

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz – KRHCC Board Member

JANUARY SINKING OF FISH TUG LEADS TO INCREDIBLE TALE OF SURVIVAL

LARSMONT DEPOT PLAYS A ROLE

Prelude: The sinking of the 95' fish tug THOMAS FRIANT in 1924 while enroute from the South Shore to the North Shore has been recorded in several histories of Lake Superior shipwrecks. But, what you read here may be one of the more accurate accounts, as it is the collective recollections of three people who either got the story first or second hand from a survivor(s).

The first is Marti Peterson, who was told the story by family members. Her grandfather was Einar "Shine" Miller of Bayfield. Shine was co-owner of the FRIANT and a survivor.



Photo right: Einar "Shine" Miller on steel tug JOHN E. MEYER out of Duluth, 1928.

Photo credit: James Miller Collection

I am the second person and heard the story firsthand from the other owner of the FRIANT, Halvor Reiten (right), also of Bayfield. Halvor would later record the sinking in an oral history, which confirmed what he told me.

Photo credit: Bayfield Heritage Association



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The third person is Eleanor Knight, a respected journalist who wrote for the Bayfield County Press from 1950-53, and later wrote a book "Tales of Bayfield Pioneers." At the time she wrote her account of the sinking, both Shine Miller and Halvor Reiten were alive and one can assume provided much of the information for her book.

Two others I want to acknowledge are Lee Bujold and Todd Lindahl. Lee is from Ashland and now a KR resident. She connected me with Marti and so we were able to compare stories about the sinking. Todd is the KRHCC historian and helped me determine where the crew landed on the North Shore and the train depot to which the shipwrecked crew walked.

It was a cold January day with clouds of lake steam emanating from the lake - actually much like the day I write this - when in the early 1970s Mary and I drove to Bayfield, WI, one of our happy places, to see what, if any, activity might be taking place. There wasn't any. So we stopped to see our friends Halvor and Sylvia Reiten who lived upstairs of Halvor's Motorworks shop in downtown Bayfield.

Halvor and Sylvia had long been friends of my family as my dad was born in Norway and I believe Halvor was first generation Norwegian-American. So they had that in common, plus Halvor was at one time a boat builder. He also had a boat yard in Bayfield where my family docked our boats since the mid-fifties.

After a bit of "catch up" talk, Halvor commented on the bitterly cold January day and then slowly seemed to fade off to a memory many years earlier. I remember nearly every word.

Halvor and his good friend, Einar "Shine" Miller, had come to the conclusion there could be money made by commercial fishing during the winter months, when all other fishermen were in winter lay up. Success depended on finding open water, and that would be the North Shore with its deep and more exposed waters, and less chance of ice.

They pooled their money for two months of winter supplies and prepared their boat, the THOMAS FRIANT, which they owned together. The FRIANT had been an excursion boat on both Lakes Michigan and Superior. The partners originally planned on using it for transporting passengers and freight between Duluth and Bayfield, but changed

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their minds and converted it to a fish tug. It was built in 1884 of wood, 96' long with an 18' beam and 8' draft.

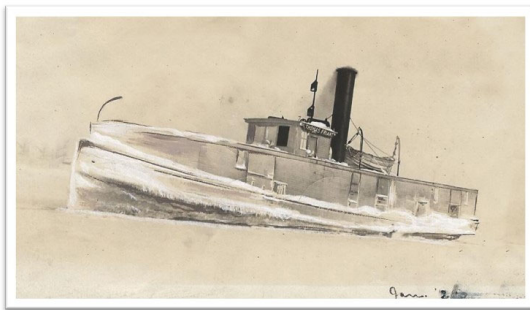
Image: The THOMAS FRIANT soon after it was converted from excursion boat to fish tug. Photo credit: James Miller Collection



The North Shore fishing venture was risky because no insurance company would insure their boat and contents for winter Lake conditions.

On January 2 or 3, 1924, the temperature began to drop and the protected waters of the Apostle Islands began to freeze in near zero temperatures. They left before ice conditions worsened and headed for Cornucopia, a jump-off point for a course to Two Harbors from where they would fish the productive waters between Larsmont and Knife River.

