



# Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

## **WELCOME TO MOOKOMAANI-ZIIBI, MN 55609**

I am quite embarrassed to say that after living in Knife River (KR) for more than fifty years I had no idea of KR's early Indigenous history other than the name Knife River evolved from the Ojibwe word "Mookomaani-ziibi" meaning "river with sharp stones". I also did not know that as late as 1800 there was a summer Ojibwe village on Granite Point (forms the west entry to the marina), which is just a block from where Mary and I live!

The Indigenous history of KR might have been lost had it not been for Todd Lindahl, KRHCC ace historian and archeologist, who recorded this very important part of KR history and now shares it with readers of the KRHCC newsletter.

An Ojibwe village on the banks of the St. Louis River like what may have been on Granite Point.



Photo credit: Paul B. Gaylord - Courtesy University of Minnesota Duluth Archives, NE Minnesota Historical Collection

## **THE INDIGENOUS PRESENCE IN KNIFE RIVER**

By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian and Archeologist

### **The rise and fall of Lake Superior**

Indigenous peoples have had a presence in Knife River going back into Paleo-Indigenous times as shown by archaeological evidence. Due to higher water levels in Lake Superior, habitation on the present-day shoreline probably came at a little later date than on the upper sections of the river. The high waterline in this vicinity reached 1,100 feet above sea level. This was due to the natural outlet at the east end of the lake being plugged by ice causing a “bathtub effect.” Once the outlet at Sault Saint Marie opened, the water at the west end of the lake dropped to nothing. The weight of the glacier at the east end of the Lake Superior basin caused the earth there to be depressed and the lake’s water flowed eastward.

So, some 9,500 years ago, you would have been able to walk on dry land from Knife River directly south to Wisconsin. Knife River would have dumped into the St. Louis River halfway to the South Shore. The head of the lake would have been near Two Harbors and extended southeast to the Apostle Islands.

As the land has risen at the east end of Lake Superior (isostatic rebound) the water has deepened westward again. The lake has covered a succession of ancient beach lines much like Minnesota Point in Duluth today. If left to nature, eventually Minnesota Point will also recede below the water, and in the distant future, the head of the lake will finally end at Fond du Lac.

### **Impact of pre-historic climate change**

At least ten different ice ages have occurred in the last one million years. We just happen to be in an intermediate phase of the latest one. The climate has changed considerably in the last 12,000 years during the early period of human habitation on this continent. The warmer and drier Hypsithermal Interval occurred from 5,000 to 7,000 years ago, which caused some prairie plants to advance as far north as the Duluth area, along with red and burr oak. Then about 5,000 years ago the climate started getting cooler again and many of these prairie plants retreated southward. Some scattered red oak stands only marginally endure today on south-facing hills that get more sunlight and warmth. Some of these can be found yet along the Knife River.

Today our climate locally is again roughly the same as it was 9,000 years ago. All these changes to the climate resulted in a different forest type, related animals, and lake and

river levels. This brought about dramatic changes in the way Indigenous people were able to make a living in this region.

During the early Paleo-Indigenous time northeastern Minnesota would have been arctic tundra with black spruce, dwarf birch, brushes, and sedges. Boat building from this period is unknown but may have included hide boats such as kayaks or some sort of rafts. By the late Paleo period the stone adz for working wood becomes more common for some sort of woodworking and possibly dugout canoe building.

During the Eastern Archaic (also referred to as the “old copper culture”) era 3,000 to 7,000 years before present (BP), trees had become large enough and readily available to produce dugout canoes. Both stone and copper tools of this period would have undoubtedly been used in canoe building, which used burning and chopping to remove wood from the trunk.

### **Enter the birch-bark canoe**

When the Woodland era arrived, the watercraft used changed from the dugout to the birchbark canoe. Weaponry also changed from the atlatl throwing spear to the bow and arrow. The use of copper tools continued as before until iron and steel trade goods first became available during the fur trade and more recent times.

When birchbark suitable for canoes was in short supply, Indigenous people reverted to building dugouts as they had in the past. Birchbark canoe building and repair would have certainly been carried out at Knife River. Perhaps even dugouts were produced here, but so far, no evidence of them at Knife River has come to light. However, there is documentation of dugout canoe building a little west of Two Harbors as late as 1858.

The two primary functions of these canoes were for travel and fishing. Fishing was one of the few activities that could be carried on at almost any time of the year and in any season.

