



John Beargrease (1858-1910)

When John Beargrease visits you, he will take you back to the late 1800s and show you what it was like to deliver mail along the North Shore of Lake Superior.

Biography

John Beargrease was born in 1858, the same year Minnesota became a state. He may have been born near Cass Lake or Beaver Bay. His father was an Ojibwe chief named *Moquabimetem*, who also went by the name of John Beargrease. He was a leader of a small group of Ojibwe that settled in Beaver Bay in 1858 to work in the sawmill. His family moved to Beaver Bay shortly after the Wielands (from Germany) founded the town in 1856. Beaver Bay was the first settlement on the North Shore. The Beargrease family lived in a traditional wigwam on the edge of town. John's father was also a sailor on the Wieland's schooner, "Charley." John's father often carried the mail for Albert Wieland. Less is known about John Beargrease's mother, other than her name, *Newagagamsbag* (or *Otoe*). John had two brothers named Peter (*Daybosh*) and Joseph (*Skowegan*). There is no mention of other siblings.

The Beargrease boys learned hunting, trapping, and fishing from their father. Like their father, they also sought work with the Wieland family. When John was in his late teens, he worked on commercial fishing, passenger, and freight ships that sailed on Lake Superior, including the Schooner, "Charley." By the 1880s, when John was in his twenties, the North Shore had many small settlements such as Agate Bay (soon to be called Two Harbors), Castle Danger and Pork Bay, but the train only went as far as Two Harbors.

John Beargrease and his brothers started delivering the mail in 1879. Their main route was between Two Harbors and Grand Marais. Occasionally, they would take the mail all the way to Grand Portage. They could make the Two Harbors/Grand Marais trip about once (sometimes twice) a week. John was best known for his mail journeys by dogsled. His fastest trip by dogsled from Two Harbors to Grand Marais was 28 hours.¹ He once made the trip in 20 hours by boat!



The mail carrier was the link to the outside world for the people living along the North Shore.² Everyone awaited his arrival with anticipation. He was the weather broadcaster and news teller. News of national importance or letters from loved ones were in his pack.

The only trail along the North Shore was a footpath that was first traveled by the Anishinabe and later by the fur traders and the fishing families that settled on the North Shore. It was called the Lake Shore Trail and followed the coastline all the way between Duluth and Thunder Bay.

In later years, John replaced his dogs with two horses, named “White Charley” and “Red Charley.” After 1899, he retired from his mail contract but still continued with his fur trading business.

John Beargrease died of tuberculosis in Beaver Bay on August 10, 1910. Some sources mention that he died from pneumonia caused by saving another mail carrier, Montferrand, by diving into the frigid waters of Lake Superior. Tuberculosis is listed as his cause of death on his death certificate. It is unknown if the heroic save in the cold waters had something to do with him catching tuberculosis.

John married Louise Wishcob (also spelled Wiscob, Wishcomb, and Weeshkob), a member of another prominent family in the area. Many sources contradict themselves as to the number of children John Beargrease had. He and Louise may have had twelve children.

Time Period Overview

Grand Portage and Its People

In 1640, the Great Lakes region was a complex patchwork of areas belonging to the Iroquois, Cree, Ojibwe, Menominee, Huron, Ottawa, Potawatomie, Nipissing, Winnebago, Fox, Miami, Assiniboine, and Dakota. Despite tensions between some of these communities, trading amongst the Great Lakes Indian nations flourished, and a firmly entrenched set of trading customs, strategies and routes existed. The Ojibwe, in their migration along the north shore of Lake Superior, eventually arrived at Grand Portage. The first record of fur trading activity between the French and Ojibwe in this area occurred in 1731. Over 150 Ojibwe families lived in the vicinity of Grand Portage. The

² Raff, Willis H. Pioneers in the Wilderness: Minnesota's Cook County, Grand Marais, and the Gunflint in the 19-Century (Grand Marais: Cook County Historical Society, 1981) p. 299.

² Peddle, Kim. “The Life of John Beargrease.” Cloquet Public Schools. <http://www.cloquet.k12.mn.us/WAS/Kim/newbear/Beargreasebio.html> June 20, 2001.

² Guntow, Vickie. “Beargrease History not Forgotten.” *Lake County News Chronicle*, January 13, 1988



British fur companies, especially the North West Company, also operated in the Lake Superior area. In 1778, furs worth almost a million dollars passed through Grand Portage, which had become a major hub in the network of fur trade posts. When the United States starting taxing foreign fur traders, however, the North West Company partners decided to move their trade center across the border to Fort William. By 1803, Grand Portage's fur trading hey day was over.

The Grand Portage Ojibwe Indians were members of the Lake Superior band but were not participants in the early Ojibwe treaties with the U.S. They protested being ignored in the 1842 Treaty when Isle Royale was ceded to the United States. In the 1854 Treaty, they ceded their lands in the Arrowhead region of Minnesota and accepted the Grand Portage reservation. By the 1860s, the Grand Portage Ojibwe worried about starvation. Drought ruined crops in 1861. Heavy rains destroyed wild rice beds in 1869. Severe cold and heavy snows killed game and many Ojibwe died for lack of food and clothing. In 1887, Congress passed the General Allotment or Dawes Act. This act divided tribal lands into parcels for individual Indians for the first time.³ Any reservation land left after the allotments would be sold by the government. This resulted in a great loss to the Grand Portage band.

