, whispering words of uncertainty and fear. Yet, with each setback, their determination grew stronger, fueled by the knowledge that this journey was not just about escaping the ordinary but about finding themselves in the extraordinary.

So, with their hearts set on the Shawnee National Forest, they prepared to embark on their thru-hike adventure. The

stage was set, the script written, and the man found himself standing at the precipice of a grand transformation. The events preceding this journey had shaped him, molding him into the person he was meant to be for this very moment.

As the story unfolds, we will witness the triumphs and tribulations of the man and Joe as they navigate the challenges and wonders of the River to River trail. Through the lens of their shared experience, we will explore the depths of their friendship, the beauty of the natural world, and the power of stepping into the unknown.

This is their story. A story of resilience, self-discovery, and the unwavering spirit of adventure. So, dear reader, join us as we embark on this thrilling journey, walking alongside the man and Joe as they traverse a trail that will forever change their lives.

Acknowledgement

I wanted to take a moment to express my heartfelt gratitude to each and everyone of you for taking the time to read about my thru-hike journey. Your support and interest in my adventure mean the world to me, and I am truly humbled by the overwhelming response I have received. Thru-hiking the River to River Trail was a life-changing experience, and I am eternally grateful to my dear friend Joe Ulmer for sharing this incredible journey with me. Joe, your unwavering support, companionship, and endless enthusiasm made this adventure even more special. Together, we created memories that will be cherished forever, and I am thankful for the bond we formed along the trail.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the River to River Trail Society, Shawnee Trail Conservancy, Friends of the Shawnee Forest, USDA Forest Service, and all the individuals who played a part in maintaining and preserving the trail. Without your dedication and hard work, this journey would not have been possible. Your efforts have allowed countless hikers, including myself, to experience the beauty and majesty of the Shawnee National Forest.

I would like to give a special shout-out to Christopher Vosnos, Shannon Sanderson, Curtis Anselment, Angie Anselment, Jo-Jo

from High Knob Campground, Will from Devil's Backbone Park, and the Hardin County Sheriff's Office. Your kindness, assistance, and warm hospitality along the trail were invaluable. Your support helped us navigate challenges, provided us with shelter and respite, and made us feel welcome in the communities we encountered. Thank you for going above and beyond to make our adventure memorable.

To all the readers who followed my journey, your encouragement, kind words, and support have been a constant source of motivation. Knowing that you were with me in spirit, cheering me on through the highs and lows, kept me going during those tough moments on the trail. Your presence has made this experience even more meaningful, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to share my story with you.

As I reflect on this incredible journey, I am reminded of the power of nature, the strength of the human spirit, and the importance of friendship and community. The River to River Trail has left an indelible mark on my soul, and I am forever changed by the beauty and challenges it presented.

Once again, thank you from the bottom of my heart for being a part of this journey. Your support means more to me than words can express. May we continue to find solace and inspiration in the great outdoors, and may we always strive to embrace new adventures and create lasting memories together.

With heartfelt appreciation,

— Glenn

Roots on the Trail

As the sun peeked over the rugged peaks of the North Cascades, casting a golden glow on the wilderness, my excitement grew. It was the start of our much-anticipated backpacking adventure with my father and older brother. I was always excited to go on adventures in the outdoors with my father. Even on family camping trips, I loved getting out in the woods. The smell of the damp thick forest covered in moss filled my nose and I breathed in the pleasant scent with a welcoming love for it. I always received an inexplicable comfort when in the woods. This trip was special though. My father, my brother and I were setting out to spend a few nights ascending Box Mountain with the goal of camping near the 6,249-foot summit. Our heavy framed backpacks filled with essentials, our itchy wool pants snug and our boot laces tied tight, we embarked on a journey that would shape my love for nature. As we climbed the sharp, steep mountain side I felt a warm closeness with my father and my brother. Each step ascends molding a bond and forming a memory to hold on to. The trail unfolded before us like a

hidden treasure, leading us deeper into the heart of the majestic mountain. Every step brought new wonders—a babbling brook, a lush forest bursting with wild sounds, and towering trees that stretched toward the heavens. I felt like an explorer, eager to uncover the secrets of this untamed wilderness. Every night spent on the mountain, we camped under the stars. No tent, no tarp. Just a sleeping bag and sleeping pad. We kept our bodies warm with the thick wool clothing and hats we had on. I still remember how itchy they were. But as we proceeded to higher elevations, I became reliant and thankful for the itchy warmth. My father was a seasoned outdoorsman, he always shared his wisdom with us along the way. He taught us so many things, while we grew up with him taking trips to the mountains. All the basic things they'd teach you in scouts. But this was different. Perhaps it was because it came from my father. I always looked up to him as "the mountain man". He knew everything about the woods. And it was his shared love and passion for outdoor recreation that always helped portray that image of him. His more memorable lessons were "Take only memories, leave only footprints", "Embrace the suck" and "If it hurts then don't do it". He taught my brother and me so much about backpacking and hiking. With every passing moment, my connection to nature deepened, and I marveled at its raw beauty while out in the woods with my father. As we hiked through dense forests and crossed crystal-clear streams, I discovered the importance of resilience and perseverance. This was also because of the large influence my father had on my brother and me to teach us the ways of respecting nature while out enjoying it. And the trail was not always easy, but the breathtaking vistas that awaited us at every turn made it all worthwhile. The experience of being in the woods and sharing

an adventurous climb with my family always made it worth it. The North Cascades became my playground, a sanctuary where worries melted away, and the only thing that mattered was the present moment. My father always had a way of making us feel these mountains belonged to us. On our final night, we set up camp by a tranquil alpine lake. Snow covered the mountain top. The stars painted the night sky, and a gentle breeze whispered across our faces as we cowboy-camped in the snow. Snug in our sleeping bags, I always reflected on the feeling of belonging, cherishing the memories we had created together on that trip in the woods, on Box Mountain. As we emerged from the wilderness and returned to civilization, I carried the spirit of the North Cascades within me. The experience ignited a passion for exploration and a deep respect for the natural world. A love for backpacking and hiking was forever instilled into my being. I knew that no matter where life took me, I would always find solace in the untamed beauty of the outdoors. That backpacking trip with my father and brother had been more than just an adventure—it had been a transformative journey that shaped my perspective, fostered a love for nature, and forged bonds that would last a lifetime. I woke up that morning, the sun barely peeking over the tall trees that surrounded our campsite. The smell of fresh dew and pine filled the air as I stretched my stiff limbs. It was the last day of our weekend backpacking and camping trip with my father and older brother, and I was both sad and excited to head back home. We had scaled the rugged mountain trails, conquering steep slopes and marveling at breathtaking views. Memories of laughter, shared stories, and the warmth of our campfire filled my heart as we began our descent. The backpack on my shoulders felt lighter now as if it carried the weight of unforgettable experiences. But

as I made my way down, my tired legs gave way to a momentary lapse in concentration. My foot slipped, and I inadvertently stepped on a pile of sticks that betrayed my trust. Suddenly, the ground vanished beneath me, and I found myself hurtling down the mountainside. Fear gripped me as my body tumbled through the air, arms and legs flailing in a desperate attempt to regain control. The world around me became a blur of green and brown, and the wind rushed past my ears, drowning out any other sound. Time seemed to stretch, each second feeling like an eternity. Finally, my wild descent came to an abrupt halt. I lay there, stunned, as the realization slowly sank in. I had survived the fall. With trembling hands, I brushed off the dirt and debris that clung to my clothes. But as I looked down, my eyes widened in disbelief. A large stick, jagged and menacing, had impaled my arm during the fall. Oddly enough, it did not hurt as much as I expected. Perhaps shock had dulled the pain. My father, who had been following close behind, rushed to my side with concern etched on his face. With calm determination, he gently removed the stick from my arm and tended to the wound. His hands moved swiftly and surely as if he possessed a magic touch that could heal anything. I watched in awe as he cleaned the wound and expertly bandaged it, soothing my fears with his steady presence. As we made our way back home, the incident replayed in my mind. I could not help but feel a deep sense of gratitude towards my father. At that moment, he had shown me his strength, both physically and emotionally. His unwavering care and skill had turned a potential disaster into a manageable setback. Even now, years later, I carry the scar of that stick impaled in my arm. It serves as a reminder of that fateful day, a symbol of resilience and the unwavering love between a father and his son. Whenever I look

at it, I am reminded of the lessons I learned on that mountain - the importance of perseverance, the power of family, and the enduring bond that can weather any storm. But as I grew older, my priorities started to shift. New interests emerged, and with them came new friends and responsibilities. The demands of growing older, attending school and eventually going to work to earn a living began to consume my time, leaving little room for the hikes that once defined our relationship.

Gradually, the distance between my father and me grew wider, and the cherished moments we once shared became fading memories. Years passed, and I found myself caught up in the whirlwind of adulthood. The demands of my life left little time for anything else, including reconnecting with my father. Although I longed for those hiking trips and the special bond we once had, I couldn't find a way to bridge the gap that had formed between us. One day, as I was sorting through a box of old photographs, I stumbled upon a snapshot from a hiking adventure my father took. The image captured my father's infectious smile and the vibrant backdrop of nature. It stirred something deep within me—a longing to revisit those cherished memories and rediscover the connection we had lost. But before I knew it - the chance to share that experience with my father again had disappeared.

Losing my father to congestive heart failure was a devastating blow that shattered my world. He was the pillar of strength in my life, my guiding light, and my confidant. His sudden departure left an immense void in my heart, one that can never be filled. I remember his warm smile, his words of wisdom, and the way he always had time for me. The pain of his absence

lingers on, and every beat of my own heart serves as a reminder of the precious time we had together. Though he may be physically gone, his love, support, and unwavering presence will forever shape the person I am today. I carry his memory within me, cherishing the lessons he taught me and striving to make him proud in everything I do.

I sought solace in the bottom of a bottle, hoping that alcohol would numb the pain, but it only fueled my self-destruction. Days blurred into nights as I spiraled into an out-of-control lifestyle. My family, seeking solace in the distance, moved to different states. My widowed mother sought support in Illinois, while my brother found refuge in Alabama. Nothing was the same after my father passed. Everything seemed to fall apart as if he was the glue that held us all together. I was left alone, drowning in my own misery. Eventually, the consequences of my alcohol abuse caught up with me. I found myself behind bars, arrested for driving under the influence. It was a wake-up call, a catalyst for change that I desperately needed. As I sat in that cold, lonely cell, I realized I couldn't continue down this destructive path. I completed treatment programs, determined to break free from the chains that held me captive. When my mother offered me a one-way ticket to Illinois, a chance at a fresh start, I knew it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. With a mix of trepidation and hope, I boarded the train to Chicago, leaving behind the wreckage of my past.

Fading Ties, Shattered Paths

In Illinois, I began the arduous journey of repairing my life and rediscovering who I truly was. I faced my legal charges head-on, taking responsibility for my actions and doing everything necessary to put them behind me. It was a grueling process, but with each step forward, I felt a glimmer of hope reignite within me. As I settled into my new surroundings, I found solace in the serenity of nature. Memories of camping trips and hiking adventures with my father resurfaced, reminding me of the joy and peace I had once experienced. It was as if the wilderness was calling out to me, urging me to reclaim the outdoor life I had longed for and missed. I would spend hours sitting in quiet contemplation, surrounded by the beauty of nature. It was during these moments that I began to piece myself back together. The healing power of the outdoors provided me with clarity and a renewed sense of purpose. I knew I had to honor my father's memory by embracing the life he had once shared with me. Slowly, I started to rebuild my life. I connected with support groups and found solace in the stories of others who had

overcome their own struggles.

Step by step, I reclaimed my identity, molding it into something stronger and more resilient. Today, as I reflect on my journey, I recognize the transformative power of redemption. The scars of my past serve as a reminder of the person I once was, but they no longer define me. I have emerged from the darkness, a testament to the strength of the human spirit and the healing power of nature. And as I continue to forge my path forward, I carry with me the love and memories of my father. His spirit guides me, his presence unwavering. I have found my way back to the wilderness, where I can honor his memory and rediscover the joy that was once lost. Determined to honor his memory and reignite that flame within me, I set out on a journey of rediscovery. I immersed myself in research, and online resources, learning about trails, gear, and skills that I had forgotten over the years. Step by step, I embraced the challenge of reconnecting with nature. I felt my father's presence guiding me along the rugged paths. Hiking became more than just a hobby; it became a way to keep my father's spirit alive and to find a sense of peace amidst the vastness of nature.

With every stride, I remembered why we loved it so much, and I vowed to continue our shared passion, knowing that he would be proud. In the age of streaming services and endless online content, we often find ourselves falling into a rabbit hole of discovery. It was on one such occasion that I stumbled upon a series of films that would forever change the course of my life. These films, showcasing the adventures of long-distance hikers, sparked a flame within me—a yearning for the open road and the untamed wilderness. As I sat engrossed in the stories

unfolding on the screen, I became captivated by the concept of thru-hiking. The idea of embarking on a journey that spanned hundreds, even thousands, of miles, traversing breathtaking landscapes and testing one's physical and mental limits, ignited a fire within me. I was no longer content with merely observing these adventures from the comfort of my living room; I wanted to experience them for myself.

Driven by this newfound passion, I turned to the vast expanse of the internet, eager to delve deeper into the world of thru-hiking. Countless articles, blogs, and forums awaited me, each one offering a glimpse into the lives of those who had walked the long trails before me. Late into the night, I found myself lost in a sea of information, devouring firsthand accounts and expert advice. I marveled at the stories of triumph and perseverance, the camaraderie shared between hikers and the profound connection to nature that seemed to blossom along the trails. The more I read, the more I felt compelled to embark on my own thru-hiking adventure. Maps, guidebooks, and online forums have become my trusted companions as I immerse myself in researching long-distance trails in America. With each trail I explore, I feel a deep connection to the land, to the stories of those who have walked before me, and to the ever-changing tapestry of nature that awaits. I began reading about the big three trails; The Pacific Crest Trail, the Appalachian Trail and the Continental Divide Trail. I surrounded myself with maps and stories, I found myself consumed by the allure of the Pacific Crest Trail. My mind wanders, and I dream of embarking on this life-changing journey. I imagine myself amidst breathtaking landscapes, conquering rugged mountains and vast deserts, feeling the sheer magnitude of nature's power.