When they approached "Corny," they were dismayed to see the entry plugged with pack ice layered by strong NW winds. They set an anchor for the evening a few miles offshore with plans to head for the North Shore in the morning. Halvor said he got little sleep as he could hear the wind piling up ice around the FRIANT. The temperature was now 23 degrees below zero.



On the morning of the sixth, they peered through lake steam and discovered they were held firmly in the pack ice, perhaps for the winter. Shine took the opportunity to take a photo (left) of the boat from the ice. But, with axes in hand, they eventually broke the FRIANT free.

Photo credit: James Miller Collection

They stoked the fish tug's 325 hp. compound steam engine to full 140 pounds of pressure and headed west towards Port Wing where they could see open water, and then set a course for Two Harbors. But, a strange thing happened. Rats began to come up from below decks. Did they know something the crew did not?

About mid-afternoon water suddenly began pouring in from under the coalbunker – and with no way to access the leak. The crew surmised that the pack ice, driven by

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strong winds, had either sprung some hull planks or poked a hole in the boat the night before.

It was soon apparent the FRIANT's three steam-driven pumps could not keep out the water. They were midway between the south and north shores. The south shore was rapidly icing in; their only hope was to make for the open waters of the north shore, 12 miles way.

Halvor Reiten told me Emory Jones from Corny, offered to jump overboard with a tarp and swim under the boat in an attempt to wrap the hull from side to side more or less in a sling. The pressure of the water would force the tarp tight against the hull and stop the flow of water. But, Halvor and Einar said no.

Eleanor Knight makes no mention of Emery's offer, but wrote they were able to tip the boat sufficiently so that John Anderson could be lowered over the side in an attempt to stuff a blanket between leaking planks. He could see that much of the light iron that covered the hull (sheet metal) had been torn off by the ice. He expected the boat to sink. Just what Emory or John may have done, or not done, remains unclear. But, what is clear is that the crew was prepared to save the boat even if it meant jumping overboard to do so.

Soon the rising water entered the firebox, steam pressure dropped and the pumps failed. The FRIANT had a single lifeboat on davits capable of holding 19 people. They filled it with what would be needed for row to the north shore. Halvor was the last of the nine men to enter it; then watched the Lake claim it, bow first and with stern 30' in the air. He remembered his pocket watch. He had placed it on a hook above the wheel and had forgotten it. Gone.

Years later, I had a chance to talk to Ken Merryman, who along with three others discovered the FRIANT quite by chance in 2004 using side-scanning sonar. It was in 290 feet of water about 12 miles south of Knife River. I told Ken, who kept his boat in the Knife River marina, about the watch and because Ken had said the wreck was upright and in pristine condition, to try to see if the watch could be retrieved somehow by a diver or robotic arm and given to a surviving family member of Halvor's.

Halvor was at the tiller of the lifeboat while the others rowed. "You may think I had the easy job," said Halvor. "But the others had the advantage of rowing to keep them

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warm.” Halvor later commented that, while looking at the crew frozen to their seats, that “They looked very much like turtles, what with frozen shells on their backs.”

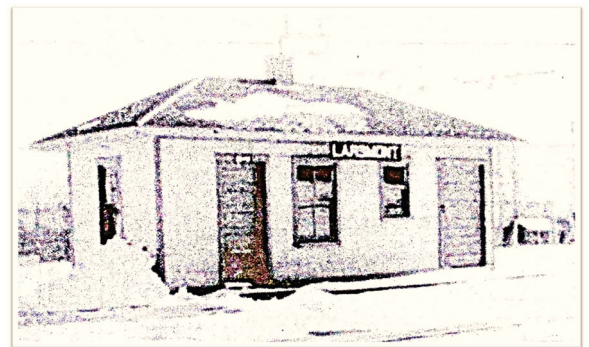
They rowed from about 4 PM until 11 PM into a strong NW wind, but as it began to die down at dusk, they welcomed a reprieve. But, the NW was not done with them; “night ice” began to appear on the calming water. “It was too thin to get out and walk on, and too thick to row through, so we used our oars to break it up,” said Halvor.

