

Mississippi River Gorge

Trestle Turn Around

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View of the Mississippi River Gorge looking south on the Lake Street Bridge

Trestle Turn Around

Distance: About 3 miles

Trail Surface: Asphalt

At the 36th street parking lot head north. Follow a trail through a grove of red oaks, then down below the road and up past the old stone steps installed in the 1930s by the WPA. Keep running until you reach the railroad trestle. Turn around here or run a few feet farther past a split rail fence to add more distance. Return south. Climb up and out of the tunnel of trees and end at another split rail fence above a ravine.

Most of this path is high on a tree-lined bluff so it's easy to ignore the gorge below. But it's there. Be quiet. Pay attention. Stare hard through the thick weave of oak and maple to find the forest floor. Or go deeper. Take the stairs down into basswood and elm. Listen closely for the tell-tale trickle of water falling somewhere, slowly making its way to the river.



Heading North

1. Through the Welcoming Oaks

Red oaks line the path. Some stand at attention, others at ease. Each seems to greet in its own way. "Good morning." "Hello friend." "Be careful." I listen and they are grateful, offering gifts—shade, a pale golden light warming the sky, a serenade of acorn shells crunching underfoot. Once something more. A memory. Thick fresh slabs of frozen white caught in oaks' crooks take me back. Mom and I in a forest up north, skiing under a stand of bushy balsam firs heavy with snow. We glow flushed with effort, burning bright with health. We laugh in delight at the trees looking like a scene from Currier & Ives. We do not yet know she is dying.

Red oaks painted white
cast out the ghost of cancer
and return us home.

2. Between 4 Barriers

10,000 years ago melting glaciers deposited 2 boulders and here they sit, unmoved by progress. On top of one, 4 stacked stones mark the trail or the moment. Beyond, the path descends through a tunnel of trees to a spot, perched above river and forest, below bike path and parkway, where 2 fences and 2 retaining walls establish boundaries. Natural | Wild | Managed | Civilized. 4 lines drawn. Soon crossed. Already paving stones shift, walls spill soil, asphalt buckles. Downstream split rails turn green from staghorn sumac vining between posts. Wrought iron once secure in concrete pops its bolts and relents to roots regaining territory. And chain link forfeits its galvanized steel to bark as trunks engulf and bind themselves to wire.

Be quiet, listen.
You can hear the plants slowly
reclaiming the gorge.

3. Down 112 Steps

Old stone steps wedged in loam wind down the gorge to forest then river. Here shadows hide before noon and the world-weary congregate—cottonwoods, maples, oaks. Brown switchgrass. A hollowed out log worn smooth by wind, water, the work of being a chair. Unleashed dogs frantic with freedom and the feel of soft sand. Charred driftwood, rotting fish, rusting leaves, the bucket seat of a car. Two crushed DVDs—Deuce Bigalow Male Gigolo, Herbie Fully Loaded—and a thick-bearded Country Western Jesus in a fake wood frame.

Won't you come below
to gather by the river
and share your story?