The thought of walking mile after mile, day after day, fills me with a deep sense of adventure and self-discovery. It's a longing that grows stronger with each passing moment, urging me to disconnect from the noise of the world and reconnect with my innermost self. The idea of traversing vast distances, immersing myself in the beauty of nature, and pushing my physical and mental limits fills my dreams with excitement. But I'm reminded of the practical constraints that hold me back. The cost of gear, permits, and the time required to complete such a journey seem insurmountable. Yet, in the depths of my soul, the desire to experience the transformative power of a thru-hike remains unwavering. So, I continue to research, to save, and to dream. Someday, I hope to embark on that epic adventure, where the trail becomes my teacher, and the wilderness becomes my sanctuary.

As I come to terms with the impracticality of embarking on long-distance trails, I shift my focus to exploring the hidden gems closer to home. Living in the bustling city of Chicago, I began my research on smaller trails that offer a respite from urban chaos. With each click and search, a glimmer of excitement emerges within me. Out of nowhere, like a serendipitous gift, I stumble upon the River to River Trail in southern Illinois. It feels like destiny calling, a trail that spans nearly 160 miles through stunning forests, serene lakes, and rolling hills. My heart quickens as I imagine myself immersed in the beauty of the Shawnee National Forest, venturing along this lesser-known path. The allure of discovering hidden waterfalls, encountering wildlife and witnessing breathtaking sunsets fills me with anticipation. The River to River Trail becomes my beacon of adventure, a chance to escape the city and embrace

the tranquility of nature. I can't help but smile at the realization that grand adventures can be found, even in the smaller corners of the world.

Armed with an insatiable thirst for knowledge, I immersed myself in a sea of information, meticulously researching every piece of gear I would need for my journey. From trail runner shoes to synthetic clothing, Smart wool socks to a reliable backpack, the list seemed never-ending. Each item held the promise of enhancing my experience, ensuring my comfort and safety on the trail. Hours turned into days as I diligently scoured the internet, reading reviews, comparing features, and seeking the advice of experienced thru-hikers. I analyzed the pros and cons of various sleeping bags, comparing insulation ratings and weight to find the perfect balance between warmth and pack-ability. I scrutinized sleeping pads, searching for the ideal combination of comfort and lightweight design. And when it came to cooking gear, I left no stone unturned, researching stove pots, cooking stoves, and even the most efficient fuel options. The more I learned, the more my excitement grew. It was not merely the act of purchasing gear; it was the anticipation of stepping onto the trail fully equipped and ready to face whatever nature had in store for me.

This meticulous research became a labor of love, a testament to my dedication and commitment to this newfound path. As the packages began arriving at my doorstep, I felt a childlike giddiness, eager to tear open each box and inspect my new tools for adventure. I carefully examined the trail runner shoes, marveling at their lightweight construction and sturdy grip. The synthetic clothing promised quick-drying properties,

perfect for the unpredictable weather that awaited me. As I held the backpack in my hands, I imagined the weight of my dreams resting upon my shoulders. Slowly but surely, my collection of gear grew, each item carefully chosen to suit the specific conditions I would encounter on the trail. The trekking poles became an extension of my limbs, providing stability and support as I navigated rugged terrain. The stove pot and cooking stove were a testament to my desire for warm, nourishing meals amidst the beauty of the wilderness. It was not lost on me that this investment was more than just financial; it was an investment in myself. Each piece of gear represented a commitment to my own growth, a declaration that I was ready to embrace the challenges and rewards that awaited me on the trail. I knew that this journey would test my physical and mental limits, and I wanted to be prepared for every twist and turn, every uphill climb and rocky descent. As I packed my meticulously chosen gear into my backpack, a wave of gratitude washed over me. I marveled at the journey that had led me here, from the films that had sparked my passion to the countless hours spent researching and preparing. I was ready, both mentally and physically, to step into the wilderness and embark on the adventure of a lifetime.

In October 2021, I left the bustling city of Chicago behind, to embark on a journey to explore the wonders of the River to River Trail in southern Illinois. After a six-hour drive, I found myself surrounded by the serene beauty of nature, eager to begin my week-long adventure of section hiking along this enchanting path. Stepping foot onto the River to River trail in the heart of Shawnee National Forest, I felt an exhilarating surge of freedom. It was as if the weight of the world lifted

off my shoulders, and I was transported to a realm where time stood still. As I ventured deeper into the woods, the familiar sights and sounds of civilization faded away, replaced by the rustling leaves, the gentle caress of a breeze, and the chorus of birdsong. The air was crisp and invigorating, filling my lungs with a renewed sense of vitality. With each step, a sense of nostalgia washed over me. The uncharted lands I traversed awakened a primal connection within me, a profound longing for the untamed and the wild. It was as if I had found a place where my soul truly belonged. The towering trees, their branches reaching towards the sky, whispered stories of ancient wisdom. The meandering river, alive with its rhythmic flow, beckoned me to follow its course and discover its hidden secrets. I was a wanderer, an explorer, and this vast wilderness was my playground. The trail led me through enchanting landscapes—rolling hills, moss-covered rocks, and vibrant wildflowers dancing in the sunlight. Each bend in the path revealed a new vista, a new opportunity to immerse myself in the beauty of nature. As I hiked on, time seemed to lose its grip on me. The worries and stresses of everyday life melted away, replaced by a profound sense of peace and serenity. In this untamed realm, I rediscovered the simplicity of existence and the joy of being present in the moment. Every encounter with wildlife felt like a sacred communion. The graceful deer, the mischievous squirrels, and the elusive songbirds—they all reminded me of the interconnectedness of all living things. In their presence, I felt humbled and connected to a greater tapestry of life. My first stop was the Garden of the Gods Wilderness, a surreal landscape adorned with ancient sandstone formations that seemed to defy gravity. As I stood on the edge of the cliffs, overlooking the vast expanse, I couldn't help but feel a

profound sense of awe. The interplay of sunlight and shadows cast a magical spell, and I reveled in the silence of the moment, humbled by the raw power of nature. Next, I ventured to Lusk Creek Wilderness, where I was greeted by a symphony of colors that seemed to have been painted by the hands of nature herself. The forest came alive with vibrant hues of red, gold, and orange, as the leaves gracefully danced in the crisp autumn breeze. The trail led me deeper into this captivating sanctuary, where the gentle babbling of the creek provided a soothing soundtrack to my journey. I couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder as I discovered hidden waterfalls cascading down moss-covered rocks, their beauty heightened by the surrounding tapestry of fall foliage. In this tranquil wilderness, I found solace, inspiration, and a profound appreciation for the ever-changing seasons of life. Ferne Clyffe State Park welcomed me with its ancient rock formations and dense forests. As I hiked through the trails, I marveled at the towering cliffs and the vibrant foliage that painted the landscape. I couldn't help but feel a deep connection to the earth, as if every step brought me closer to the essence of my being. The Panther Den Wilderness beckoned me with its untamed wilderness and secluded trails. I ventured deeper into the woods, where the scent of pine filled the air, and the melodies of birdsong danced around me. It was a place of solitude and reflection, where the rhythm of my footsteps echoed the beat of my heart. Here, amidst the towering trees and vibrant flora, I felt a sense of belonging, as if nature had opened its arms and welcomed me home. The Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge revealed a different facet of the River to River Trail, with its diverse ecosystems and abundant wildlife. I witnessed flocks of migratory birds taking flight, their graceful movements painting the sky. The refuge

was a sanctuary of biodiversity, a testament to the delicate balance between humans and nature. I couldn't help but feel a sense of responsibility, an urge to protect and preserve these precious habitats. Finally, I found myself in the Clear Springs Wilderness, a place where the sound of rushing water and the scent of wildflowers filled the air. I followed the trail along Hutchins Creek, relishing the coolness of the water against my skin. It was a place of serenity and rejuvenation, where the worries of the world melted away, and my soul found solace in nature's embrace.

Each spot along the River to River Trail unfolded with its own unique charm, leaving an indelible mark on my heart. The joyous wonder I felt in each place fueled my desire to experience the entire trail, to immerse myself in its beauty from start to finish. As I packed up my gear and bid farewell to southern Illinois, a new dream took root within me—a dream of thru-hiking the entire River to River Trail, allowing its enchantment to guide me on a transformative journey of discovery and self-renewal. With a year's anticipation and preparation, in 2022, I returned to the River to River Trail in southern Illinois, ready to embark on my first thru-hike. The vibrant hues of fall painted the landscape, setting the stage for an unforgettable journey. However, this year brought with it an unprecedented challenge—a record drought had left the trail dry and water sources scarce. Undeterred, I had planned ahead and was fortunate enough to receive the kind offer of someone who would cache water along the trail, ensuring my hydration along the way.

Setting off on my adventure, I felt a renewed sense of determi-

nation, eager to conquer each mile of this majestic path. As I trekked through the arid terrain, I marveled at the resilience of nature, the dry leaves rustling underfoot, and the sun casting an intense golden glow upon the land. The absence of water sources reminded me of the delicate balance we share with our environment and the need for careful stewardship. Minutes turned into hours and hours into days, as I pressed on, relying on the cached water to sustain me. The vastness of the wilderness surrounded me, and despite the dry conditions, the beauty of the trail remained unyielding. Each sunrise and sunset painted the sky with breathtaking hues, reminding me of the fleeting nature of time and the importance of embracing the present moment. But as I ventured further, the weather took an unexpected turn. Freezing temperatures descended upon the trail, catching me off guard. I realized that my cold weather gear was insufficient to withstand the harsh conditions that awaited me. The biting wind and icy air tested my resolve, pushing me to my limits.

I had to make a difficult decision—my safety and well-being demanded that I temporarily halt my thru-hike. Disappointed yet undeterred, I sought refuge and warmth, reflecting on the lessons learned along the trail. Nature had humbled me once again, reminding me of the importance of preparedness, adaptability, and respect for its unpredictable ways. While my journey was paused, my spirit remained unbroken. The River to River Trail had shown me the power of resilience, both within myself and within the natural world. When I was section hiking the trail, the previous year, little did I know that I would not only discover the beauty of nature but also the beauty of human connection. Along the trail, I crossed paths with a fellow

hiker, Joe, and we became friends, as I shared supplies I wasn't using with him, while he was completing his thru-hike that year, which he successfully completed, which was another inspiring factor for me to challenge myself to try it on my own. And after falling short of completing my thru-hike, I felt defeated. But as I was on my way home, I received a heartwarming message from the new friend I had met on the trail. Joe encouraged me to try again, he suggested we embark on the adventure together, reminding me that the true joy of any journey lies not only in the destination but also in the companionship we find along the way. With renewed hope and the prospect of sharing the trail with a friend, I knew that my next attempt would hold even more magic and fulfillment.

Over the next year, I meticulously studied maps, researched gear, and read countless trail journals. I've obsessed over every detail, ensuring that I'm equipped with the knowledge and tools to tackle the challenges that lie ahead. I've carefully selected the gear, meticulously packing and repacking my backpack, shedding unnecessary weight and optimizing every inch of space. But preparation goes beyond gear. I've spent countless hours conditioning my body and mind, knowing that endurance and resilience are just as important as physical supplies. I've pushed myself on long hikes, gradually increasing the weight on my back, and building up stamina and strength. I've studied meditation techniques, finding solace and focus in the quiet of nature. My mind has become a fortress, ready to face any obstacle that may come my way. For an entire year, I poured my heart and soul into preparing. Each day, I lace up my running shoes and hit the pavement, my breath mixing with the crisp morning air. The pounding of my feet on the

ground became a rhythm of determination, pushing me farther, faster. In the gym, I embraced the weights, feeling the burn in my muscles as I lifted, striving for new personal bests. And when the walls seemed to close in, I turned to calisthenics, my body becoming a machine as I conquered push-ups, pull-ups, and planks. It was a year of sweat, sacrifice, and unwavering dedication, but as the day of my thru-hike approached, I knew that every moment spent training had transformed me into a force to be reckoned with.

Day One: Grand Tower to Hutchins Creek

As I load up my car in the late overnight hours, the city of Chicago sleeps peacefully, unaware of the adventure about to unfold. The highway stretches before me, its emptiness matching the calmness within me. The anticipation was palpable as I stood in the garage, surrounded by an array of gear and supplies. Every item was meticulously chosen and packed, ensuring I wouldn't forget a single thing this time. Memories of last year's failed thru-hike still lingered, a bitter reminder of unfinished business. But this time, I was determined to conquer the trail. The cold night air wrapped around me, whispering doubts and fears into my ears. Doubts about my physical and mental preparedness, and fears of the unknown that awaited me on the trail. I took a deep breath, summoning every ounce of confidence and trust in myself. This time would be different. This time, I would go the distance. I bid farewell to my wife, her loving support a constant source of strength. And my loyal companion, my sweet dog, who looked at me with understanding eyes. They knew the fire

burning within me, the longing to push my limits and find solace in the embrace of nature. With a heavy heart, yet filled with excitement, I climbed into my car.

As I pulled out of the driveway, the engine's hum filled the air. The road stretched before me, a symbol of the journey that lay ahead. I turned on the stereo, letting the music drown out the doubts and worries that threatened to take hold. The rhythm pulsed through my veins, intertwining with the beating of my heart. The night sky enveloped me, stars twinkling overhead as if to guide my way. Thoughts of the trail danced in my mind, mingling with dreams and aspirations. I mentally prepared myself for the challenges ahead, envisioning the breathtaking landscapes and the sense of accomplishment that awaited me at the end. The hours on the road ticked away, the passing scenery a blur of lights and shadows. My thoughts became a tapestry of excitement and determination, interwoven with the lessons learned from my previous attempt. I knew I had to embrace the unpredictable nature of the trail, adapt to its challenges, and persevere no matter what.

I think about the previous year, the disappointment of my unfinished thru-hike is still fresh in my memory. I replay every misstep, every mistake that led to my premature exit from the trail. But this time, things will be different. I've learned from my failures, analyzing each one to identify the weaknesses and pitfalls. I've mentally rehearsed every possible issue that may arise, preparing myself to handle them with grace and determination. I won't let anything deter me from reaching my goal this time. As I approach Elizabethtown, sitting at the eastern terminus of the trail, my friend Joe awaits to meet me.

A surge of excitement and nerves fills my chest. I envision the trail stretching out before me, its twists and turns, its challenges and rewards. The thought of completing this thru-hike fills me with a sense of purpose and accomplishment. I pulled into the parking lot of the Hardin County Sheriff's Office, where Joe had arranged to leave his car. I see his familiar face, a mix of anticipation and support. We exchange a few words, both of us understanding the significance of this moment. I take a deep breath, knowing that the next few weeks will test me in ways I can't yet fathom.

