



**Frank Sears**  
**This Life Matters**

## High Peaks Hospice This Life Matters

### Frank Sears

Frank Sears was a champion racer of Siberian huskies. His father was an Olympic competitor in the short-lived venue of Olympic sled-dog racers. Frank was a companion and driver to the rich and famous who came to the Olympic Village and took dog team rides around its celebrated frozen lake. While winters were spent in racing and driving, summers were spent landscaping. Sears Landscaping employed several men from the village.



“I always did what I thought was right. I kept to that way and no other.” Head-strong and a hard worker, Frank challenged life and the elements for all his 85 years.

That challenge began on the day of Frank’s birth on October 25, 1921. That was “when winters were winters.” Frank remembers his parents saying that Dr. Guys got to the house by horse and the snow was “up to the horse’s belly.” Frank was born in Lake Placid and move one mile from the place of his birth, the 4 corners, in 85 years. Frank still keeps his handsome rugged looks showing the charisma and zest for all that life has to throw at you. His heart recently stopped for 31 seconds but his will propels him on. He is supported by children who know how to respect their father’s temper and love his ways. A week before his heart stopped he was still manicuring the five flower gardens and the grounds around his home. There were times when his youngest daughter Betsy would come running to check on him after seeing him lying on the ground. If that is what it took to keep the weeds under control, that is what he would do.

The years of his youth were what he describes as “wild”. He graduated from eight years of school. Frank remembers his father working for Dr. d’Avignon on his farm. Dr. d’Avignon sold a farm in Wilmington to Dexter for a dollar. “Boys are supposed to help their fathers on the farm.” At the age of five a group of boys was playing outside. One of the boys threw a stone at Frank and hit him in the leg. His leg became infected and gangrene set in. The doctor wanted to cut the leg off but Frank’s Dad, Dexter, said no. His leg healed and grew strong again but he couldn’t help his Dad on the farm that year. Yes, boys are supposed to help their father’s on the farm but when he was 14 he was shot in the head. Frank, his brother, Junior (Dexter, Jr.) and a friend Roy Snow were playing with a shot gun. The gun went off and one of the pellets grazed his head. It was a long drive from Wilmington to Lake Placid to the hospital. They were all relieved that Frank survived but he couldn’t help his Dad on the farm that year either.

“Scared, yes, there were two times I was scared.” Frank was about 12 years old and the challenge was climbing a pine tree that was about “120 ft” high. “I climbed about 100 feet then I looked at the ground and knew that I had to get down somehow. I hugged that tree for all I was worth and I cried.” Frank realized that no one knew where he was and they certainly wouldn’t be looking for him up in the tree tops. He got down bit by bit hugging that tree. He knew fear that day. There was one other time when he was a young man out hunting and was lost for a day and a half on the mountain. He made a wrong turn looking for the hunting camp. He knew from listening to his Grandfather, father and other men that it was not a foregone conclusion that he would make it out. He heard about the search



parties going out to look for the lost. Frank spent the night listening to the squirrels thinking they were bears, straining at every cracking twig thinking the worst. The next day his father found him. “I hugged his leg and cried. My Dad said to me “That’s’ the only way you are going to learn.” And learn he did. There were many times in his life that he was the one that led search parties finding the lost.

Frank had a role model for his adventures. His Dad, Dexter, an Olympic contender, was also a bootlegger in the 1920’s. He had the bullet holes in his car to prove it. More often than not Dexter made those trips safely but he also paid federal fines for smuggling alcohol over the Canadian border to NY markets. The Sears men were strong. Dexter made a life for his family by doing what needed to be done. Frank followed his lead, love and respected his Dad. “My Dad was 200 pounds of muscle with nerves of steel. He was the real superman.” Dexter was a lumber jack, deer hunter, musher and leader in his community. There was one day Dexter didn’t come home from the woods. The search party started out and they found him leaning up against a tree. He had a heart attack. He died the way he lived, fighting the elements: refusing to give in.