They shot off flares hoping to attract the attention of the Two Harbors tug EDNA G, but they were mistaken by folks as fireworks from die-hard New Year's revelers on the south shore. Besides, in January no boats would be expected to be on the Lake.

Near mid-night they could see a light from shore. They headed for it, but when they reached shore, icy cliffs confronted them. They scaled them by cutting footholds in the ice, then followed the light to a fisherman's shack, where two fishermen were playing cards.

They had landed about five miles west of Two Harbors. The following morning, after resting and fueling their tired bodies, they walked about another mile to a depot to catch a ride to Two Harbors. KRHCC historian Todd Lindahl has surmised that using the logistical information provided by the fishermen, this depot was the “flag stop” depot at Larsmont (right). It was unmanned, but heated and would-be riders used a flag or lantern to stop an approaching train.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl



As they sat exhausted, a man came in, sat by the stove and looked at the dejected survivors. Without a greeting, he suddenly launched into a forceful exhortation, which ended with “That will teach you a lesson! Lead a better life!”

Halvor remembered for emphasis the man jumped up and down as he preached. He then left. They had no idea what denomination or sect he belonged to. But it was evident he believed in berating the afflicted rather than comforting them.

A train approached and they flagged it down. Upon hearing their plight, the train conductor gave the men free passage to Two Harbors. A restaurant owner gave them a free meal, acknowledging he had once been shipwrecked.

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The next day the crew caught a train to Duluth and from there they hitchhiked back to Bayfield with little but the clothes on their backs. The crew from Cornucopia then walked the 19 snow-covered miles from Bayfield back to Corny. In 1924 cars were placed on blocks for the winter.

Halvor told me he never recovered from the financial loss of the boat and gear, none of which was insured. In 1924 dollars, the boat was valued at \$10,000 and equipment \$6,000.

Shine Miller's comment to the news media was "If every man on the crew had not been a real boatman, we would not have escaped so fortunately."



Said Eleanor Knight "They were all boatmen, trained in the ways of Lake Superior, toughened in the hardships it could inflict on them. And they made it."

Photo right: Halvor Reiten

Photo credit: Bayfield Heritage Association

In November 2019 the THOMAS FRIANT was listed on the National Register of Historic places.

KR CAMPGROUND OWNER BUYS COOLIDGE BROS. BUILDING

Randy Ellestad, Knife River Campground owner and entrepreneur, has purchased the Coolidge Bros. garage and machine shop at 171 Scenic Drive in Knife River. The transaction was completed earlier this month.

"When I learned that Brian and Tim Coolidge were considering selling the building, I bought it because of its prime location on Scenic 61 and its great potential for a variety of businesses that cater to the increasing number of visitors traveling the North Shore. When people driving by saw the activity taking place and stopped, they offered a lot of ideas for the building – some even wanted to rent part of it," said Randy.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

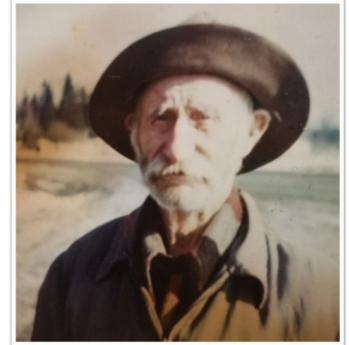


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For now, Randy is concentrating on emptying out the former machine shop and cleaning and painting it. "Once I can stand back and see the open space available, I will come up with how to use it," said Randy.

The Coolidge Bros. garage and machine shop has been a fixture in Knife River since 1923 when Ai and Mary Coolidge moved to KR from Michigan and opened a gas station and garage. Being a natural machinist, he began machining hard-to-find parts for cars and anything on wheels.

Photo: Ai Coolidge, Photo credit: Randy Ellestad Collection



His three sons, Francis ("Dutch"), Loren ("Punk") and Lloyd ("Irish") would eventually join him and by consensus of local gear-heads, the Coolidges were nothing short of brilliant - and without formal educations. Soon they were producing custom machined parts for a variety of local manufacturers and businesses.