As we left Elizabethtown behind and embarked on our journey across southern Illinois toward Grand Tower, anticipation and excitement filled the air inside the car. My friend Joe sat beside me, ready to conquer the River to River trail alongside me. For two hours, we exchanged stories, our voices blending with the hum of the engine. We spoke of the trail, sharing tales we had heard, dreams we had nurtured, and the challenges that awaited us. With every passing mile, our bond grew stronger, as we delved into personal stories from our lives back home. We laughed, we empathized, and we found comfort in each other's experiences. The road stretched out before us, a metaphor for the adventure that lay ahead. As we neared Grand Tower, the small town that marks the western terminus of the trail, our souls were intertwined, united by a shared determination and a deep connection that would carry us through the challenges we were about to face on the trail.

The moment had finally arrived—the beginning of our long-awaited trek. Joe and I, with our backpacks securely strapped on, stood beside my car near the maintenance garage at Devil's

Backbone Park. I lock the doors to my car and we walk down to the shore of the Mississippi River. Tradition called for hikers to dip their toes in the water where they started and where they would eventually end their journey. It was a symbolic gesture, a way to honor the trail that would be our constant companion throughout this adventure. With a sense of reverence, I approached the river's edge. The water glistened under the golden rays of the sun, its gentle ripples inviting me to partake in this sacred ritual. I submerged my foot into the cool river water, feeling its refreshing touch against my skin. A surge of energy coursed through me as if the river itself was infusing me with strength and determination. I lifted my foot out of the water, shaking off the droplets that clung to it. A sense of purpose filled my being as I turned to face the path that lay ahead. The river, now a part of me, would guide me through the trials and triumphs of this journey. With renewed vigor, Joe and I continued back towards the park entrance. The weight of our backpacks felt lighter now as if the river's touch had imbued us with an intangible strength. As we walked, I felt a deep connection to the wilderness surrounding us, the beauty and tranquility echoing the beating of my heart.

We were ready. The river's water still clung to my memory, a constant reminder of the journey awaiting us. The sounds of rustling leaves and chirping birds serenaded us, creating a symphony of tranquility. The worries and concerns of everyday life faded into the background, replaced by a sense of freedom and possibility. The Mississippi River, with its powerful currents and timeless presence, had bestowed upon me a newfound appreciation for the strength within myself. Leaving my car behind at Devil's Backbone Park, my friend

Joe and I embarked on our long-awaited River to River trail thru-hike. Passing our first trail blaze on a tree, just outside the park entrance. A blue “i” lay inside a white overlay, nailed into the surface of the tree. The crisp April air greeted us on that clear day, promising adventure and discovery ahead. As we set off, we were joined by Curt and Angie Anselment, Joe’s friends who had traveled to hike with us from the park to Inspiration Point. As the four of us set out, we found ourselves tracing the path of a flat levee road. The sun shining bright overhead, casting long shadows as we made our way forward. The road stretched out before us, seemingly endless, but our spirits were high. Conversations flowed effortlessly as we shared stories, jokes, and plans for the journey ahead. The camaraderie among us was palpable, as we laughed and encouraged one another with each step. Excitement coursed through my veins, I was ready to embark on my first thru-hike adventure. The first leg of our nine-day journey took us along a dry, exposed levee road that hugged the mighty Mississippi River. The levee road stretched out before us, a seemingly endless path that beckoned us onward. With each step, I could feel the anticipation building, a sense of freedom and adventure intertwining within me.

Finally, we had reached the Godwin West trail head, a significant milestone in our journey. It marked the point where we would bid farewell to Curt and Angie, who had joined us for this leg of the hike. Embraces were shared, heartfelt thanks were exchanged, and promises to meet again were made.

Leaving the trail head, we entered the realm of the Clear Springs Wilderness. Trail blazes became blocks of cedar wood with an “i” chiseled into the surface, signifying that we’ve entered

a wilderness area. The scenery around us transformed as we descended into the lush forest. Towering trees enveloped us, their canopies providing shelter from the sun's rays. The air carried a delightful mix of damp earth and the sweet fragrance of wildflowers.

The path meandered gracefully, guiding us deeper into the wilderness. We navigated over rocks and tree roots, our footsteps blending with the harmonious symphony of nature. The sound of rushing water grew louder as we approached Hutchins Creek, our destination for the day. 14.5 miles behind us.

Finding a suitable spot near the creek, we set up camp, our tired bodies finding respite. The soothing babble of the creek served as a natural lullaby, easing us into a state of relaxation. Setting up our tents, we felt a sense of accomplishment and anticipation for the journey that lay ahead. The knowledge that this was just the beginning, the first night of many to come, sparked excitement within us. As dusk settled in, I prepared my first meal on the trail—a freeze-dried delight from Peak Refuel. The flavor, Sweet Pork and Rice, filled my senses and brought a comforting warmth to my tired body. It was a taste of civilization amidst the wilderness, nourishing both my hunger and my spirit.

In that moment, surrounded by the beauty of nature and the companionship of my friend, I felt a deep sense of fulfillment. Our journey had only just begun, but already we had experienced the joy of exploration and the serenity of the wilderness. With hearts full of gratitude and anticipation, we settled in for

a well-deserved rest, eager to continue our trek.

Joe and I retreated to our respective tents, bidding each other goodnight. With the sounds of nature as our lullaby, we drifted off to sleep, our bodies and minds finding solace in the embrace of the wilderness. The symphony of chirping crickets, distant hoots of owls and the loud yip-yaps of coyotes served as a reminder that we were now part of something greater—a journey that would test our limits, forge unbreakable bonds, and reveal the hidden depths of our souls.

Day Two: Hutchins Creek to Makanda

As the first rays of dawn delicately painted the sky, nature's symphony gently roused me from my slumber. The melodious chirping of birds blended harmoniously with the rhythmic flow of the nearby creek, creating a serene backdrop to greet the new day. Stretching my limbs and inhaling the crisp morning air, I emerged from my cozy tent, invigorated and eager for the adventures that lay ahead. With practiced ease, I dismantled my tent, folding it meticulously before securing it in my backpack. Each item of gear found its place, carefully organized and ready to accompany me on the second day of our thru-hike. Beside me, Joe mirrored my movements, his experienced hands deftly packing his own belongings. Together, we prepared ourselves for another day of exploration and discovery. Leaving behind the tranquil embrace of Hutchins Creek, Joe and I ventured forth, crossing the threshold from the Clear Springs Wilderness into the untamed beauty of the Bald Knob Wilderness. The landscape underwent a subtle transformation, with dense foliage and towering trees enveloping us, as if nature herself

whispered secrets of ancient wonders.

Our path led us onwards, ascending gradually as we navigated the challenging terrain that marked our exit from the Bald Knob Wilderness. Step by step, our determination matched the steepness of the climb, propelling us closer to the trail head. Finally, we emerged onto Bald Knob Road, a vantage point offering a panoramic view of the wilderness we had conquered. The towering Bald Knob Cross could be seen from the road we walked. Its colossal size and striking design make it an unmistakable landmark against the sky. The cross reaches skyward, its clean lines and sharp angles cutting through the air with a sense of purpose and grace. The gleaming white surface reflects the sunlight, casting a radiant glow that can be seen from miles away.

As we continued our journey along Bald Knob Road, our footsteps became a rhythmic cadence that echoed through the stillness. Passing old abandoned barns and cottage style farm homes. The road slithered its way across the rolling hills. Each steep hill is a vigorous achievement to our feet. It was during this stretch that a friendly forest service worker crossed our path, diligently collecting surveys from fellow adventurers. Joe eagerly engaged, sharing tales of our experiences and insights gained on our thru-hike, contributing to the collective knowledge of those who tread the trail. Resuming our trek, Joe and I pressed onward down Bald Knob Road, our boots resonating with determination and anticipation. As we entered Alto Pass, a sense of solitude enveloped us, amplifying the whispers of nature and the serenity of the hour. An old dog sat patiently on the front step of a business, soaking in the rays

of the morning sun. The town embraced the hush of the early dawn, seemingly awaiting the world's awakening. Undeterred by the slumbering shops, Joe and I pressed on and with each step, the quiet town of Alto Pass faded behind us, blending into the tapestry of memories we were creating. The sun climbed higher, casting its warm glow upon our path, as we embraced the allure of the unknown that awaited us beyond the town's limits.

We captured each blaze we passed with our mobile devices. Almost as documented proof of our existence on this beautiful trail. As Joe and I trekked along the formidable path of our thru-hike, our bodies yearned for a moment of respite. We had been pushing ourselves that day, conquering miles upon miles of challenging terrain. But fate smiled upon us as we stumbled upon a quiet stream just outside Alto Pass. We found a comfortable spot by the stream and sank down, our weary bodies grateful for the brief reprieve. The sound of rushing water accompanied our heavy breaths, slowly calming the fatigue that had settled into our bones. We sat in companionable silence, our gazes fixed on the tranquil vista before us.

At that moment, time seemed to stand still. The worries and pressures of the world faded into insignificance, as if the universe had granted us a break from the chaos of our lives. We embraced the stillness, allowing the tranquility to seep into our very beings. After a short rest, we grabbed our packs and were ready to continue our grand adventure. The stream had revitalized not only our physical selves but also our determination to conquer the remaining challenges that lay ahead. The Cedar Lake woods welcomed us with a

vibrant symphony of colors. Towering pines with gnarled branches reaching out. Sunlight filtered through the dense foliage, casting a kaleidoscope of dappled shadows that danced upon the forest floor. The air was thick with the earthy scent of moss and damp soil.

As we ventured further, the trail led us to the Cedar Lake spillway. The rushing sound of water greeted our ears, growing louder with each step. The spillway came into view, a cascade of water tumbling over mossy rocks. The stones, worn smooth by the ebb and flow of countless seasons, were blanketed in a layer of slippery moss that added an element of adventure to our journey. Navigating the spillway was a test of balance and agility. We carefully stepped onto the moss-covered rocks, gripping onto our trekking poles for support. The water roared beneath us, its energy palpable and invigorating. With each stride, we felt the thrill of conquering the treacherous terrain, our hearts pounding in rhythm with the rush of the water.

After successfully crossing the spillway, we found ourselves in a serene oasis—a campsite nestled just beyond the tumultuous water. It was a sanctuary of tranquility, surrounded by pines that stood as ancient sentinels, guarding the secrets of the woods. The campsite, adorned with a stone fire ring and a well-worn log, seemed to beckon us to rest and recharge. We sat on the log in quiet contemplation, the beauty of the Cedar Lake woods unfolded around us. Sunlight filtered through the trees, casting a soft golden glow on the forest floor. The woods seemed to come alive, with the whisper of the wind and the rustle of leaves telling stories of ancient wisdom and hidden wonders. Joe and I took a few moments to lay out our tents

to dry from the little condensation they collected the previous night. Once rejuvenated, spirits uplifted and tents drier, we bid farewell to the campsite and the Cedar Lake woods. As we continued our River to River trail thru-hike, the memory of that serene oasis stayed with us, a source of inspiration and tranquility during the challenges that lay ahead. The Cedar Lake woods had woven its magic into our hearts, leaving an indelible mark on our souls. We were grateful for the opportunity to witness its beauty, to hike over the slippery mossy rocks of the spillway, and to find solace in the campsite just beyond. And as we ventured deeper into the trail, we came out of the woods, to the Lirley trail head and resumed our road hiking onto Rowan Road, passing through the little town of Makanda. The streets were quiet. Horses greeted us with welcoming glances as we passed small farm homesteads and dogs barked outside the homes we walked past.

Eventually, Joe and I found ourselves drawn into the heart of the famous hippie town, Makanda. As we crossed the bridge over Drury Creek, we felt a wave of excitement as the eclectic charm of Makanda unfolded before us. The famous boardwalk shops beckoned, promising unique treasures and vibrant experiences. But before we could fully immerse ourselves in the town's allure, we decided to drop our heavy packs at the pavilion shelter in Creekside Park. As we settled in, the sound of singing and guitar playing drifted through the air, enticing us to explore further. Across the street, a musical town get-together was in full swing, filling the night with laughter and melodies. Intrigued, Joe and I decided to wait until the late hours, hoping that once the festivities ended, we could discreetly set up camp in the shelter.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting an enchanting glow across the town, we set our plan into motion. Carefully, we moved picnic tables to form a barrier, shielding ourselves and our tents from the passing vehicles. With each table in place, we felt a sense of security, hidden from prying eyes. However, just as we were about to settle in for the night, an odd truck pulled into the park lot, its engine humming idly. Suspicion gripped us, and we exchanged wary glances, assuming it had arrived because of our presence. Our hearts raced as we contemplated our next move, unsure of the truck's intentions.

Amid our uncertainty, a small raccoon wandered into the park, curiously inspecting the trash cans. To our amusement, the mischievous creature tumbled into one of the cans, unable to escape. Faced with the unexpected distraction, we seized the opportunity to avoid potential confrontation. Swiftly, we packed our bags, slinging them over our shoulders, and made our way out of the park, liberating the raccoon as we left. Our footsteps carried us down the road, away from the vibrant bustle of Makanda, until we entered the tranquil embrace of Giant City State Park. After trekking a mile into the trail, we found a suitable spot to set up our tents, fully aware that we would need to move on with the break of dawn. 34.1 miles completed. With the promise to pack up and continue our journey at first light, we assembled our tents. Exhaustion washed over us as we crawled into our sleeping bags, seeking solace in the warmth and comfort they provided. The day's events, filled with anticipation, unexpected encounters, and moments of lightheartedness, replayed in my mind as sleep embraced me. In the stillness of the night, surrounded by the gentle whispers of nature, I drifted into a peaceful slumber.

Day Three: Makanda to Panther Den

As the sun peered through the thin fabric of my tent, I awoke on the third day of our thru-hike. With a stretch and a yawn, I emerged from my cozy sleeping bag and unzipped the tent flap, greeted by the breathtaking sight of clear skies above Giant City State Park. Beside me, my trusty hiking companion, Joe, emerged from his own tent, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. We exchanged weary but excited chatter, knowing that today held another day of adventure and discovery. With our gear packed and our spirits high, we set off on the trail that led us deeper into the enchanting state park. As we walked, marveling at the wonders around us, the trail guided us through a maze of colossal rock formations. Towering behemoths of ancient stone stood proudly, as if guardians of this natural wonderland. We maneuvered over the rocky terrain, our trail runners finding sure footing with each step. Along the way, we spotted trail blazes marked by a blue “i,” guiding us forward with their reassuring presence. These simple yet significant markers became our companions, offering assurance within the vastness of nature.