Frank used to go to the races – sled dog races, that is. The races were in Ottawa, Quebec and in Lake Placid. Frank is the third in four generations of Sears men who were renown mushers: Frank, Sr., his grandfather, Dexter, his father, Frank and Frank’s two sons, Frank, Jr. and Don. A sled dog team race was anything but routine. Some mushers drove teams of 13. Frank drove teams of five or seven at the most. During one race in Canada, Frank was up against international racers including Leonhard Seppala. Seppala was the driver of one of the famous dogsled teams that in 1925 raced over 650 miles from Nenana to Nome, Alaska bring antitoxin serum for a diphtheria epidemic. That race was the precursor of the Iditarod. On this particular day in Canada Frank had a team of five Alaskan Huskies and Leonhard had a team of thirteen. At the end of the race Seppala made his way over to Frank to feel his strong legs. While the rest of the mushers jumped on the sled and rode through the course Frank would “save” his team by jumping off the sled and running up the hills with them. This same Leonhard Seppala raced against Frank’s father, Dexter, in the Olympics of 1932. Seppala came in 2<sup>nd</sup> and Sears was 9<sup>th</sup>.



Frank drove sled dog teams at Santa’s Workshop, and Frontier Town during the summers. They traded iron runners for wheels to give the children rides. They went from Lake Placid to Syracuse, Lake George and Watertown giving rides at special events. He would also hire out his team during the winter during Winter Carnivals and at the Adirondack Sportsman’s Show.

Frank loved his dog team. His favorite lead dog was Red. Frank talks about his dogs with a gentleness sometimes unseen in rough and tumble men. One of Frank’s lead dogs had a litter of pups and he was lying on the grass watching them. The mom picked up one of the puppies by the scruff of the neck and walked over to Frank and put the dog on his chest. That was trust shown from dog to driver. Those dogs weren’t pets and the children were warned not to treat them that way. You could see Frank and his team at all the major community events. If you looked really closely you could see him coming out of a refrigerator with his dog team on a television commercial. He was seen coast to coast on television with Arthur Godfrey when he was in Lake Placid. In 1941 – 1942 Frank sold one of his teams to the U.S. Army.

Again and again the conversation returned to Betty, his wife of more than fifty years. They were married from 1941 to the day of her death in 1997. Her father didn’t want them to marry but love won out. Betty was his only boss. She weighed 122 pounds and kept that weight throughout their married life. “She kept me straight. One time I was at her home visiting and then walked the five miles home.

Well, when I got home I just started to miss her and turned around and walked the five miles back to her house.” Twenty miles but from the look in his eyes these sixty plus years later you know it was worth it. She was about 17 when they married. She was Frank’s one and only. While he was the boss of everyone else, she continued to be his guide. “All she had to say was “Frank, you cut it out”, and I knew I had to.” Frank would come home after winning first place trophies from racing events and Betty would say “Good job, Frank, but we can’t eat trophies.”



The night they got married it was 41 degrees below zero in Lake Placid. They got married in the Church and then walked to the movie theater to celebrate. “It was warm in there.” Others may have been watching the movie.. “I don’t know what was showing we just hugged and kissed and kept warm.”

Together they had five children in six years: Natalie, Nancy, Frank Jr., Don and Betsy. Dr. Owens delivered the first three children. Dr. Owens was an elderly physician even then. He knew that Frank wanted a son. So the second birth he sent someone else over with the news of Nancy’s entrance into this world. When Frank Jr. was born Dr. Owens was the first to shake Frank’s hand.

Frank never asked any help from anybody. There was a time that there was no work in Lake Placid and Frank and his Dad worked for the Rail Road and moved the whole family to Niagara Falls for a year. “Half of Lake Placid was there.” They worked for union wages and kept food on the table. Betty didn’t ask for help either. “I remember coming in from work and seeing this little woman standing between two chairs washing diapers. She heated the water and went to work. She worked long after I went to bed.” Betty was creative as well as resourceful. Frank forged his own trails. He was one of the first to cut the trees on Whiteface and Gore constructing ski trails. “I remember the day we finished the trails on Gore.” It was 1963, we walked back into the house in Lake Placid and learned that President Kennedy had been shot. He also worked as a foreman when the Northway was built.