Besides being skilled machinists, the Coolidges were inventors. Dutch invented the Coolidge "Trollo-Plane" that was sold around the nation for trolling at deep depths. See the May issue of his newsletter for more on the diving plane. Punk built and flew his own ultra-lite aircraft, mostly from scratch. Dave Coolidge, son of Dutch, is the founder and past owner and president of Serco knuckle-boom loaders in Two Harbors.

At one time the business employed several and many part time machinists to make custom machined parts for equipment manufacturers throughout the Upper Midwest.

Image: Some of the massive machine tools in the Coolidge Bros. garage.

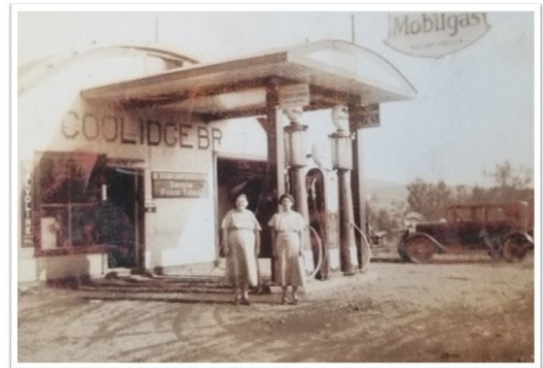
While Coolidge Bros. is now part of KR history, it is reassuring to know the building continues to be locally owned. Randy is well recognized as a respected KR historian and has already pledged to display and/or incorporate Coolidge Bros. memorabilia on both the outside and insides of the building, regardless what becomes of building space.

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Photo credits: Randy Ellestad Collection



Randy shows off a cleaned-up rare porcelain sign found tucked away in garage.



Coolidge garage 1932. Could the Mobilgas sign in the photo of Mary (Ai's wife) and friend by the same sign Randy found in the garage?



Alvin Skadberg of Knife River poses at gas pump.

Punk Coolidge installing made-from-scratch wind charger on the roof of the Coolidge Bros. building.



KRHCC CAN'T SIT ON THE FENCE ANY LONGER!

In the lease the KRHCC has with the Regional Rail Authority (RRA), we agreed to meet a condition that we provide a security fence along the railroad right-of-way that extends for more than 300 feet along our southern east/west property line. While we were not thrilled with this responsibility, other conditions within the lease were very favorable – starting with a \$1 a year lease payment.

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Anyway, with more and more visitors coming to our still unopened Center, we can no longer sit on the fence issue. We have decided to raise the funds to install the fence this summer. There is a bit of urgency, too, as it is becoming apparent the North Shore Scenic Railroad is favoring KR as an optional shorter destination to Two Harbors, and for other reasons. Visitor safety is both the RRA's and our primary concern.

Estimate for about 330 feet of fencing, concrete and concrete-forming tubes is \$6,000, or about \$20 a foot. A \$100 donation will pay for five feet of fencing! Labor to install the fencing (60+ fence post holes) will be all-volunteer. General Contractor Larry Ronning has confidence in his mostly geriatric volunteers!



Image: Sample of fence KRHCC intends to install along 320 feet of RR right-of-way.

Photo credit: Menards

As mentioned in last month's KRHCC newsletter, we are in a bit of a bind in that two of the most likely grantors we could approach to help fund the fence have open grants with us. They cannot consider an additional grant until the first is closed out.

The reason the grants remain open is that we were not able to complete the projects for which we had requested funding, which was to remove and replace the depot concrete apron. We could not get a contractor to do the work until early October, and by then the construction season was fading. We were able to complete about a third of the apron with volunteer labor before freezing temperatures set in.

At the time of this writing, a second round of stimulus checks have either been received or are "in the mail." If you have not been too greatly affected financially by the pandemic and are eligible for a check, please consider donating a portion of it to a non-profit that serves those directly affected by the pandemic, such as the Lake County Area Food Shelf. And then, if you would like to do something really nice for the KR community and those who follow us, please donate to the KRHCC. We are a 501(c3) so all donations are tax deductible. For more information: info@krhcc.org

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MORE ON NAME CALLING FROM LAST MONTH'S ISSUE

If you have a Knife River PO Box you can probably consider yourself a Knife Riverite. And, if you like, you can consider yourself a "Herring Choker." Hey what great name for any KR sports team – the "Knife River Herring Chokers!"