Ojibwe people making a birch-bark canoe near Ely, MN. (Photo credit: Paul B. Gaylord - Courtesy University of Minnesota Duluth Archives, NE Minnesota Historical Collection) with replicated birch-bark canoe (insert photo credit Jared Wicks)



The Ojibwe name for Knife River as recorded by the French was “Mookomaani-ziibi,” or interpreted as “a river with sharp rocks.” When the first settler, Captain Charles Anderson, arrived here in 1879, there was still an Ojibwe village on Granite Point. An elderly Ojibwe with whom he became friends told him that he had been born in that village perhaps eighty or ninety years before. How far into the murky past a village was located there is unknown.

In 1857 the town of Buchanan was also built on Granite Point, probably for some of the same reasons that drew Indigenous peoples there. The point and island south of the river mouth blocked some of the notorious prevailing northeast wind. Indigenous peoples valued the sand and gravel beach between Granite Point and the mouth of the river as a good place to safely land a canoe without damaging it on sharp rocks. The river, of course, offered a good place to catch fish. Two particularly favored species found here in the river were sturgeon and suckers.

### **Fish were caught in several different ways.**

Seines (nets) were made by women using nettle, which grows in swamps and along rivers. An average net was about 60 by 60 arm-lengths and used in a couple different ways. One was similar to historic-period pond netting. The nets were weighed down by stones that were notched on two sides.

One method of catching sturgeon was to use a long stick with a looped cord hanging from the end. This was slowly worked over the sturgeon’s tail and then pulled tight. Sometimes a hook and line with bait were used with the hook made of bone or copper prior to trading with Europeans. During the winter, fish were speared or caught with hook and line through the ice. A wooden decoy with birch-bark fins was used to attract fish.

The fish could be prepared in several ways. If not eaten fresh, they were prepared on a rack over a fire and stored for later use during the winter in makuks buried in the ground. Maple sugar used to season fish was also stored in makuks along with the fish. From mid-March for about a month the maple sap was gathered and boiled down to sugar. Often families would go from the sugar bush directly to a fishing area such as the mouth of the Knife River.



One large sugar bush area next to Knife River yielded a cache of nested makuks (imaged), wooden ash spiles (spigots) and an ancient copper axe for making cuts to insert the spiles. Photo credit: Todd Lindahl

### **The Ojibwe presence in Two Harbors.**

The Ojibwe name for Agate Bay in Two Harbors was “Wass Wewining,” which meant a “place to spear fish by torchlight.” The French fur traders named the small creek entering the bay Flambeau Creek. Flambeau is “torchlight” in French.

At the north end of town is “Jake’s Hill” where the second Two Harbors water tank stands. There are sugar maples on top of this hill and the original survey maps from the 1850s show the sugar bush and the Ojibwe trail leading to it. It undoubtedly was used in conjunction with the fish caught in the bay. Similar activities took place at Knife River.

Salting was unavailable and salting fish unknown to Indigenous peoples until the arrival of the fur trade. The French and British both traded with Indigenous peoples for fish and maple sugar for use at their trading posts.

The American Fur Company (AFC) got into commercial fishing in 1834 and within a year was making more money in the venture than trading in furs. As was done with fur trapping, the Indigenous peoples did all the fishing with the traders acting as middlemen.



The fur company established fish collection stations along the North Shore and on Isle Royale. Collection stations were made at Knife River and Encampment Island in 1837. The AFC provided a trader (“clerk”), a carpenter for boat building, a blacksmith, a cooper for making barrels, and some laborers. Indigenous peoples were given boats and any fishing equipment needed.

Fish were picked up by a fleet of company schooners and taken to Fond du Lac, MN, for processing. From there they were shipped down the Great Lakes to eastern markets.

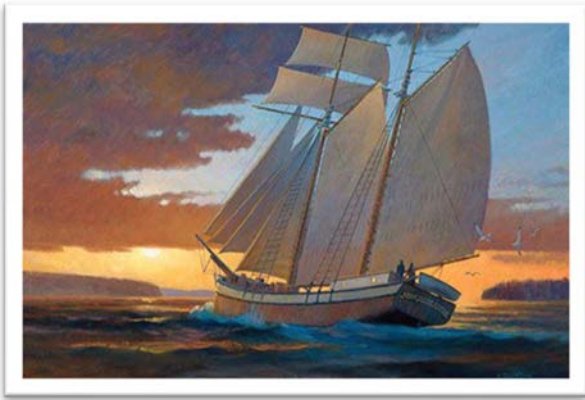


Photo credit: The American Fur Company's schooner ASTOR, painted by North Shore artist Howard Sivertson used with permission of Sivertson Galleries in Grand Marais and Duluth.

