



A Wintergreen Primer for Curious Guests

“Where am I?”

--You're nearly smack dab in the middle of the continent and in Ely, as the crows flies, you're less than 15 miles from our Canadian neighbors to the north (although most of them actually live 200 miles south of us near the Toronto-Ottawa area)

--Ely prides itself as Minnesota's "end of the road" community and, in fact, Hwy 169 dead ends into the wilderness a few miles north of town. The world tips north here & all our lakes & rivers are flowing to the Arctic Ocean. Other MN watersheds flow east to the Atlantic or south to the Gulf. MN is the only state from which all waters flows out – virtually none flows in!



--From here to the North Pole it's 2500 miles of woods, wilderness, tundra & ice ... and you'll cross only one significant hint of civilization – a lonely strip of asphalt called the "Trans-Canadian Highway" (and perhaps a few bush roads).

--You're also at the world's premier protected place. Among America's 750 designated wilderness areas, the most popular & heavily visited is our Boundary Waters Canoe Area. The world's premier canoe country, it hosts a quarter million visitors each summer. And as the dogsledding capitol of the continental US, it hosts 1000s of mushers like you each winter.

--Together with its Canadian counterpart Quetico Park, this 3-million-acre vacation wonderland features 2,000 lakes, most all of which are clean enough to dip your cup in and drink from, a rare & special thing nowadays

--The Boundary Waters is also the only fully intact ecosystem left in the continental US where the entire web of life is still fully functioning, from the smallest fur-bearing critter of the forest floor (red-backed voles) to the king of the boreal jungle – the timber wolf. Our "Save the Boundary Waters" advocacy center in Ely right across the street from our Wintergreen stores strives to protect this amazing place & is currently seeking to stop the toxic threat of proposed copper sulfide mining.

--Fun fact: Ely is the habitat epicenter of the largest viable population of timber wolves in the continental US (about 2,500)...and Wintergreen is the epicenter of their closest canine cousins, the Canadian Inuit dog (70). A canine jamboree!

--All breeds of dogs (some 340 breeds from 6 oz teacup poodles to 300 lb British Mastiffs) evolved from wolves starting some 18,000 years ago. Their family tree finds that the first domesticated canines were Canadian Inuit dogs. So you'll be sharing our Wintergreen woods with the origin of all dogs and their closest cousins. Enjoy the canine jamboree!

“Give me winter, give me dogs and you can keep the rest.” Knud Rasmussen, Greenlandic explorer

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“Why am I here?”

--Our rough & tumble boreal forest with its thousands of lakes, bogs, ridgelines and cliffs didn't have rails or roads until late in the last century and so dogteams were the main means of winter travel.

--That tradition was celebrated for several decades in Ely when, from the 60s to the 90s, it hosted the largest dogsled event in the world – the “Ely All American Race”. This week-long January festival drew hundreds of mushers with thousands of sled dogs to Ely and our main street, Hwy 169, was cordoned off as the race track.



--Alaska's 1,000-mile Iditarod later stole the show with its big prize money and network coverage. However Ely continues to have a smaller race, the Timber Wolf Classic, and Minnesota continues to have a 500-mile race, the John Beargrease Sled Dog Race.

--John is an iconic figure of Minnesota history a 100-years back and has a curious Wintergreen connection: An Ojibwa native, John served as a US Postal Carrier who delivered mail by rowboat each summer & dogteam each winter to the isolated fishing villages along Lake Superior's North Shore. His weekly arrival was anxiously awaited because he not only delivered mail, but gifts, gossip & news from the outside world.

--In 1910 while making his weekly dogsled mail run on a cold December day, he caught site of some Scandinavian fisherman whose sloops was floundering in a windstorm along the ice-encrusted shore near Beaver Bay. He stopped to help them but, sadly, he sustained injuries that led to his demise. He's buried in the town's Ojibwa cemetery and is fondly remembered in the stories & biographies of his colorful life.

--But his legacy lives on. The trail he pioneered is now the Superior National Hiking Trail & serves as the race route for the marathon named after him. Racers doff their hats at John's grave at their Beaver Bay rest stop.

--And curiously John has a White Iron connection as well because among our lakes 45 islands is a chain called the Beargrease Islands. They were the summering grounds for John's Beargrease clan whose ancestral wild ricing grounds lie in the back bay of our lake – one of 200 lakes in Minnesota famous for this incredible food that receives special protection. It's fun to think that during his intrepid life John drove his dogs past our Wintergreen point just as you'll be doing today.

“Where am I going?”



--Sorry, we can't help you there.