Our journey continued, and as the morning hours rolled by, the trail led us to Giant City Lodge—a beacon of hospitality nestled within this majestic landscape. With rumbling stomachs and the promise of a hearty meal, we eagerly made our way to the lodge’s restaurant. Stepping inside, we were greeted by the comforting aroma of sizzling bacon and freshly brewed coffee. We settled into our seats, ready to refuel and replenish our energies. The menu boasted a variety of delectable options, but my craving led me to order a country fried steak, fried eggs, hash brown potatoes, and a side of biscuits and gravy. It was a breakfast fit for a hungry hiker, and the taste was nothing short of divine. As we savored each delicious bite, we couldn’t help but appreciate the simple pleasures that this journey had to offer. Surrounded by fellow travelers visiting the lodge.

With our bellies full and our spirits rejuvenated, we filled our water bottles up and bid farewell to the lodge and resumed our trek along the River to River Trail. Our hearts were light, knowing that new wonders awaited us just beyond the next bend. As we trekked through the woods of the state park, we came across Deer Pond, a serene fishing hole nestled within the beauty of nature. The tranquil atmosphere urged us to pause and appreciate the peacefulness around us before forging ahead. However, as the trail unfolded, my pace quickened, and I unintentionally distanced myself from Joe. Lost in my own stride, I missed a crucial trail blaze and found myself on the wrong path, far from where I was supposed to be. Realizing my mistake, I communicated with Joe, via the minimal cell service I was able to use, and together we figured out the error.

With determination and a sense of direction restored, I retraced

my steps and found my way back to the area where I had fallen off the trail. It was a humbling experience, but I rejoined the correct path, knowing I had lost about an hour of hiking time. Alone in the dense forest, I continued my journey, navigating through creeks and maneuvering over fallen trees. Eventually, the trail led me into the Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge—a flatter section that offered respite from the demanding terrain. To my delight, I reunited with Joe near a small stream where he had taken a brief pit-stop. As we caught our breath and enjoyed the surroundings, we were greeted by another hiker—a young man section hiking that area of the River to River Trail. We exchanged small talk and bid him farewell as he continued on his own adventure. Pressing forward, we ventured through Crab Orchard, passing remnants of the past, such as the old SIU fireplace and decaying building foundations that now merged with nature's growth. Our journey led us out of the woods and toward the trail head on South Rocky Comfort Road.

Seizing the opportunity of cell reception, Joe and I took a moment to call our wives, ensuring they were aware of our plans to camp in Panther Den for the night. As we prepared to continue, a woman on horseback rode into Crab Orchard from the opposite direction, offering a friendly greeting before continuing on her own path. Crossing over Rocky Comfort Road, we entered the Panther Den Wilderness area. The trail began to slope, taking us down steep hills that led to waterways flowing from Devil's Kitchen Lake, from the north. Deep in the heart of the woods, we traversed creeks and stumbled upon an old rusted truck, a relic of bygone years. Eventually, we arrived at a campsite nestled against a small rock overhang, with a

gentle creek flowing nearby. It felt like an idyllic spot to call it a day. After setting up our tents, we began our own camp chores, including collecting water, organizing our gear and turning on our stoves to boil water for dinner. 47 miles completed. As dusk settled, the aroma of my Coconut Curry Chicken and Rice freeze-dried meal filled the air. It was a scrumptious delight, but it left me feeling pleasantly full. With the night enveloping the forest, we settled into our tents, ready to catch some rest.

Among the darkness, the sound of a Whippoorwill bird kept us company throughout the night. Its persistent calls echoed through the woods, amusing us with its lively presence. We laughed and joked, finding solace in the whimsical melody as we drifted into a peaceful slumber, eagerly anticipating the adventures that awaited us the next day.

Day Four: Panther Den to Hilltop Campground

As the morning fog enveloped the forest, Joe and I emerged from our tents on the fourth day of our River to River trail adventure. We dismantled our tents, discussing our plans for the day. The allure of a nearby campground offering food, refreshing showers, and laundry facilities enticed us to take it easy and enjoy a “Nero” day—after only hiking a few miles enjoying a day of rest and relaxation, often near a town. Not the same as a “Zero” day where one would not hike any miles at all for the exchange of rest to recuperate and heal. In the serene morning hours, we set off, the woods cloaked in a peaceful stillness. The sound of flowing water accompanied our footsteps, while even the birds seemed to remain silent, perhaps still slumbering. The trail led us to the famous Panther Den City, surrounded by towering rock formations that seemed to reach the sky. I couldn’t resist the temptation to explore further and ventured into one of the formations, feeling the temperature drop and a refreshing coolness surround me.

Continuing on, we climbed out of Panther Den Wilderness through an old forest road turned trail, passing by vast fields of cattle. The trail became steep, covered with boulders and rocks, almost resembling a rock scrambling experience. Despite the challenging terrain, we pressed on, eager to conquer the obstacles that lay before us. Emerging from the woods, we found ourselves on Wayside Lane, a road that meandered past homesteads and farms. Although the concrete surface was harsh on our feet, it provided a respite from the rugged terrain we had encountered. Moving forward, we turned onto Mt. Hebron Road, passing the small Mt. Hebron Church and continuing on North Lick Creek Road. Our eyes caught sight of an abandoned gas station next to the I-57 overpass—an eerie reminder of the passage of time. The empty pumps and boarded-up windows stood as a testament to a bygone era.

Crossing over the I-57 overpass, we were greeted by the enthusiastic honk of a passing semi-truck, a cheerful acknowledgment of our progress thus far. Once we had crossed, we finally arrived at Hilltop Campground, our planned refuge for the evening. 55 miles completed. After meeting the owner, who shed some trail magic onto us in the form of a cold bottle of water and a can of cola, and finding a spot to call home for the night—a picnic shelter within the campground—I decided to make a phone call and order a delivery pizza to treat ourselves. However, my excitement faded as I discovered that the local pizza shop was closed. Consulting my phone's map, I learned that the only available option for food was a Subway sandwich restaurant located three to four miles up the road. Determined to satiate our hunger, I left my pack behind and embarked on a 7-mile round trip to bring back sandwiches for Joe and me.

The journey proved tougher than anticipated, with steep hills along Goreville Road testing my endurance. Yet, the promise of a delicious reward kept me going. Upon my return, we eagerly devoured the sandwiches, finding comfort and satisfaction in every bite. With our bellies full, we decided to cowboy camp in the shelter, opting only to use our sleeping bags and sleeping pads on the shelter floor. Joe checked the weather reports for the next day and discovered that storms were projected to hit in the early hours and possibly throughout the day. Snuggled in our sleeping bags, we mentally prepared ourselves for the unpredictable and wet weather that lay ahead, going over our plans for the upcoming day. As we drifted off to sleep, the sound of rain pattering on the roof of the shelter, accompanied by distant thunder, served as a reminder of the challenges and excitement that awaited us on the trail.

Day Five: Hilltop Campground to Goreville

As the fifth day of our River to River trail thru-hike dawned, Joe and I were abruptly awakened by the deafening roar of thunder and the blinding crash of lightning. A torrential downpour immediately followed, the rain falling so heavily and blowing into where we slept that we were drenched. Panic set in as we realized our gear was getting soaked. Frantically, we stuffed our unpacked belongings into our bags and made a mad dash for the nearest shelter—a restroom building within Hilltop Campground. Once inside, we shook off the water and took a moment to catch our breath. Pulling out our mobile phones, we accessed the weather Doppler and anxiously watched as the storm raged on overhead.

As we waited out the storm, we realized that there was a small window of a few hours with a break in the rain. Seizing the opportunity, we hastily devised a new plan for the day's itinerary. We decided to hike forward into Goreville, seeking refuge at Acee's restaurant and gas station to wait out the storm

and take a much needed rest stop. With the plan in place, we continued to wait in the shelter, watching the storm gradually pass. Later in the morning, as the rain subsided, we collected water from the campground and set off on our adventure once again. Our goal was to conquer the first section of Ferne Clyffe State Park, just outside of Goreville. As we ventured forth, the recent surge of rainfall became evident when we stumbled upon Bork Falls. The sheer volume of water cascading over the falls was so immense that it appeared as if a river was flowing across the road. Crossing proved to be a slight challenge, but the sight of the overflowing falls was a breathtaking spectacle.

Pressing on into Ferne Clyffe, we found ourselves captivated by the towering pines, the majestic rock cliffs, and the abundance of waterfalls and flooded creeks. The landscape transformed into a mesmerizing oasis of nature's beauty, reminding us of the power and allure of the wilderness. With each step, we marveled at the serenity and splendor that surrounded us, grateful for the respite from the storm and the opportunity to witness nature's grandeur. Our spirits lifted as we embraced the challenges and wonders that lay ahead on our thru-hike. As Joe and I hiked through Ferne Clyffe State Park, we encountered the first of many creek crossings. The heavy rainstorm earlier that morning had left the creek swollen and the dark brown waters flowed rapidly, disguising the bottom of the creek bed. We hesitated, unsure of how deep the crossing actually was. But a surge of determination overcame me, and I decided to take the first step into the water. As I waded in, the water rose, reaching past my waist. It was at least four feet deep or more, and the current threatened to sweep me away. Anxiety filled my chest, but I pushed forward, putting one foot in front of the other.

I could hear Joe's voice murmuring behind me, expressing his disbelief, "Fuck, dude." But I remained focused, determined to find a path across the deep creek. With each step, I felt the current swirling around me, but I refused to let fear paralyze me. I swallowed my anxiety and pressed on. After what felt like an eternity, I finally reached the other side. Relief washed over me, and I turned to see Joe following my lead, finding comfort in the fact that I had made it across. He, too, braved the deep waters, mustering the same determination as he fought against the current. As we continued our journey through Ferne Clyffe, we encountered more creek crossings. Though they were not as deep as the first, we faced them with newfound confidence. The knowledge that we had conquered the challenging and uncertain deep creek gave us the strength to face each subsequent obstacle head-on.

We pushed on, crossing creek after creek, undeterred by the wetness or the challenges that lay before us. Our determination and the unwavering belief that there was only one way to reach the end of the trail in Elizabethtown propelled us forward. We knew that we had to persevere through the thick and thin, trusting in our abilities and the trail that lay ahead. With each successful crossing, our confidence grew, and the hardships of the journey seemed to fade into the background. Together, Joe and I forged ahead, bound by our shared determination and the unyielding desire to conquer the River to River trail. As I embarked on this great adventure, little did I know that our journey would be so much more than just a hike. Along the winding paths and through the rugged terrain, I discovered the power of shared experiences and the deep connection that can be forged with a newfound friend.

It all started when Joe and I realized that we both came from similar musical backgrounds. Our conversations turned into friendly debates about music and culture, as we discussed our mutual admiration for talented artists and our disdain for those we deemed less skilled. We delved into the realms of music production and found common ground in our love for certain eras of music. While hiking together, we developed our own unique brand of comedic relief centered around music. Joe would play a particular artist on his mobile device speaker as we trekked along the trail. We found solace and motivation in these tunes, creating what we called “YD Mode.” Whenever we decided to put the “wheels in motion” and “grind some miles out,” we would blast those songs and let the beats envelop us. It was as if music became our driving force, pushing us forward and helping us conquer the aches and pains in our weary feet. In those moments, as the melodies swirled around us, our minds became isolated from the physical discomfort of hiking extensively. We found ourselves in sync with the rhythm, our feet moving to the beat. The shared experience of music brought us closer together, reinforcing our commitment to complete the arduous journey.

It was the little things, like our musical camaraderie, that made this adventure truly memorable and unforgettable. As we hiked mile after mile, we shared laughter, debates, and moments of pure joy. Through these experiences, a bond was formed, a bond that I hope will last for years to come. Thru-hiking the River to River trail was not just about conquering nature’s challenges; it was about discovering incredible connections that can be forged through shared passions. As I reflect on our journey, I realize that it was the shared love for music

and the moments of respite it that truly made the experience extraordinary. As we ventured deeper through Ferne Clyffe I found myself in awe of the natural wonders that enveloped me. The deep, lush forests of the Shawnee National Forest seemed to hold a sense of nostalgia and belonging. It was as if I had finally discovered my place in the world, walking through these woods. I couldn't help but yearn to walk this trail everyday of my life, to spend eternity roaming the enchanting woods of the Shawnee.

Walking along the trail, I realized as I gazed around me that no amount of research, excerpts, books, or videos that I had read and watched about this trail could truly capture the essence of actually being out here, amid it all. The experiences shared by others who had journeyed this trail could never fully convey the overwhelming feeling of actually being here, surrounded by the untamed beauty of nature. Each step I took along the trail filled me with a profound sense of peace and a welcomed sense of direction. The trail became my guiding companion, leading me through the wilderness with a comforting certainty. I realized that my adventure was only halfway complete, but the thought of it ever coming to an end felt almost unbearable.

Day Five: Goreville to Goddard Crossing

As we pushed through Ferne Clyffe, I found myself completely immersed in the ambiance around me. The scent of rain hung in the air, and the overcast clouds created a serene atmosphere. It reminded me of the cozy feeling of curling up on the couch during a crisp autumn day, sipping a hot beverage like Apple Cider, and relishing in the warmth of a fire and a good book or a comforting movie. I wished for that feeling to last forever, for the rain-soaked tranquility to be eternally preserved. But time pressed on, and we emerged from the woods onto Happy Hollow Road, walking on a new road into the small town of Goreville. Despite the physical fatigue, my spirit was lifted, and I couldn't help but carry the memories of the trail in my heart. As I continued on my adventure, I hoped to hold onto these feelings, to carry the spirit of the trail with me forever. The River to River trail had become more than just a path; it had become a part of me, shaping my perspective and leaving an indelible mark on my soul. We walked along the small neighborhood in the quiet town of Goreville, the

anticipation of reaching Acee's restaurant before the impending rainstorm heightened our pace. We could see a few cars and trucks filling up at the gas pumps, their occupants hurriedly stepping inside, seemingly eager to avoid the approaching downpour. We followed suit, entering the bustling building. The moment we stepped inside, the intoxicating aroma of fried chicken, pizza, and onion rings took over our nostrils. Our eyes scanned the surroundings, taking in the sight of shelves filled with an assortment of junk food and cooler doors displaying an array of tempting beverages in various flavors and brands. Even the freezer cooler door beckoned with its enticing selection of frozen treats, from ice cream bars to fudgesicles.