Fishing and boat building are activities that have gone on at Knife River from the prehistoric past and continue to this day.

Editor's note:

*If all goes according to plan, The KRHCC will complete its commercial fishing exhibit this fall. Within the exhibit will be five interpretive displays that present KR's fishing history from Indigenous peoples to present, and how commercial fishing helped create the town's character.*

*One of the displays is devoted to the Indigenous people's presence in KR. We were very fortunate to have William Blackwell, an elder from the Grand Portage Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, and the Fond du Lac Tribal Historic Preservation Office help us with the content of the display. We would not have attempted to write the content without their help.*

*Indigenous people do not have a written language but rather rely upon their history passed through elders. The arrival of Europeans brought disease for which Indigenous peoples had no natural immunity. Many elders died and with them generations of history.*

*The KRHCC is confident that with the help of the Indigenous community and widely respected KRHCC historian Todd Lindahl, the interpretive display devoted to the Indigenous presence in KR has been accurately presented. This display and the other four are available for sponsorship. For more information: email [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)*

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF HONORING KR'S "ELDERS."**

Last fall Mary and I took a North Shore fall colors trip (fog and rain) with our destination the Grand Portage Monument in Grand Portage, MN. We wanted to learn more about North Shore Indigenous history that we could summarize and present in an interpretive display devoted to the Indigenous presence in Knife River.

We learned that Indigenous people do not have a written language, but rather rely on oral history passed down from elder to elder. The arrival of Europeans brought diseases for which the Indigenous had no natural immunity. Many elders died and with them generations of history.

Oral history is fragile and fleeting. In KR we have a lot of oral history in second and third generation KR families that is in danger of being lost. I am very thankful that I have been welcomed into the homes of several KR "elders" in their seventies and older to share their recollections of KR, even going back to childhood. Their memories are endearing and now recorded and archived at the KRHCC.

We need to honor and respect our elders for their life experiences which contribute to the history and culture that has shaped our town, and the wisdom they have acquired over the years they can impart on us personally.

## **CRUSADER II's VIEWING DECK**

Ever since CRUSADER II was gifted to KR in late 2016, those of us who accepted the gift (?) have given thought to how we would display it once we found a place to put it. An important part of the display would be a deck that would run the length of and parallel to it and be 30"-36" from ground. It would allow people to peek into what was once a working fish tug.

For the last six years as board members traveled about the Great Lakes, we have taken photos of different boat shelters with viewing decks to gather ideas of what our deck (and shelter) might look like.

Here are some examples of viewing decks we found and our reactions:

**Greenery on steroids.** We think there is a boat under all that bramble. No need for a deck as boat is partially rotted into the ground. Lesson here is if you plant greenery around a boat, plan for who will keep it under control.

Photo: Paul von Goertz



**Sensitivity to the environment.** We gave this deck high marks for being the most affordable, least labor intensive and having the least impact on the environment. You wait twenty years for the lower third of the boat to rot into the ground, so no need for a viewing deck. No need for clearing the site of trees either, but keep the grass mowed around it.

Photo: Paul von Goertz

**Repurposed deck.** Someone's front porch repurposed as a viewing deck.

Photo: Anne Skadberg

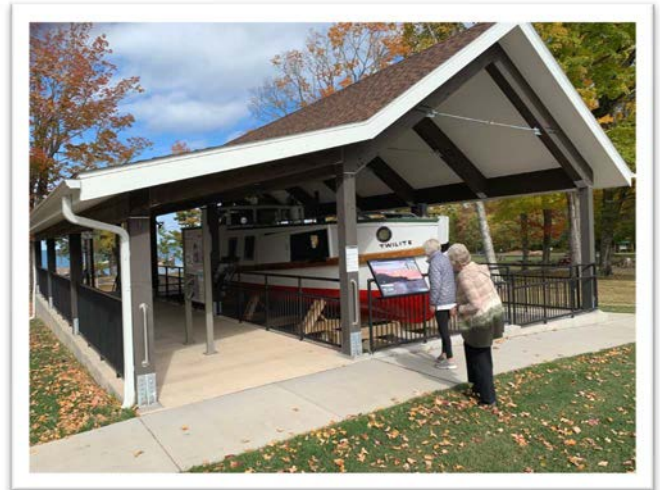


**Best deck made with community dollars (we assume).** Randy Ellestad found this picture of a viewing deck in Two Rivers, WI. We really like it and ours will be similar, except we will budget to keep fresh paint on our boat.