Mail Delivery

On March 3, 1855, Congress ordered the beginning of mail service from Superior to Grand Portage. Surveyor Thomas Clark II was given the mail contract to do monthly services up the North Shore. He gave the name "Beaver Bay" to a settlement that was about midway between Superior and Grand Portage because of all the beavers that he saw in the river. He decided the waterpower at Beaver Bay could be used for a sawmill. In June of 1856, the first white settlers arrived in Beaver Bay, mainly of Swiss and German descent. In 1858 the Wieland family built a sawmill, and lumbering became the chief industry in the settlement. Albert Wieland was postmaster and started delivering the mail to Grand Portage in late 1856. Later, John Beargrease's father, also named John Beargrease, was hired to carry the mail. The only trail along the North Shore was a footpath that was first traveled by the Ojibwe and later the fur traders and the fishing families that settled on the North Shore. It was called the Lake Shore Trail and followed the coastline all the way between Duluth and Thunder Bay. The trail was filled with deep and forested ravines. Hundreds of small streams, gorges, and raging rivers, unworthy of footbridges, had to be crossed. There were rains, hail, slippery clay, windfalls and thick underbrush constantly crowding the trail.⁴ Winter

³ _____. A History of Kitchi Onigaming: Grand Portage and its People. (Cass Lake: Minnesota Chippewa Tribe, 1983) p. 53.

⁴ Two Harbors Centennial Commission. Two Harbors 100 Years: A Pictorial History of



blizzards built mountainous drifts into which a traveler could disappear and suffer a slow and agonizing death. Mosquitoes, flies, ticks, bears, moose, and wolves roamed at large.

The Beargrease family, using their unique ability to blend traditional lifestyle with the new demands of the European settlers, picked up the job of delivering the mail.⁵ They already had their trap lines along the North Shore, located along the Lake Shore Trail, hoping to trap for the fur market. For almost twenty years, between 1879 and 1899, John Beargrease and his brothers delivered the mail between Two Harbors and Grand Marais. One of them took the trip at least once or twice a week. They conducted an active fur trading enterprise all along the delivery route. Residents were dependent on mail and freight delivery systems that fell short of the norms in other parts of the country. Their consciousness of isolation contributed to their constant preoccupation with all matters relating to the steamships, sailboats, dog teams, and rowboats that kept them in contact with the outside world.⁶

In early 1890, the *Duluth Daily Tribune* announced that summertime steamboat mail service was to begin from Duluth to Port Arthur. People still had to rely on rowboat, dogsled, and/or snowshoes for the delivery of mail in the spring, fall, and winter. Beargrease's rowboat replaced the steamboat after just one season in 1891. The "Star Route" businessmen, who owned the "Dixon", contracted with the Post Office Department for several mail routes. They found it more beneficial to sub-contract each route. They could make more of a profit employing Beargrease than with the "Dixon" steamship.⁷ In late 1894, Beargrease contracted with the post office directly. He won a prime contract, No. 41436, for the service extending through the winters of 1895-96 and 1896-97. He was paid \$728.00 per annum. He stopped delivering the mail in 1899.

Two Harbors, Minnesota and Surrounding Communities. (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983) p. 202.

⁵ Peddle, Kim. "The Life of John Beargrease."

<http://www.cloquet.k12.mn.us/WAS/Kim/newbear/Beargreasebio.html> (June 20, 2001).

⁶Raff, Willis H. Pioneers in the Wilderness: Minnesota's Cook County, Grand Marais, and the Gunflint in the 19-Century (Grand Marais: Cook County Historical Society, 1981) p. 291.

⁷ Raff, Willis H. Pioneers in the Wilderness: Minnesota's Cook County, Grand Marais, and the Gunflint in the 19-Century (Grand Marais: Cook County Historical Society, 1981) p. 298.



Iron Ore

The presence of iron ore in Minnesota was first discovered by the Ojibwe when they discovered out-crops of rich iron ore on the Mesabi.⁸ In the 1800s, iron was not in demand. It was copper and gold that drew prospectors to the region. The search for gold, though fruitless, led to the discovery of iron ore on the Vermillion Range. Eventually, railroads were built to transport the ore from the mines to the ports of Duluth and Two Harbors. The steadily increasing output of the mines necessitated improved loading facilities for lake shipments to the east. John Beargrease worked on these piers at Two Harbors. He often worked on the shipping boats as well.

Until 1888, Two Harbors was known as Agate Bay. Iron ore shipping was the most important industry along with the handling of large amounts of lumber, pulpwood, and other forest products. At one time, Dock No. 1 was the largest iron ore dock in the world. Soon, Two Harbors became the main terminus for the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad.

⁸ Two Harbors Centennial Commission. Two Harbors 100 Years: A Pictorial History of Two Harbors, Minnesota and Surrounding Communities. (Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, 1983) p. 70.