After five days on the trail, surviving on nothing but freeze-dried meals and heavy-calorie bars, it felt as if we had entered a dreamland filled with the tantalizing snacks and drinks we had fantasized about since leaving Hilltop Campground that morning. Without hesitation, I walked up to the counter, asking my friend Joe if he was hungry, and promptly placed an order for a large box of chicken tenders and a large box of onion rings. As I made my way to the drink cooler doors, I couldn't resist grabbing an energy beverage and a cold Coke. And just as an afterthought, I snagged a bag of Skittles from a nearby shelf.

"Will that be all?" the friendly clerk behind the register asked.

"For now..." I replied with a grin.

With my purchased items in hand, I signaled to the clerk that they could deliver the food to the table near the doors when it was ready. Joe and I found a seat at the table, eagerly pulling

out our battery banks and cell phones, seizing the opportunity to charge them in the outlets provided by the restaurant. As we focused on our screens, checking weather reports and catching up on messages, a faint rumble of thunder could be heard nearby.

Our eyes briefly lifted from the screens, and we glanced outside to witness the rain beginning to fall. The timing couldn't have been more perfect. We sat there, savoring the delicious aroma of our impending feast, the sound of raindrops hitting the pavement providing a soothing backdrop to our much-needed respite. It was a moment of contentment, a break from the rigors of the trail, and a blissful indulgence in the comforts we had been longing for. As we awaited our food, charged our devices, and relished the taste of real, hot meals, we knew that this brief interlude at Acee's restaurant would fuel us not just physically but also emotionally for the days of hiking that lay ahead. The rain outside became a symphony of nature, amplifying the sense of coziness and shelter we felt within those walls. It was a moment of respite, shared laughter, and the simple joy of satisfying our cravings. Little did we know that this unexpected stop at Acee's would become a cherished memory of our thru-hike adventure, a moment of indulgence and resupply that reminded us of the small pleasures in life. And as we continued our journey, our stomachs full and our spirits lifted, we were ready to face the challenges that awaited us on the trail, fueled by both the food we had enjoyed and the camaraderie we had strengthened.

As we patiently waited for the rainstorm to pass over us, taking shelter inside Acee's, the harsh downpour outside was a sight

to behold. The rain hit the roof of the building with a forceful drumming, creating an intense symphony of nature's power. We watched in awe as the raindrops jumped off the ground upon impact with the pavement. Lightning illuminated the sky, followed by the rumbling of thunder that seemed never-ending.

As I witnessed this display of nature's might, a sense of awe washed over me, mingled with a tinge of fear. The storm was a reminder of how small and vulnerable we are in the face of the elements. It was a humbling experience that stirred a primal instinct within me, urging me to seek the safety of shelter and respect the forces that surrounded me. Yet, among the awe and trepidation, a sense of anticipation tugged at my heart. For I knew that once the storm passed, I would step out into a world transformed. The aftermath of the tempest would leave its mark, and I would bear witness to the raw beauty and the challenges that lay in its wake. The unnerving feeling crept in, reminding me of the task at hand. The debris, the flooded streets, and the altered landscape awaited me once the storm subsided. It was a reminder that I too would have to face the aftermath, to confront the reality of the storm's impact.

Inside the safety of the restaurant, we sat at our table, gorging on the chicken tenders and onion rings that had been brought to us. It felt as though we hadn't eaten freshly cooked food in months, tearing at the tender meat and crispy rings with a ravenous hunger. While perhaps not as dramatic as cannibals in a zombie movie, our eagerness to devour the meal was undeniable. Our hunger had been awakened, and we savored every bite. Just as we were enjoying our feast, Joe checked his weather report and delivered the news that the storm was expected to last for

a few more hours. It was a small setback in our plans to cover more miles, but we couldn't help but feel a sense of relief that we were not out in the midst of the wet and wild weather. We were grateful for the shelter that Acee's provided.

To makeup for the lost daylight and distance that we had hoped to cover, I suggested the idea of night hiking. It seemed like a viable option to continue making progress on our thru-hike journey. Joe considered the suggestion, weighing the pros and cons, and eventually agreed that it was a reasonable plan. As the storm continued its symphony outside, I saw an opportunity to be productive. I left Acee's briefly, walking next door to the Dollar General store where I had planned to purchase food and resupply for the remainder of our thru-hike. Top Ramen, Slim Jims, granola bars, and electrolyte beverage packets filled my basket. With the necessary supplies in hand, I returned to Acee's, breaking down the bulky packaging to fit everything into my food bag. It was a task that needed to be done, and I felt a sense of accomplishment as I organized my provisions.

Now, as we waited for the storm to subside, we occupied ourselves with various chores and tasks. We knew that opportunities like Acee's would be few and far between on the trail, so we made the most of our time here. It was a waiting game, but we were grateful for the shelter, food, and the chance to recharge before venturing back out into the elements. As the rain continued to pour outside, we savored every moment within the comfort of Acee's, knowing that soon we would once again be immersed in the wild beauty of the trail. The storm served as a reminder of the unpredictability of nature, but it also reinforced our resilience and adaptability as hikers. And

so, we patiently waited, cherishing the temporary respite that Acee's provided, and preparing ourselves for the next leg of our thrilling adventure.

After patiently waiting for the rainstorm to pass at Acee's restaurant in Goreville, Joe and I were relieved to see the rain beginning to subside. Though the clouds still blanketed the sky above us, the Doppler radar on our mobile devices confirmed that the rain had passed. With a mix of hesitation and determination, we grabbed our packs, threw them over our shoulders, and walked out of the warm embrace of Acee's. As we made our way back to Ferne Clyffe State Park to resume our thru-hike adventure, we were taken aback by the sight that greeted us. The rainfall had filled the creeks with an abundance of water, turning them into rushing streams. Despite our initial shock, we remained confident that we could navigate through. Continuing through Ferne Clyffe, we reminisced about another hiker who had announced his own thru-hike adventure, starting from the opposite side in Elizabethtown and heading westward. We had been following his journey through updates he posted on a hiker forum dedicated to the River to River trail. Eager to see if there were any new updates, we checked our mobile devices, only to find that there hadn't been any recent posts. Undeterred, we pressed on, knowing that we were on our own path, but still curious about the progress of our fellow hiker.

Joe activated "YD Mode" on his mobile phone, a setting that propelled us into a faster and heavier pace, driven by the ambition to push our way to Rebman Lane, just outside Ferne Clyffe State Park. Lost in the energizing tunes of Young Dolph, an American rap artist, we maintained our stride as we walked

the gravel path of Rebman Lane. Emerging onto Highway 37, the sound of fast-paced traffic soared by, resembling the roaring of rockets. “We’ll probably have to deal with trucks and shit,” Joe remarked. But I wasn’t bothered by it. We crossed the road, purposefully walking towards oncoming traffic. This approach allowed us to have the advantage, enabling us to move out of the way if necessary, while ensuring our safety and that of others on the road. After a short fifteen-minute walk on Highway 37, we reached Tall Tree Lake Road, which marked the beginning of a three-mile road walk to Dutchman Lake. The road stretched ahead of us, and we embarked on this leg of our journey with determination and a sense of anticipation.

As we walked, our minds focused on the path ahead, the challenges that awaited us, and the beauty of the trail. We savored the freedom of the open road, the camaraderie between us, and the shared adventure that lay before us. With each step, we moved closer to Dutchman Lake, ready to embrace the next chapter of our thru-hike. And as the road stretched out ahead, we knew that every mile covered was a testament to our determination and the indomitable spirit of hikers who dare to embark on this great unknown.

We soon found ourselves approaching a stand of tall trees, coming off Twinz Lane. To our surprise, we noticed blue ribbons tied to the trees, adorned with what appeared to be newer trail blazes. The fresh blue “i” stood out against the ancient bark of the trees. We recalled reading about a recent trail reroute in this area due to a storm that had swept through, causing extensive damage to the original trail. Curiosity piqued, we followed the reroute, observing the destruction that the

recent storm had inflicted upon the enchanted forest. Majestic pines lay toppled over like a massive pile of toothpicks strewn across the ground. It was a humbling sight, a reminder of nature's power and the ever-changing landscape we were traversing.

Feeling the need for a break, we stumbled upon an unexpected sight—a picnic table oddly placed in the middle of the Dutchman woods. It didn't seem too old, and we couldn't help but wonder how it came to be there. However, our wonder was short-lived as we continued on our way towards Dutchman Lake. Before we knew it, we found ourselves standing at the edge of Dutchman Lake, its shimmering reflection captivating our gaze. The sky above was painted with a delicate pink dusk, which was mirrored in the calm waters of the lake. It was a moment of serene beauty, a pause in our journey to appreciate the natural wonders that surrounded us and take a couple of photos of ourselves in front of the Dutchman Lake trail head sign.

As the evening settled in, we prepared for our night hike adventure. Strapping our headlamps to our heads, we illuminated the path before us as we stepped off Fishing Hole Lane near the Dutchman Lake boat ramp and back into the woods. The beams of our headlamps cut through the darkness like lasers, guiding our way through the dense forest. The night enveloped us, casting eerie shadows and amplifying the sounds of nature around us. Every step forward was accompanied by the rustling of leaves and the occasional hoot of an owl. We relied on our headlamps to reveal the trail, casting a narrow beam of light that guided us deeper into the night. As we ventured further

into the darkness, we felt a sense of exhilaration. The night hike added a new level of adventure to our journey, intensifying our connection to the trail and heightening our senses. We moved cautiously, but with a newfound confidence, knowing that we were experiencing something unique and extraordinary. As the hours passed, we embraced the solitude and serenity of the night, savoring the quiet moments and the mystical ambiance that surrounded us. The night hike became a testament to our resilience and determination, reminding us of the boundless possibilities that awaited us on this remarkable thru-hike adventure. The clock struck past midnight. Unbeknownst to us, we had already passed through many remarkable sections of the trail. Our only reminders of our whereabouts were the pings on our GPS maps and the occasional illuminated location marker or sign that emerged from the darkness, illuminated by the beams of our headlamps. We had even hiked under the bustling traffic crossing overhead on Interstate 24, a stark contrast to the tranquility of the trail. The Odum Tract Ecological Area had also hidden itself among us, with remnants of its historic farm culture scattered along the trail. We didn't see the abandoned Corn Pickers, relics of a bygone era that had been untouched for decades. Each step brought us closer to our destination, and with anticipation building, we picked up our pace slightly. However, our progress was abruptly halted by a thick, deep clay-like sludge that had formed from the recent rainfall. With each step, our legs sank into the muddy soil, resembling a bowl of oatmeal. Even our trekking poles failed to find solid ground, sinking into the mud like candles on a cake. We remembered hearing about trucks that had been in the area, working to remove downed trees. Reports had indicated that the trail was impassable due to the damage caused by their tires. Yet, there

we were, knee-deep in the mire.

We felt a sense of being swallowed by the quicksand-like qualities of the mud. It was a relentless struggle to break free from its grip. Eventually, we crawled our way out of the worst of it, grateful to find a slightly wetter substitute for the trail. With each step, the muddy waters cleansed our clothes, shoes, and trekking poles, as if washing away the remnants of our muddy ordeal. As we trudged onward, porch lights flickered ahead, providing a glimmer of hope. Quick checks on our mobile phones confirmed our location. We had reached it—the official halfway point of the River to River trail known as Goddard Crossing. Named after the generous landowner who allowed the trail to pass through his property, the trail led us in front of a couple of residences before a large River to River trail sign glowed in front of us. The beams of our headlamps reflected the scene before us, creating a shrine-like display of endless possibilities.

In celebration of our milestone achievement, we snapped a picture, capturing the memory of our journey thus far. Exhausted from the day's travels, we began to discuss where we would set up camp for the night. Both of us yearned for a well-deserved rest. Joe calculated that we had hiked an impressive 26 miles that day. 81 miles completed. We found a secluded spot just off Highway 45, sinking ourselves into the shadows cast by the surrounding woods. Setting up a stealth camp, we settled in as trucks whizzed by on the nearby highway. Few words were spoken, as the weariness of the day weighed heavily upon us. We both fell asleep, finding solace in the stillness of the night and the promise of a new day on the horizon.

Day Six: Goddard Crossing to Petticoat Junction

Stepping out of our tents, Joe and I emerged from the shelter of the woods, greeted by the bright rays of daylight. The landscape around us seemed otherworldly, as if we had landed on a distant Martian planet. It was a stark contrast to the pitch-black night we had experienced just hours before. Taking our time, we carefully packed our tents and gear into our backpacks, securing them with straps before shouldering the weight. Continuing our trek down Highway 45, our weary bodies reminded us of the miles we had covered so far. As we passed Taylor Farms, a large group of cattle grazed near the highway. We exchanged a short joke as we playfully attempted to feed a particularly interested cow. Moving forward, we passed small homes and old home sites, drawing closer to the Max Creek trail head.

Descending into the woods, the surroundings became thick and eerie. The towering trees and dense foliage created a sense of mystery and seclusion. The hills led us to a lower

elevation, where the cool air from Max Creek provided a much needed atmosphere of relief and retreat. As we neared the creek, the water flowed sharply between the rocks, its icy clear blue shining brilliantly. Taking a few minutes, we filtered water and replenished our bottles, exchanging a brief comedic skit about hiker safety during creek crossings.

Refreshed and invigorated, we resumed our journey, picking up the pace as we ventured deeper into the dense woods. The trail led us through a labyrinth of trees, their branches reaching out like skeletal fingers. It felt as if we were entering a secret realm, hidden away from the outside world. Climbing out of the woods, we found ourselves on Hilltop Lane, eagerly anticipating the sight of Boot Ranch. Walking along the road, the pavement transitioned into gravel, and a farm appeared on the horizon. Fence posts adorned with old boots lined the property, each boot telling its own unique story. Some were weathered and worn, carrying the weight of years, while others seemed new. Some had succumbed to the harsh weather, deteriorating over time, while others aged gracefully. It was a sight to behold, a testament to the lives and stories that had passed through this land. Alongside the boots, old farm equipment rested against the fence, adding to the rustic charm.

Among the intriguing display, a comedic sign on a nearby electric pole warned of trained chickens protecting the farm. We couldn't help but snicker at the whimsical touch. After a moment taking in the sights of the farm, we continued to the end of the road and once again found ourselves enveloped in the thick woods. The trail curved through brush, revealing small rock formations, massive boulders, and miniature canyons that

seemed to emerge from the very ground we walked on. The forest floor was covered in a thick green moss-like layer, adding to the enchantment of our surroundings. Occasionally, a creek or stream would appear, providing nourishment to the vibrant woods that surrounded us.