When Mary and I moved from Park Point in Duluth to KR in 1972, there were still many old-timers here and we on occasion would hear the term "Herring Choker" applied to them – usually by people from Two Harbors, and even French River.

I always thought the term referred to all the herring choked down as a KR meal staple, and learning too, that KR was at one time a huge exporter of fresh herring as far as Chicago.

I Googled "Herring Choker" and the definition I got was "Someone who comes from New Brunswick, Canada. The term is derived from the stereotype that people living in the Maritimes eat only fish, herring in particular." So, my first inclination of the origin of the term seemed to be correct.

But, as a double check, I talked with a long time KR native connected to a commercial fishing family who claimed the term originated from Norwegian fisherman who pulled herring from their nets by pinching their gills and pulling them through the net. The practice appeared that the fisherman was choking the herring in the process.

If you're into embroidering your shirts or jackets, and proud to be identified with KR, feel free to stitch in "Herring Choker." There, now you're cool.

KRHCC 2021 ANNUAL BOARD MEETING BOARD ACTION

The Annual Meeting of the KRHCC took place virtually over the week of January 11, 2021 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and to be in compliance with Governor Walz's social distancing guidelines.

President Paul von Goertz contacted all board members during the week of the 11th by means of text, email and in-person, and provided them all with the CFO's 2020 year-end report and meeting minutes from the 2020 Annual Meeting. Both were approved.

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Meeting highlights:

- All board members are holdovers from 2020 and agreed to serve the remaining year of their two-year terms. Board members are chosen at the KRHCC's annual meeting.
Holdover board members are:
President – Paul von Goertz
Vice-President - vacant by board decision
Secretary – Bob Entzion
Chief Financial Officer/Treasurer – Mona Linden
Randy Ellestad – Board member
Duane Madison – Board member
Larry Ronning – Board member
Todd Lindahl – Board member and historian
- KRHCC “Foundation”
Secretary Bob will take the initiative to develop a KRHCC “foundation” to raise funds to help make capital purchases and cover operating expenses.
- Todd Lindahl and Duane Madison will investigate options for on-site record storage.
- A dedication of the community flagpole at the KRHCC will be conducted by the Two Harbors American Legion Post on Memorial Day, Monday May 31. The pole will be dedicated to service members of the Albert Wieme family.
- Major 2021 projects will be completion of the depot concrete apron and installation of 320 feet of security fencing between depot and railroad-right-of way. Both projects must be completed this summer to be in compliance with grant project deadlines.
- Site plan with shelter designs to bid-ready will be completed by March 31. At that time the KRHCC will seek funding for construction of boat and picnic/event shelters in spring 2022.
- Four outdoor interpretive display panels have been ordered with delivery in early April and installation following.

Summary of President's report:

The KRHCC is entering 2021 with the continued enthusiasm of volunteers and financial support of the community and grantors, all of which will allow it to fulfill its mission and vision.

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Memorials and Honorariums

The KRHCC recognizes in its newsletters individuals who have been honored with memorials, honorariums or just to celebrate an important life event, with gifts designated for the KRHCC. In respect to the privacy of donors, we will not list their names or amounts contributed.

Please consider designating the KRHCC for memorials or to honor loved ones. We are a 501(c3) non-profit so all donations are tax deductible. To donate: info@krhcc.org

In memory of John Safstrom:

John died unexpectedly a year ago in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, where he and Gail were wintering. John and Gail have been residents of KR since 1989. A structural engineer by training, John was active in all three Knife River non-profits and loved working on the depot.

Your comments and suggestions for this monthly emailed newsletter are always welcome. Email to: info@krhcc.org If you have family or friends who may enjoy receiving it, please forward to them, or send their email addresses to above email address and they will receive their own copy.

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