

Who was John Beargrease?

John Beargrease 1858-1910

How well do you know your mail carrier? If you lived on the North Shore of Lake Superior between 1897 and 1899, you would... John Beargrease and his brothers. The brothers delivered mail between Two Harbors and Grand Marais once, sometimes twice, a week. They carried loads up to 700 pounds! Sometimes they would even go all the way to Grand Portage.

The trail used for travel, along Lake Superior's North Shore, was a rugged footpath. Streams and ravines had to be crossed. The path was called the Lake Shore Trail and ran between Duluth and Thunder Bay. The North Shore's rocky shoreline, severe temperature changes, and violent storms, made travel in this area challenging. It made communication with the outside world difficult and communities were isolated.

In 1858, when Minnesota became a state, John Beargrease was born. John's home was also North Shore's first settlement, Beaver Bay. His father was an Ojibwe chief and was also called John (Moquabimetem). The Beargrease family lived in a wigwam on the edge of Beaver Bay where John's father worked in the sawmill, traded furs, and carried mail. John had two brothers named Peter (Daybosh) and Joseph (Skowegan).

John and his brothers spent time hunting, trapping, and fishing. When John was old enough, he worked on ships which sailed on Lake Superior. It was 1855 when Congress ordered the beginning of mail service from Superior to Grand Portage, but in 1855, that service was spotty— if the lake was choppy in summer or icy in winter, the mail didn't make it through. Finally in 1879, John and his brothers picked up the job of delivering the the mail.

In the summer, they used canoes and large boats, and in later years two horses (White Charley and Red Charley). But it was the winter travel by dogsled which John Beargrease became well know. His sled looked like a toboggan and was pulled by only four dogs! They would travel 30 to 40 miles a day. John's fastest dog sled trip was 28 hours from Two Harbors to Grand Marais. Mushers today with as many as 16 dogs and better equipment can do the trip a only a little faster.

John married Louise Wishcob and had twelve children. John's last trip delivering mail to Grand Marais was on April 26, 1899 when the Lake Shore Trail became an actual road. One day in 1910, he went out in a storm to rescue another mail carrier whose boat was caught in the waves off Tamarack Point, near Grand Portage. He died of tuberculosis in 1910. His grave can be seen today at the Indian Cemetery in Beaver Bay.

Today we honor John Beargrease with the annual John Beargrease Sled Dog Marathon each January. He helped the small communities along the North Shore of Lake Superior by his regular deliveries of mail and news!

<http://www.gichigamiexpress.com/history/sled-dog-history/> (permission via phone 8/24/14)

<http://www.mnopedia.org/multimedia/mn90-send-it-sled-dog> (permission via email 8/24/14)

<http://www.minnesotahistorycenter.org/sites/minnesotahistorycenter.org/files/JohnBeargreaseFullBiography.pdf>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Beargrease#mediaviewer/File:Lake_Superior_winter_mail_line,_by_Childs,_B._F..png

Fearless John The Legend of John Beargrease

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