As we forged ahead, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe and gratitude for the incredible journey we were undertaking. With each step, I embraced the unknown, eagerly anticipating what awaited us as we continued our adventure. As Joe and I trekked along the River to River trail, a sign directed our attention to the next point of interest: Gum Springs. Seeing those words spelled out in white paint, I couldn't help but feel a sense of apprehension. The memory of last year's treacherous hike into Gum Springs flooded my mind. It was a path strewn with rocks, resembling a challenging climb out of the depths of hell. However, I reminded myself that this time we were heading in the opposite direction, and I hoped for a different experience.

The proud, towering pines surrounded us as we ventured through the dense woods. Time seemed to pass effortlessly, and before I knew it, Joe and I had successfully made our way through Gum Springs and arrived at the trail head on Gum Springs Road. We decided it was the perfect moment to take a short break. I retrieved my stove and food bag, offering my last freeze-dried meal to Joe. We opted to share a Pad Thai with Chicken, relishing every bite and expressing our mutual appreciation for the delicious lunch. With our hunger satisfied, we both kicked off our shoes and dipped our feet into the cool waters of Cedar Creek, which flowed nearby. It was a refreshing respite, providing relief to our weary feet. The brief

intermission by the creek allowed us to recharge and heal, both physically and mentally. Fueled by the warmth of a satisfying meal and the soothing touch of the creek, we gathered our belongings and resumed our journey.

Continuing along the trail, we walked beneath the canopy of tall, thick pine trees that seemed to engulf the surrounding woods. Each blue trail marker that passed us by served as a reminder that we were steadily approaching our destination. Along the way, we encountered groups of horseback riders. Out of respect, Joe and I temporarily stepped off the trail, giving the riders ample space to pass by safely. We stood calmly and motionlessly, ensuring that our presence wouldn't startle the horses and endanger their riders. A brief exchange of greetings and mutual appreciation for the natural beauty surrounding us was shared between us and each passing rider.

As Joe and I continued our thru-hike along the River to River trail, we were met with a pleasant surprise. A thick wooden sign displaying a map greeted us, indicating that we had arrived at the East Trigg Trail head. We couldn't help but cheer and celebrate our progress. Pausing briefly, Joe took the opportunity to exchange messages with our friend Chris, who had agreed to meet us on the trail and provide some much-needed trail magic. As we chatted, a horseback rider passed by with two friendly dogs. I couldn't resist showering one of the dogs with love and a friendly greeting. After finalizing our plan to meet Chris, we continued on towards Tin Whistle, a pedestrian and equestrian tunnel that ran beneath a seemingly endless railroad. As we passed through the tunnel, covered in vibrant graffiti, we caught a glimpse of the shimmering Bay

Creek/Millstone Lake on the other side. Crossing the man-made dam that bordered the small body of water, we marveled at the beauty of our surroundings.

As daylight began to fade, we pressed further into the woods, passing Ruby Falls Junction and Crow Knob Ecological Area. Our destination for the day was Petticoat Junction, a spot we had agreed upon. To our surprise and delight, Chris appeared before us, having walked in from Cedar Grove Road where he had parked his car. He greeted us with the exciting news of offering us a ride to a nearby town for a hot meal and a couple of beers before returning us to Cedar Grove Road. Overjoyed, Joe and I raced to Chris's car, hopping in as we sped towards Eddyville. Our hunger and anticipation grew as we arrived at Shotgun Eddie's, a famous food stop along the trail. We were warmly greeted by the restaurant staff and promptly ordered a round of cold beers. I couldn't resist ordering the "Eddie burger" with a side of onion rings, devouring it faster than I had ordered it. The satisfaction of the delicious food paired perfectly with the refreshing beer. We shared stories of our previous visits to the area and discussed future adventures. Reluctantly, we bid farewell to the luxury of the food hole and returned to Chris's car, making our way back to Cedar Grove Road.

Upon our return, we exchanged brief goodbyes and good lucks with Chris. Once again, Joe and I donned our headlamps and began hiking into the darkness, guided only by the trail blazes and occasional GPS location pings. Eventually, we stumbled upon a wooden plaque that read "Petticoat Junction." Joe and I hiked 20.2 miles. 101.2 miles completed. To our surprise, a voice called out from the dark, "Is that Glenn and Joe!?" We

were greeted by Steve, the fellow hiker, delighted to run into us, who we had read that left the eastern terminus a few days ago. He must've also seen that we started from the western side of the trail from our start post on the River to River forum. What are the odds that we would cross paths and share a camp site that night?

Day Seven: Petticoat Junction to Bethesda Church

On the seventh day, Joe and I woke up at Petticoat Junction to the sound of birds chirping and the gentle rustling of the wind through the trees. As we emerged from our tents, we were greeted by a fellow hiker named Steve, who was hiking the trail in the opposite direction. We exchanged brief greetings before Steve packed up his gear and hurried down the trail, eager to reach his destination. Little did we know at the time, but Steve had made the decision to call off his thru-hike due to impending weather that would complicate his plans to finish within his designated time frame. As we watched Steve disappear into the woods, we packed up our own tents and gear with the same swiftness. With plans to reach Eddyville that day and indulge in a delicious breakfast at Shotgun Eddy's, we set off eastward from Petticoat Junction. Our first challenge of the day presented itself right away - multiple little creeks and streams that we had to cross. Determined not to get our feet wet, as we had run out of dry socks, we carefully maneuvered across the water, tying our

damp socks to the back of our packs in hopes that they would dry as we hiked. The terrain gradually became more difficult as we scaled small rock formations that dotted the sharp hills around us.

Scaling out of the Jackson Hole and Double Branch Ecological Areas, the sharp canyons and cliffs gave way to the lush woods and serene creeks below. The trail transformed from a dirt path to an old road, eventually transitioning into a gravel road that led us out of the woods and into a tall grass prairie region. We had reached the outskirts of Eddyville. However, as we neared the heart of the small town, Joe shared with me that his ankle had severely swollen and walking had become challenging for him. Determined to push through, Joe continued to limp for the next mile and a half into town, hoping that a rest at Shotgun Eddy's, along with some hot food, would provide enough reprieve for his ankle to recover. Sadly, as we entered town and saw the charming sights of Eddyville, Joe expressed his possible intentions of calling it quits and leaving the trail at this point. I couldn't help but feel a mix of disappointment and concern for my friend. We had come so far together, and the thought of continuing without him seemed daunting. But ultimately, I knew that the decision to leave the trail was his to make.

We made our way to Shotgun Eddy's, where we sat down to enjoy a hearty breakfast. As we indulged in the delicious food, Joe contemplated his next steps. It was a bittersweet moment, knowing that our adventure together might be coming to an end sooner than expected. But I also understood the importance of prioritizing one's health and well-being. After devouring a

delicious breakfast burrito and a plate of flapjacks, Joe and I stepped outside of Shotgun Eddy's. Joe found a couple of chairs and propped his swollen ankles up, while I grabbed a bag of ice from the kind folks working inside the restaurant. As Joe settled into the chair, he began dialing his cell phone to call his wife. I could sense the weight of the conversation he was about to have, and I knew it wouldn't be an easy one.

Giving Joe some space, I also reached for my phone and dialed my wife's number. I wanted to share with her the news of Joe possibly ending his thru-hike and the possibility of me continuing without him. The conversation was filled with mixed emotions, both of us understanding the difficulties and challenges we faced on the trail. After hanging up the phone, I rejoined Joe, and we sat in silence for several minutes, anticipation heavy in the air. Finally, Joe stood from his chair, putting weight on his swollen ankle. He looked at me with determination and told me that he was going to finish the thru-hike. He shared with me that if he was going to call it quits, it would be on his own terms, when he wanted to. I couldn't help but feel a surge of admiration for Joe's resilience and strength. He had dug deep within himself and mustered the willpower to push forward.

What struck me most was Joe's refusal to let his circumstances define him. He could have easily chosen the easier path, sparing himself from the agony and discomfort. But Joe's commitment to completing the journey went beyond physical pain—it was a testament to his character, his unwavering dedication to his goals.

Our adventure was set to test our limits, but little did I know that Joe would become the embodiment of resilience and perseverance. It started innocently enough—a swollen ankle that seemed like a minor setback. But as the miles piled on, so did Joe’s pain. With every step, I could see the strain etched on his face, his movements becoming increasingly labored. Yet, he refused to let his injury dictate the outcome of our journey. Several opportunities presented themselves, almost gift-wrapped, urging Joe to quit and ease his suffering. The trail offered escape routes, shortcuts, and moments of rest that seemed like lifelines. But Joe, undeterred, turned them down one after another, with a fierce determination radiating from within.

With renewed determination, Joe and I gathered our belongings and prepared to continue. We knew that the next few miles on New Home Road, from Shotgun Eddy’s to the Lusk Creek trail head, would be slow-going. But we were confident in our ability to rely on one another, take breaks as needed, and communicate any pain or discomfort we felt. The end was in sight, and we were ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead. As we walked, I couldn’t help but marvel at Joe’s strength and tenacity. His willingness to continue, even with an undiagnosed injury, inspired me. I realized that I would do anything in my power to support him and help him reach the other side, to Elizabethtown. If it meant carrying Joe on my own shoulders, I would gladly do it to ensure his successful finish to this memorable journey.

With each step, our bond grew stronger, and our determination burned brighter. Together, we pushed forward, supporting one

another through the pain and fatigue. The road stretched out before us, but we knew that as long as we had each other, we could conquer anything. The journey was far from over, and the challenges that awaited us were unknown. But with Joe's unwavering spirit and our shared determination, I knew that we had what it took to reach the end of our River to River thru-hike. And as we continued down the road, I felt grateful for the opportunity to witness Joe's strength and to be a part of this incredible adventure by his side.

As we slowly approached the winding road leading to the Lusk Creek trail head, I noticed Joe wincing with every swift motion accidentally made with his ankle. Despite the discomfort, we both maintained a positive and determined mindset. We entered the Lusk Creek region from the trail head parking area, passing a marker sign indicating that the Lusk Creek Ford was 1.5 miles away. Before venturing further, Joe rolled up his pant legs to prepare for the journey ahead. We paused at the large Lusk Creek Wilderness National Forest sign, capturing the moment by snapping a picture on our phones. It was important to document this special adventure. With the memory preserved, we continued our hike, descending down the slope through the dense pine woods. As we made our way down the hillside, we encountered a couple of horseback riders accompanied by their faithful dog. This unexpected encounter provided Joe with an opportunity to rest briefly before we proceeded down the steep slope. The path was rugged, with boulders and rock edges serving as makeshift stairs, guiding us towards Little Bear Branch Creek, which fed into the magnificent Lusk Creek.

Reaching the base of the slope, we marveled at the vastness of the Lusk Creek wilderness. The sheer expanse of nature surrounding us left me in awe. We approached the Bowed Tree Crossing of Lusk Creek, grateful that the creek's water level was low. A nearby dam constructed of sticks and rubble stood tall enough for Joe to cross without getting his feet wet. It was a stroke of luck. Taking my first step into the clear, cool, and relaxing current, I waded through the waters of Lusk Creek, making my way to the other side where the trail continued. The sensation of the water flowing around my feet was rejuvenating, washing away any fatigue accumulated from the hike thus far. With renewed energy, we pressed on, eager to explore more of the enchanting Lusk Creek wilderness.

As we crossed Lusk Creek and began ascending a new steep incline, Joe pushed through the challenge while I led the way. After a short climb through the thick woods, we found ourselves walking alongside a cliff edge, offering breathtaking views of the opposite side and the hill we had just traversed. It was a scenic spot indeed. Coming across a sign on the ground that read "Owl Bluff Tie-Up," we knew we had reached a special place. We looked over and marveled at the panoramic vista of the entire Lusk Creek valley region. Taking a well-deserved rest on an old downed tree, we enjoyed some snacks, slurping energy gels and savoring bites of trail waffles. However, our short break took an unexpected turn when Joe discovered a tick on his leg. This discovery fueled our motivation to clear the area promptly, as we didn't want to become lunch for more ticks. With renewed determination, we pressed further into the dense Lusk Creek Wilderness forest. The forest was a mixture of short and tall pines, creating a canopy that alternated

between sunlight and shadows. At times, we lost the trail, finding ourselves within the thick, claustrophobic woods. To guide us, the forest was now littered with cedar block blazes, each imprinted with an “i,” ensuring we stayed on track. The trail wound its way up and over various hills, making sharp turns left and right. It seemed as though Lusk Creek had no discernible beginning or ending in sight. As the sun began to set, the looming expectation of night hiking loomed over us, prompting us to retrieve our headlamps in advance preparation. Pausing briefly, I witnessed the sunset casting a soft pink glow over the entire forest, a sight I had never seen before. I couldn’t resist sharing the breathtaking moment with Joe, and we both snapped pictures to capture the fleeting beauty.

With nightfall, we relied solely on the illumination from our headlamps. The narrow beam of light revealed only the trees in front of us, providing a preview of where we should place our next step. We steadily made our way forward, navigating through the darkness. Eventually, the trail transitioned into a wider road, signifying our exit from the Lusk Creek Wilderness. After four hours and eight miles of non-stop hiking, we reached the east end of the largest wilderness area on the trail. It was another accomplishment to cherish, marking the completion of a challenging section. As we exited the Lusk Creek Wilderness, a post on the River to River forum that we had read days prior came to mind. Steve, another hiker, had mentioned discovering a cabin in the same area, built by someone who cherished the region and had created a haven for fellow hikers. Intrigued by this information, we kept our eyes open as we made our way towards Bethesda Church. 117.8 miles completed. To our surprise, we stumbled upon a red shed that bore the

characteristics of a cabin. Excitement swelled within us as we approached, hopeful that this could be the very place Steve had mentioned. Near the front door, we found a binder containing a contact number. Without hesitation, I dialed the number, and after a few rings, a warm, melodic voice with a glorious southern accent answered the call. I explained to the woman on the other end that my friend Joe had sustained an ankle injury during our thru-hike. Desperate for a refuge from the elements, we hoped she could offer assistance. To our amazement, she turned out to be the almighty trail angel we had hoped for. The woman kindly shared the secret location of a hidden key that would grant us access to the cabin.