When he was young he delivered milk and vegetables to the Lake Placid Club, driving to and from the local farms. “I worked for the Lake Placid Club. I only made .25 and hour.” Frank worked 12 hour days from six to six. “I had to work that long to put food on the table and clothes on the kids backs.” He was used to giving orders. He was a trail boss, the founder and owner of Sears Landscaping with his own crew, a sled dog musher with 40 dogs and supervising other drivers, a railroad worker and a guide through out the North Country. He was a caretaker to many of the wealthy in Lake Placid. “Some were as dumb as peas, but I didn’t care. If they wanted me to plant trees and gardens one week and move them the next, I would do it. Some of the men around town would get mad at the waste. Not me. They just paid me more. They liked me and I made a living. The more they changed their minds the more I got paid.” A newspaper article by Frank Shatz says “There are hardly any commercial establishments left in this resort village which have not at sometime or other been landscaped by Frank Sears. His company, in existence since the late 60’s, has designed and executed the landscaping of the grounds of at least 75 percent of all the existing motels in addition to countless private homes.”



“To be a conscientious landscaper is not an easy task.” Frank says. “You are constantly battling with yourself to decide whether to save a tree from the ax, or open up the space. But, after all, one has to realize that trees need breathing space too. In the end, the best you can do is to try to strike a balance with nature. When you succeed, and the result is satisfactory, it gives you a mighty good feeling. I think, landscaping for me has never felt like just a business. With me it is always a bit of passion.”

When someone famous came to town, Frank was the one that the Chamber of Commerce called. He gave rides to Jackie Kennedy and her children, to Arthur Godfrey to Kurt Douglas and his children. He remembered a young couple associated with the song "Dance Ballerina, Dance" who he spent all day with. He gave them dog team rides, watched them laughing together after snow ball fights and cooked them a meal on Mirror Lake. A romantic day and Frank made it happen.



When he gave Jackie Kennedy and her children a ride the dog sled was flanked by snow mobiles with secret service men. He was well protected that day.

Arthur Godfrey was a special man. "He kept me laughing." Some of the famous were "stuck on themselves, not Arthur, he was a regular guy."

Frank was a guide for the NYS Troopers during a 105 day manhunt for a 29-year old AWOL Air Force major who had committed a series of burglaries and killed the Lake Placid Village Police Officer Richard Pelkey. James Arlon Call had assumed there would be "money in abundance" in Lake Placid. The Adirondack woods would be a safe place to hide for a man with his military training.

This story began with an August 2, 1954 break-in of the Lake Placid Club where \$100,000 of jewelry was stolen. A trap was set for the thief in a camp on West Valley Road. It was there that the shoot-out occurred involving Officers J. Bernard Fell, Richard Pekley, John Fagan and St. Dominick Valenze and



James Call. After several of the officers were shot, Call used Officer Fell as a human shield to exit the building and the man hunt was on. The volunteer force increased to 500 men including state trooper who combed twenty miles of the Adirondack terrain.

Frank was in charge of guiding a group of troopers through the woods. At one point they came to a barn on Bear Cub Road. There were about 7 or 8 troopers and they sat down on the grass and asked Frank to search the barn.

Call eluded all of his trackers by walking 300 miles through five counties and ended up in Reno, NV where he was apprehended for another crime. He was eventually brought back to Lake Placid for arraignment and sentenced to 20 years in prison.\* Information gleaned from an article by David Shampine of the Watertown Daily Times, October 22, 2006

This may have been his most dramatic search effort but it was not the only one by far. Frank led searches for those lost in downed plane crashes and lost in the Adirondack Mountains.

In what some might consider a bit of irony, it was Frank Sears, Jr. of Sears Contracting Corporation in Lake Placid who in October of 1992 cleared the debris from a fire that damaged the main building of the Lake Placid Club.



Any regrets? "not building that log cabin with Betty on Alford's Pond." After he dies he has strict instructions for the children. His ashes are to be mixed with Betty's and then they are to be sprinkled around Alford's Pond. That is where they spent "their lovers hours" and together that is where they will stay.





LAKE PLACID, N. Y. ---Frank Sears of Lake Placid gives his lead dog an affectionate pat following the two-day 40-mile grind of the Lake Placid International Sled Dog Derby Feb. 11-12 in which Sears placed third and was awarded a special condition prize of \$100.00.