Photo: Randy Ellestad

**Best deck made with public dollars.**

This deck within a commercial fishing exhibit sets the bar. The exhibit can be found at Little Sand Bay of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, which is under the direction of the Department of the Interior. The shelter takes advantage of a natural slope in the land to allow TWILIGHT to be recessed into the ground, thereby making an elevated viewing deck unnecessary. Photo: Paul von Goertz

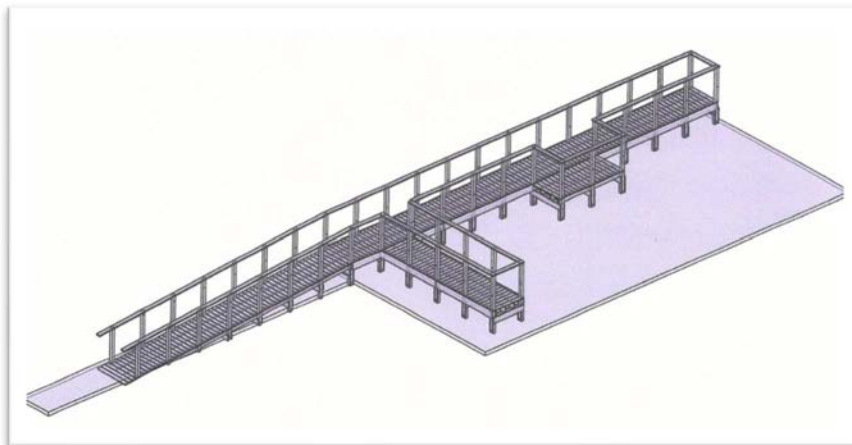


**The CRUSADER II viewing deck-**

CRUSADER II's deck will run the length of the boat and across the stern to give visitors two views into the boat. It will be approximately 30 – 36" off the ground. Access to it will be an ADA-compliant ramp. Length of the ramp will be determined once deck height is confirmed. See concept drawing made by Dave Grong, KRHCC board member, using a CAD program he found on his old computer.

CRUSADER II will rest within the "L" in the drawing. KR local Alex Happ, owner of NorShor Construction, will build the deck, starting around mid-May.

Unfortunately, the interior of the boat was stripped years ago by a party who intended to turn CRUSADER II into some kind of cruising boat. He was kind enough to leave a large, corroded battery. Thankfully, Carl Erickson's coal stove remains.



For this year, we will restore the boat's hull, cabin and decks. Next year, if all goes well, we will return the interior to its original condition.

Concept drawing of CRUSADER II's viewing deck.  
Image: David Grong

**Viewing decks need interpretive displays to complete the educational experience.**

The best interpretive displays we've found at commercial fishing exhibits around the lakes are nearly identical to the four we have by the depot. We will have five that will be mounted to viewing deck railing posts; each display is available for sponsorship @ \$1,250. For more information, contact: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)

Other examples of interpretive displays worthy only of good intentions.

I would read the info on the cabin, but from a distance while trying not to have the Beer Barrel Polka going through my head.

Photo: Paul von Goertz



There is a viewing deck on far right barely visible. The "interpretive display" Scotch-taped to bow reflects the overall consideration given to displaying this once sturdy hard-working boat, complete with Chris Craft bow light tacked on.

Photo: Paul von Goertz

## CRUSADER II SMILE METER

Voice heard recently from CRUSADER II:

“How is the KRHCC doing raising the \$6,750 or more in match funds to help get a shelter over me?

KRHCC response:

“We’ll have you covered for next winter! We’ve raised enough already to get you a Menards Yardworks® Blue Standard-Duty Tarp! And there’s more! We can use it later as a paint drop cloth! How’s that?

If you can help place a proper shelter over CRUSADER II, please note on your check that your donation is for shelter match funds. Send to:

KRHCC  
POB 240  
Knife River, MN 55609



The KRHCC is an IRS-recognized 501(c3) so your donation is totally tax deductible.

## CORRECTION

In the January issue of the KRHCC newsletter it was reported that Howard “Bud” Sivertson died January 12, 2022, in Grand Marais, MN, at age 92. Your writer’s brain had not fully transitioned from calendar year 2022 to calendar year 2023. Bud died January 12, **2023**. Your writer regrets this error.

## FEBRUARY DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

### Donations

- James Alt and Deborah McKnight for CRUSADER shelter matching funds.
- Mark and Claudia Stenson for general fund.

## NEWSLETTER

*The KRHCC is a 501 (c3) nonprofit so all donations whether in the form of a memorial, honorarium, or sponsorship are fully tax deductible. Your comments and suggestions for this monthly emailed newsletter are always welcome. Email to: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)*

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