Expressing our heartfelt gratitude, we thanked her profusely before setting off to find the hidden key. After some searching, we located it and approached the cabin's front door. With a mixture of anticipation and trepidation, I inserted the key into the doorknob, turned it, and slowly opened the door. As we stepped inside, darkness enveloped our eyes, momentarily obscuring our vision. Uncertain of what awaited us within, we cautiously took our first steps into the cabin, our senses heightened and our hearts filled with curiosity. As we stepped into the dark cabin, Joe and I fumbled around until our hands found the light switch. With a flick, the room was bathed in a warm glow, revealing a hidden paradise for hikers like us. The cabin was filled with everything we could need—food, water, a stocked fridge and freezer, a cozy futon couch, a comfortable bed, heating, and even a television set.

Overwhelmed with awe, we dropped our heavy packs in utter disbelief. The place that surrounded us was beyond our wildest

dreams. It was a haven, a respite from the weary miles we had trekked. We couldn't help but appreciate every single amenity, grateful for the chance to charge our electronics finally, rest our tired feet, and spend a night of comfort and warmth. Curiosity got the better of me, and I walked over to the television set. With a sense of wonder, I turned it on, and to my delight, it worked flawlessly. The screen came to life, offering a plethora of channels and live programming. As luck would have it, I stumbled upon a mystery movie channel, adding a touch of serendipity to our already magical evening. Jokingly Joe muttered, "I hope there isn't a knock at the cabin tonight.." I snickered at the comedic irony of his words. Here we were, tucked away in this hidden sanctuary, far from the outside world. But we both knew we couldn't simply bask in this abundance without expressing our gratitude to the woman who had opened her cabin to us. It was an unyielding blessing, an act of kindness we would never forget. Joe reached into his pocket, pulling out a substantial amount of cash, our way of showing appreciation to this trail angel. With hunger gnawing at my stomach, I found a chicken Teriyaki freeze-dried meal and set about preparing it. Boiling water on my stove, I watched as the meal transformed into a delicious feast. I paired it with a cold diet cola from the fridge, relishing in the simple pleasure of having everything we needed at our fingertips. It was pure and unadulterated happiness, a moment that would forever be etched in our memories.

As the warmth from the cabin's heating enveloped us, Joe claimed the bed for himself, while I stretched out on the cozy futon. With the heat cranked up, we both drifted off into a happy coma of comfort, eagerly anticipating the morning

yet reluctant to leave this sanctuary behind. The faint howl of coyotes echoed in the distance, a gentle reminder of the untamed wilderness that lay beyond the cabin's walls. In that moment, embraced by the comforts of the cabin, we found solace and tranquility. It was a night of respite, a pause in our adventure to savor the extraordinary kindness we had stumbled upon. And as we dozed off, we knew that no matter what lay ahead, we would carry the memory of this magical evening with us, forever grateful for the generosity and hospitality bestowed upon us by a stranger turned angel.

Day Eight: Bethesda Church to Karbers Ridge Road

As the sunlight seeped through every crack and open window of the cabin, I sat up from the couch, feeling refreshed, comfortable, and ready to tackle the day ahead. Glancing at my watch, I realized it was already past 8 in the morning. Joe and I had unintentionally slept in, but there was no panic. We took our time, collected our gear, and organized our packs before heading out of the cabin. Before leaving, I made sure to secure the door and placed the key in the same safe spot where we had found it. It was a reminder that this blissful escape was only accessible to those who had been granted permission. With our packs securely on our backs, we took one last look at the charming red cabin, capturing a memorable snapshot on our mobile phones. It was a token of the peaceful haven that had provided us much needed rest.

We began our journey down the gravel road, Raum Road, with the sun blazing over the treetop horizon. The clear skies instilled unwavering confidence within us, fueling our

determination to continue on our River to River trail. As we walked, we were captivated by the breathtaking landscape that surrounded us. The country road was lined with majestic oak, pine, and birch trees, their branches swaying gently in the breeze. The gravel rocks beneath our feet greeted each step with a reassuring crunch, as if encouraging us to keep moving forward. As we descended the hill on Raum Road, a quaint farmhouse came into view. The vast land surrounding it was home to grazing cattle, and near the garage stood a handmade coop housing a variety of Leghorn and Brahma chickens.

Following the trail's posted blazes, indicated by a blue "i," we turned onto an old farm road. To our right, hidden among the overgrown brush, was Concord Cemetery, its weathered tombstones a testament to the passage of time. We continued along the farm road, soaking in the tranquility of the surroundings. Eventually, we arrived at the Benham Hill trail head, marking the entrance to the One Horse Gap area of the trail. It was another milestone reached on our challenging yet rewarding journey. The anticipation of what lay ahead filled us with a mix of excitement and determination.

The two of us stepped back onto the dirt path, leaving behind the trail head parking lot. The trail stretched out before us, running parallel to a bluff that overlooked the vast expanse of the One Horse Gap Lake area. As we descended into little valleys, shallow dry creeks wound their way through the hilly landscape. Trees seemed to sprout endlessly along the hillside, creating a serene and picturesque scene. Occasionally, we were greeted by small streams or waterfalls, or even moderately sized rock formations that added a touch of awe to our journey.

As we descended to the bottom of one particular valley, we came across a trail marker that read “One Horse Gap in 1 mile.” Perched atop the marker was a figurine of a unicorn with a vibrant purple mane and tail. We couldn’t help but smile at the whimsical sight, basking in the glory of the miles we had already accomplished on this incredible journey. With a brief nod of congratulations, we continued up the hill, eager to reach One Horse Gap. As we approached, we were greeted by huge rock mounds and boulders that seemed to tower over us like mansions. Painted artwork adorned the trail, with blue stars covering a River to River trail sign. A large wooden sign, hand-etched with cursive white lettering, proudly proclaimed “One Horse Gap.” Trees emerged from the ground among the rock formations, each marked with a blue “i,” leading us further along the trail.

We continued on, passing through the rocky terrain with a sense of awe and wonder. Massive cliffs of sandstone rock hugged the trail we walked on, their sheer size leaving us amazed. We couldn’t help but capture the beauty on our cameras, taking pictures along the way to forever remember this remarkable landscape. As we made our way past the rocks and canyons, we noticed what looked like an overlook in the faint distance. With anticipation, we walked closer, finally reaching the edge. The view was breathtaking - green, lush trees and rolling hills stretched as far as the eye could see. Above us, a painted blue sky with fluffy white clouds seemed to blanket the land below. To the right of us, a makeshift sign nailed to a tree read “Rocky Top,” with a jagged mountain image scribbled to the right of the letters. Energized by the beauty before us, we continued to ascend the trail as it wound through the canyon region.

Suddenly, a group of horseback riders approached us from the opposite direction. Joe greeted them with a cheerful “Good morning!” One of the riders responded, asking us where we were headed. Joe proudly declared, “Elizabethtown, doing the River to River.” The rider looked at both of us with amazement and admiration, exclaiming, “You are doing good... Awesome!”

As the riders continued on the trail in the direction we had come from, Joe and I couldn't help but compliment each rider's beautiful horse, including the last one, adorned with a decorative red headdress on its head. “I like that head dress,” Joe stated with genuine admiration. We continued down a gravel trail, eventually reaching an open green area where we decided to take a short break. We removed our packs, resting our weary bodies against the comforting trees. After about five minutes, we gathered our packs once more, swallowing our aches and pains, ready to continue our adventure. With each step, we were filled with an indescribable sense of accomplishment and gratitude. And as we pressed on, we knew that each mile brought us closer to the goal - the completion of an unforgettable thru-hike experience.

As my friend Joe and I continued our journey along the River to River trail, we found ourselves immersed in a rich and vibrant forest. Towering pine, oak, maple, and beech trees surrounded us, casting a dappled shade on the path beneath our feet. The air was filled with the earthy scent of moss and the gentle rustling of leaves, creating a serene and peaceful atmosphere. As we hiked further, we crossed Hart Creek, its clear waters babbling over smooth stones. The creek served as a refreshing break, allowing us to replenish our water supply and cool off before continuing

our trek. Stepping out of the woods, we found ourselves back on Raum Road, a quiet stretch of pavement leading us towards the small town of Herod.

Along the road, an old rustic wood barn caught our attention. Despite its obvious abandonment, it exuded a sense of tranquility, nestled within a lush green lawn and surrounded by the majestic woods. We paused for a moment to admire the scene, imagining the stories and memories that must have unfolded within its weathered walls. Continuing on, we were taken aback by an unexpected sight in the humble town of Herod. Standing proudly among the quaint houses was a gigantic mansion, seemingly out of place in this small community. It was an imposing three-story structure, with a grand entrance, large windows, and a log cabin-like exterior. The detached three-car garage and the assortment of sports cars and trucks in the driveway hinted at the opulence within. To our surprise, we noticed two Pope County Sheriff's vehicles parked nearby, adding an air of mystery to the scene.

Joe and I couldn't help but joke about how a Sheriff Deputy could come to own such an extravagant property. We snickered, amused by the unlikely pairing of a millionaire's home in this unassuming town. With a sense of curiosity lingering in our minds, we continued on, eager to explore the rest of Herod. As we approached the town, a tall white steeple emerged on the horizon, serving as a beacon of sorts. It belonged to the white church, its presence a symbol of faith and community. The sight of the steeple brought a sense of comfort and familiarity, reminding us of the importance of unity and shared values. Glancing at our empty water bottles, we realized the need to

find a water source in the town. With renewed determination, we pressed on, our anticipation growing as we drew nearer to Herod.

As we crossed the road at Highway 34, into the heart of the little rural town, we approached the Herod Springs Baptist Church, my friend Joe and I couldn't help but notice the memorial statue honoring John O'Dell, the late educator, pastor, and community leader who had tirelessly worked on blazing the River to River trail in 1992. He was fondly known as the "Father of the River to River trail." Captivated by the monument, Joe and I decided to take snapshots of the memorial dedication as a way to pay our respects. Afterward, we made our way to the picnic shelter conveniently located next to the church. The shelter welcomed us with rows of picnic tables, offering ample space to relax, stretch out, and organize our gear. Our attention was then drawn to a mini refrigerator mounted on one of the shelter's posts. A note on the door caught our eye. It read: "Welcome hikers and travelers! Grab some bottled water and a snack from the refrigerator. Sit and rest a spell." The note continued with a short prayer, offering a blessing to those who opened it.

Intrigued by the invitation, I reached forward and pulled open the refrigerator door. Inside, I discovered a hiker's treasure trove unlike any other. Bottles upon bottles of cold, refreshing water awaited us, along with fresh fruit, snack nuts, granola bars, chips, and even a Mountain House freeze-dried meal. The flavor was Breakfast Skillet.

Turning to Joe, I asked with a smile, "Want to split the Mountain House?" Joe nodded enthusiastically. As he got the stove ready to boil water for our meal, I grabbed our bottles

and headed towards Gibbons Creek flowing nearby the church. Filtering and collecting water, I made sure we had enough for both of us. Returning to the picnic shelter, I helped Joe by starting up the stove to boil water for rehydrating our breakfast meal. Once the water was ready, I split the Mountain House meal into a freezer bag that Joe had brought, while keeping the other half in its original packaging. However, my adventurous spirit led me to an idea. I decided to boil some water for Ramen noodles, intending to create a “hiker trash breakfast” by mixing the breakfast meal and ramen noodles together. It seemed like a daring culinary experiment.

As I attempted to drain the cooked ramen noodles, my grip on the pot slipped, causing the noodles to spill onto the harsh gravel ground below. For a fleeting moment, I felt defeated. But then, a realization washed over me: “It’s only dirt.” Determined not to let this setback ruin our meal, I crouched down and meticulously picked up individual noodle from the ground. I carefully inspected them, discarding any rocks or debris. Once I had gathered all the noodles, I mixed them with the breakfast Mountain House, creating a unique and delicious concoction. I indulged myself in the delightful combination of flavors, savoring every bite. Joe couldn’t help but exclaim, “You are a savage!”

So so, in that humble picnic shelter next to the church, surrounded by the serenity of nature and the memory of John O’Dell’s trailblazing spirit, Joe and I shared a meal that embodied resilience, resourcefulness, and the pure joy of adventure. After our extended rest at the shelter, Joe and I felt rejuvenated and ready to continue our thru-hike adventure. We bid farewell

to the welcoming picnic shelter at Herod Springs Baptist Church, feeling an immense sense of gratitude for the kindness shown by the congregation towards fellow hikers like us. As we made our way towards the back of the church, we headed in the direction where the trail picks up again, leading us towards the captivating Garden of the Gods Wilderness along Gape Hollow Road. Ascending a hill, we took a moment to admire the vast field of vibrant yellow butter-weed that stretched out behind the church. It was a beautiful sight, a reminder of the diverse and enchanting landscapes we would encounter on our journey.

Continuing along the road, we eventually reached a welcoming sign marking our entrance into the Garden of the Gods Wilderness, a place brimming with natural wonders and untamed beauty. We paused for a moment, taking in the significance of this milestone. It was a reminder that we were stepping into a realm where nature reigns supreme, where adventure awaits at every turn. Eager to capture the memories, Joe and I took one last picture together next to a River to River Trail sign. It was a symbol of the journey we had embarked upon and the miles we had conquered thus far. With a sense of accomplishment and determination, we packed away our phones, tightened our grip on our trekking poles, and prepared to immerse ourselves once again in the embrace of the thick woods.

As we ventured deeper into the wilderness, the sounds of civilization faded away, replaced by the rustling of leaves and the melodious calls of native birds. The trail beckoned us forward, promising new challenges, breathtaking vistas, and unforgettable moments. With each step, we embraced the

unknown, ready to embrace the beauty of nature and the spirit of adventure. Our hearts filled with excitement, we set forth, eager to uncover the hidden wonders that awaited us in the Garden of the Gods Wilderness. As we trekked through the stunning Garden of the Gods Wilderness, Joe began to express his discomfort, mentioning the pain and swelling in his ankle once again. Concerned for his well-being, we decided to veer off the trail temporarily. We dropped our packs and took a moment to gather our thoughts. Joe reached for his Mio Energy drink squirt bottle and offered me a pick-me-up. Curiosity got the better of me, and I took a squeeze of the concentrated sugar mix into my mouth. The taste was sour and pungent, but the instant energy boost it provided was undeniable. We shared a moment of shared determination, agreeing to hike until the wheels fell off, pushing ourselves to reach Elizabethtown by the end of the day.

