

The First North Shore Road

Todd Lindahl

July 2002

Long before Europeans ventured into the Great Lakes region Native Americans established a trail along the north shore. Early travel was accomplished on foot, by snowshoe, or dog sled. The easiest and most preferred method was by canoe via the lake, but this option was not always available. The north shore trail connected with a network of other trails leading to access points on inland waterways or seasonal camps. The western end of the trail merged with the important portage at Fond Du Lac. This portage system was the link between Lake Superior and the Mississippi River system.

The fur trade companies were quick to realize the importance of the portage. In 1817 John Jacob Astor's *American Fur Company* established a fort at the foot of the portage. By 1832 the *American Fur Company* was comprised of many scattered posts including the one at Grand Portage in Cook County. The north shore trail served as a connection between these two posts.

In 1854 the Ojibway tribe ceded northeastern Minnesota to the United States government in the *Treaty of La Pointe*. This opened the north shore to white settlement and commerce. The first significant settlement was at Beaver Bay in 1856. Other north shore residents were sparsely scattered and made up of mostly fishermen, explorers, or prospectors.

Two U.S. post offices were established on the north shore in 1856. One was at Beaver Bay and the other at French River in Duluth Township. Legendary Ojibway mailman *John Beargrease* traveled the north shore trail by dogsled starting in 1879. During the summer months the trip was made using a rowboat. Each round trip from Beaver Bay to Grand Marais to Duluth and back took two weeks. By 1873 the trail had become what could be loosely described as a road. In 1897 when John Beargrease started carrying the mail the road was reported to be wide enough for a horse team.

Some improvements were made over the years with the last 20 miles between Duluth and Grand Portage completed in 1887. In 1883 the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad began a rail line from Two Harbors to Lake Vermilion. The north shore road now became known as the stage road with three different stage companies competing for the winter mail and passenger business. During the summer months passenger ships that ran on the fixed timetables provided these same services. Before long there was only one stage company left. Barney Lynch who had built the Half Way house stage stop half way between Duluth and Two Harbors ran it. The exact location of this facility is unknown, but it may have been in the vicinity of the Sucker River. Each morning on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday the stage stopped at all of the primary hotels in Duluth. At 8:30 A.M. it left the city headed up the shore. At the Half Way House the horse teams were changed and passengers could buy a meal while they waited. The return trip on the alternate days began as soon as the train arrived from Tower. The stage arrived back in Duluth at 5:30 P.M. with each round trip taking two days.

On December 20, 1886 the D&IR ran its first train over the Lake Division track between Duluth and Two Harbors. As a result the stage line and half way house disappeared over night. The importance of the road was greatly diminished for a time, but in the end, the popularity of automobiles and improvements in the roads displaced the trains. Today the road is still king.