

# Beargrease: The Legend

Each year, thousands of fans gather on the shores of Lake Superior to cheer on approximately one thousand sled dogs and their drivers as they pay tribute to the legend of John Beargrease.

John Beargrease, the son of Chippewa Chief Moquabimentem, was born in 1885 to the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa. He married a woman named Louisa Wishcob, with whom he had ten children.

A man of many skills, Beargrease was best known for his legendary mail delivery runs up and down the North Shore. From 1887 to 1900, he hiked, sailed, rowed, and in the winter months traveled by dog sled, devotedly delivering the mail week after week. John Beargrease was not the only mail carrier on the North Shore route, but none surpassed his level of excellence and persistence in what he did. He was even known by some as “the renown pilot of Lake Superior,” dangerously challenging its thin and shifting winter ice on a regular basis.

John Beargrease carried the mail from Two Harbors to Grand Marais, making at least one round trip per week, and sometimes two. He provided the only link to the outside world for many of the isolated inhabitants of the North Shore. His dependability and predictability became his most important traits. The bells on the dogs’ collars (worn to scare off wolves) became a welcome and exciting sound to each homestead and settlement, as John Beargrease carried not only the mail, but also messages and news from along the trail.

In 1895 he received a two year contract with the government for \$728 a year. (That’s less than \$2 a day!) In 1897, with the population growing and the trails improving, Beargrease traded in his dogs for a team of horses. (It is said that he sold his four-dog team for \$150 to some Duluthians headed for the Alaskan Gold Rush!) His horses, Red Charley and White Charley, pulled the mail on a new 350 pound steel sled. It was his efficient use of the horses on those trails that convinced Lake County officials to upgrade them and eventually build Lake Shore Road. Beargrease retired from his mail run in 1900 and lived out his life in Grand Portage.

Among the many things that Beargrease did well, he is remembered at this time mostly for his legendary ability to drive a dog sled. Averaging 30 – 40 miles a day, he once made it one way (Two Harbors to Grand Marais) in 20 hours! These times are even more outstanding when taking his extreme conditions into consideration. Beargrease raced with a team of only four dogs, who were pulling, at times, a loaded sled weighing from 400 – 700 pounds! In addition, Beargrease was pulling a modified toboggan over rough terrain with no vehicle trails on the land, and no bridges across the streams until construction on them began in 1884. For these reasons, Beargrease liked to travel on the lake as much as possible in order to avoid the ups and downs he faced when on land. This posed its own threats as well; as he was known to have broken through that ice on occasion, putting him in contact with Lake Superior’s deadly winter waters.

Beargrease lived a heroic life, and died performing a heroic act. While going to the aid of another mail carrier whose boat was caught in high waves off Tamarack Point at Grand Portage Bay, Beargrease contracted pneumonia, and died in 1910. He is now buried in Beaver Bay’s Chippewa Cemetery.

Beargrease lived a life of legendary, mythical proportions. His story speaks of a routinely exciting and dangerous adventure so rare in today’s world. He was a man about whom stories have deservedly been told for two generations, and about whom stories will continue to be told. He was a hero in this time. And through the celebration of this memory, he lives on as a hero today.