With our packs securely fastened, I turned to Joe and suggested a 24-hour challenge. He responded with a resolute “YD Mode, baby!” We picked up our pace, determined to cover as much ground as possible. Young Dolph’s music blared from our mobile devices, driving us forward as we swiftly made our way through the Garden of the Gods Wilderness. Passing by campers who had set up their tents in scenic overlooks, we tried to be respectful of their peace while remaining focused on our goal. We caught glimpses of the famous rock formations, including the awe-inspiring “Camel Rock,” that the Garden of the Gods region was renowned for. The sun shone down upon us, casting a perfect blue sky overhead. Occasionally, we paused to allow Joe to readjust and reposition his ankle in his trail runner shoes. I reassured him that we could take

as many breaks as he needed, emphasizing the importance of preserving his well-being as we neared the end of our journey. Time was on our side, and there was no need to risk further injury when victory was within reach. Emerging from the woods, we found ourselves in a bustling parking lot filled with vehicles. A wilderness sign proclaimed our presence within the Garden of the Gods Wilderness, invigorating us with a renewed sense of purpose. We continued down the road until we reached a mile marker sign. And there it was, the sight that almost brought tears to our eyes: “Elizabethtown in 22 miles.” We were so close, and the proximity only fueled our determination.

After capturing a quick snapshot of the sign, we pressed forward, crossing Garden of the Gods Road and disappearing into the welcoming embrace of a thick pine forest. The air was fragrant, and the towering trees provided a sense of tranquility as we pushed through the darkness. Our headlamps illuminated the path ahead, guiding us through the dense forest. We crossed Shawnee Forest Road and encountered the unique rock formation known as “Knights of the Golden Circle,” also referred to as Buzzard’s Point or Buzzard’s Roost. The setting sun painted the sky with shades of dusk, urging us to secure our headlamps and fuel ourselves with a quick snack before continuing. Motivated by our desire to complete the trail, we persevered through what felt like an eternity of night hiking. Finally, as we stumbled into High Knob Campground, seeking a moment of respite before continuing our thru-hike, we saw the camp store was closed and most campers had settled in for the night. We dropped our packs near an outlet next to the store. We dug out our cables to charge our headlamps and battery

banks, taking a moment to rest and refuel.

With only 18 more miles to go, I assured Joe that we were well on our way. Wanting to offer some relief to his ankle and help him conserve energy, I took both of our bottles and headed towards a nearby faucet to refill them with fresh drinking water. Suddenly, out of the darkness, a woman called out to us, “You guys alright?” Jo-Jo was her name, owner of the High Knob Campground and self-proclaimed “Mom” to the hikers that passed through. As she approached us in the shadows, she wanted to ensure we had access to water and expressed concern for our well-being. When we mentioned our plan to finish the trail that night, Jo-Jo insisted we stay at the campground and even offered us one of her cabins. However, my friend Joe was determined to press on. In the darkness of the night, our faces were mere shadows to one another. Joe, eager to jog Jo-Jo’s memory, asked if she remembered him from previous years when he had hiked the trail. Unfortunately, unable to discern our identities, Jo-Jo grew wary of our presence. Joe leaned in for a hug, but Jo-Jo stepped back, declining the embrace. She simply wanted to ensure we had everything we needed and reiterated her suggestion to stay at the campground.

I could sense Joe’s frustration that Jo-Jo didn’t recognize him. Having hiked this trail for a decade, Joe had become acquainted with many of the people who lived along the route. “Maybe it’s too dark for her to see you,” I offered as an explanation. But Joe dismissed the possibility, insisting that she should have remembered him and questioning why she didn’t. Almost shamefully, he retrieved his pack, and we both strapped them onto our backs, disappearing into the enveloping darkness of

the woods. Navigating our way through the night, we eventually reached the Battery Rock intersection, an older section of the River to River trail before the newer reroute to Elizabethtown was established. It was there that Joe confessed to his inability to continue any further. His ankle was now swollen and causing him intense pain. He contemplated the idea of having me retrieve his truck to pick him up later. Sensing his distress, I urged Joe to sleep on the decision. We would revisit the situation in the morning with clear minds and devise a plan for the remaining 14 miles of the trail. Fourteen miles. The number echoed in my mind, a reminder of how much ground we had already covered. We had come so far, traversing an incredible distance. We hiked 25.8 miles. 143.6 miles completed.

As the night enveloped us, we settled down, our minds filled with thoughts of the challenges that lay ahead. The darkness offered solace, allowing us to rest and prepare mentally for the decisions that awaited us come morning. We had come too far to give up now. With determination and a renewed sense of purpose, we would face the remaining miles and accomplish what we had set out to achieve.

Day Nine: Karbers Ridge Road to Elizabethtown

On our ninth and final day on the River to River Trail, the first rays of sunlight filtered through the trees, gently awakening us from our slumber. Stepping out of our tents, we were met with a messy and haphazard arrangement, a testament to our exhaustion the previous night. We packed up our tents, ensuring we left our campsite in pristine condition, adhering to the “leave no trace” principles. It was our last camp, and we wanted to honor the trail until the very end.

As we made our way back to the trail, the forest floor was carpeted with bluebell flowers, illuminated by beams of sunlight that cascaded through the branches. The warmth of the morning sun enveloped our bodies as we hiked towards the rising sun. Conversations filled the air as we reminisced about the incredible journey we had embarked on over the past nine days. We shared stories of memorable moments and encounters with fellow hikers, relishing in the bittersweet

feeling of reaching the end of the trail we never wanted to end. The trail transitioned into an old farm road, and the rising sun painted the tree canopy with a golden glow. The trail blazes continued to guide our way, with a blue “i” marking the path towards this unforgettable adventure. Captivated by the picturesque scene, I took it upon myself to capture photos of as many trail blazes as I could. The morning light touched the white blazes, creating a stunning contrast that seemed to embody the essence of our journey.

Along the way, we encountered another hiker heading in the opposite direction, accompanied by a loyal canine companion. We exchanged a few words about trail conditions before wishing each other luck and parting ways. I took a moment to offer a gentle pat to the dog, appreciating the bond between hiker and four-legged hiking partner.

Continuing our trek, we reached one of the last creeks we had to cross before completing the trail – Big Creek. Taking a refreshing moment to cool down and soothe Joe’s swollen ankle, we braced ourselves for the challenging ascent that awaited us. The trail appeared to defy our efforts, steeply ascending with rugged terrain and thick ruts. We had to slow down, carefully navigating each step to maintain a steady pace. Finally reaching the top of the hill, we were greeted by a trail littered with fallen trees and branches. Determined, we scaled and climbed over each obstacle, the obstacles serving as a reminder of the resilience we had developed throughout our journey. By this time, the sun had climbed higher in the sky, and the trail cleared up, offering us easier hiking conditions – at least for the time being. Emerging from the woods, we found ourselves

in a clearing along an old farm road, where the remnants of an old chimney stood as a silent reminder of the history that had unfolded in this very spot. We took a brief break, allowing Joe to tend to his ankle and giving me a chance to rest my feet, which had developed hot spots. We knew we couldn't afford to stop for too long, as the finish line was within reach.

As we continued along the farm road, we passed a large quail habitat sign, humorously capturing a photograph and exclaiming, "It's all about the quail, baby!" The road transitioned from gravel to rocks and then reverted to dirt, winding through the thick wilderness. We took short breaks whenever Joe needed to alleviate the weight on his ankle, but we both understood the magnitude of how far we had come and how close we were to completing our thru-hike. With each slow and deliberate step, we pressed on, our pace steady and determined. The gravel forest roads stretched out before us, leading us deeper into the wilderness during the late morning hours. We were enveloped by the sights and sounds of nature, as we continued our march towards the end of the trail. The fatigue was evident, but the knowledge that we were on the cusp of finishing the trail propelled us forward. The path may have been slow, but it was the path that would lead us to our triumph.

On the last few miles of our thru-hike on the River to River Trail, we found ourselves once again dipping our feet into the cool waters of another creek crossing. This time, it was Hogthief Creek. We relished these moments, as they provided an opportunity to soothe our sore feet. However, for me, a blister was beginning to form, and the combination of wet skin and raw friction made each step a challenge. As I stepped out of

the creek, a limp became my constant companion for the rest of the trail.

But my pain was nothing compared to what Joe was enduring. With each step, he felt as though his foot would give way, the searing pain intensifying with every movement. Despite my attempts to comfort him and motivate him with promises of “just one more hill,” Joe knew the reality of the situation. The pain was relentless, and there was no easy way out. As we marched onward down the trail, passing more blazes, I couldn’t help but capture as many of them as I could on camera. Each blaze served as a reminder of the effort we were putting forth on this final day. The pictures would later become a testament to our determination and the strength we had developed throughout our journey. As the light reflected off the water ahead, I quickened my pace, eager to see what lay ahead. Stepping through the brush and walking down the trail, I came upon a momentous location – Tecumseh Lake. Nestled in the middle of the forest, this beautiful small lake, constructed for flood control by the forest service, served as a water refill and relaxation spot for westbound hikers. But for us, hiking eastward, it was a significant trail marker. With only a little over three miles left before reaching Elizabethtown, I excitedly shouted to Joe the lake’s distance from the small town. Jumping back on the trail, I pushed forward, my anticipation building with each step.

But as I forged ahead, I couldn’t help but notice Joe’s pace had slowed to a turtle-like crawl. His face reflected the pain he was enduring, a testament to his unwavering determination. Together, we continued forward through the forest, our eyes

fixed on the end – the eastern terminus of the River to River Trail. Triumph awaited us, and it was the sheer motivation that fueled our every step. Joe and I had been through a challenging journey, hiking the last couple of miles of days. And as we descended the tenth hill, I jokingly claimed it was “just one more hill,” much to Joe’s amusement. They navigated the rugged path slowly but steadily, their determination driving them forward. Finally, we reached a tree line that revealed a farm road stretching ahead, bordered by expansive fields of cattle and tall prairie grass. Pausing briefly, we took in the breathtaking sight, knowing that Elizabethtown awaited us beyond these fields. Gathering our strength, we resumed our march, aware that this was the victory mile, the last stretch of our thru-hike. The farm road beneath our feet was covered in tiny gravel rocks, and sharp barbed fencing lined both sides. We greeted the cattle we passed, feeling a sense of connection to the land and its inhabitants. With smiles on our faces, we pressed on, momentarily forgetting any pain or discomfort as the joy of reaching the end washed over us.

The sky above was a brilliant shade of blue, vibrant and beautiful. Looking back, we saw the hills we had conquered, feeling a sense of accomplishment. Each mile, each place we had passed through, flashed in our memories. Looking ahead, we saw the culmination of our journey, a transformation that had shaped us into better people and strengthened our friendship. As we walked that last mile, Joe and I gradually put some distance between us. It was as if we both needed a moment to connect with the trail, to express our gratitude for the experiences we had shared. Each step brought us closer to the completion of our adventure, and we wanted to savor the

final moments with the trail that had challenged and rewarded us.

As the road continued to open, revealing the vast land around us, the rolling hills behind and the serene pastures surrounding us, I felt a profound sense of gratitude. The trail had tested our physical and mental limits, but it had also given us strength, resilience, and memories that would last a lifetime. And so, with each step, Joe and I walked on, filled with reverence for the trail that had guided us and the bond we had formed. The last mile became a tribute to our journey, a testament to our determination and the ever changing power of nature. Watson Lane led us out of the woods, and as we followed Locust Street, we came across a blue “i” indicating our turn. Signs of a small rural town began to appear as we walked, passing old brick homes and soaking in the charm of the surroundings.

As we reached the final stretch of our thru-hike, I couldn't help but feel a sense of awe for my friend. Joe had not only conquered the physical challenges but had also triumphed over his own limitations. He had proven that the human spirit is capable of remarkable feats when fueled by determination and unwavering resolve. We walked into the small town, Joe and I spotted a few houses, a church, a gas station, and a quaint restaurant. But what captured our attention was the breathtaking view beyond the streets of Elizabethtown. The Ohio River, in all its splendor, stretched out before us. Overwhelmed with joy, Joe pulled out his phone and started a live stream video to share the momentous occasion with their loved ones. Under the bright sunshine, I felt a wave of nostalgia washing over me. It was like being a kid again,

strolling through the neighborhood where my grandma used to live. The sound of Joe's lively voice on the live stream filled the air as he greeted viewers and recounted the journey we had just completed. These were the final steps, the culmination of our remarkable adventure. Turning the last corner on Locust Street, we approached the waterfront. The E-Town River restaurant floated on its barge, and the Rose Motel stood tall on a hill, overlooking the river. Joe, still documenting our final moments, exclaimed into his mobile phone, "I didn't think I was going to make this one!" He then jokingly suggested going for a swim. A tradition among hikers on the River to River trail is to dip your toe in the river where you start and complete the journey by dipping your toe at the end. I agreed with Joe, feeling that plunging into the Ohio River for a swim was a fitting celebration. With slow, steady steps, I entered the cool, muddy water, while Joe leaped in with exuberance, splashing around and cheering. Our shouts of triumph echoed across the river as we basked in the achievement of completing the 157-mile journey from the Mississippi to the Ohio River.

Leaving the water, we climbed up the hill to the trail sign marking the eastern terminus. We touched the sign in celebration. I remembered I had left a bag in Joe's car, containing a change of clothes and a small bottle of champagne. After shedding our dirty, muddy clothes and donning fresh attire, I retrieved the bottle and two Styrofoam cups, inviting Joe to join me for a celebratory shower. Returning to the trail sign, Joe found a spot on the ledge below, and we shared joyous laughter together, still in awe of the incredible walk we had just accomplished. I asked, "Champagne shower?" and Joe eagerly agreed. Popping the bottle open, I showered the trail sign, Joe, and the surrounding

area with bubbly liquid, creating a festive atmosphere. I then poured a cup for Joe and another for myself, toasting to our success.

“Congrats, man,” Joe said, raising his cup.

“Thanks, yes,” I replied, clinking our foam cups together.

In the end, it was Joe’s journey that left an indelible mark on my own. His courage and tenacity had inspired me to push beyond my own boundaries, to embrace challenges with a newfound sense of purpose. I realized that the power to overcome resides within each of us, waiting to be ignited by the sheer will to persevere. It had taken four years to complete this journey, but it was just the beginning. Thru-hiking has become a part of our lives, a way to escape the stresses of modern life and find solace in the woods. As I sipped my cup of cheer, I thought,

“Thank you, Father. Thank you for sharing the woods with me.”

The thru-hike had brought me closer to nature and those around me. And as long as I had my trail runners, trekking poles, and a backpack full of essentials, I knew there would always be a place and time to relive the adventure I longed for. With a renewed spirit and a heart full of gratitude, Joe and I made our way back to Joe’s car, parked near the Sheriff’s office. The completion of the River to River trail was just the first chapter of our ongoing journey, a testament to the power of the wilderness and the enduring bond between friends.

