

# Newsletter



## Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz  
KRHCC Board Member

### **“SOMETIMES LIFE GETS IN THE WAY OF OUR PLANS.” Anonymous**

I've changed the lead story for this month's newsletter several times over the last week or so as COVID-19 has evolved and made it more difficult to arrive at a kick-off date for this year's work at the depot site.

We thought we would start the 2020 work year as soon as late February, then realized it best to wait until our snowbirds returned as well as our aging “spring breakers” who still think they are 18 years old. So we chose Monday morning, April 13, with a brief “get organized” meeting at the depot and then “get to work.” Larry Ronning, volunteer general contractor, already has the materials we need for completing the depot interior, starting with some beautiful custom-milled 2 ½” T&G paneling that matches the original.

**But then....**the seriousness of COVID-19 became readily apparent and many of our volunteers are in the “at risk” age group. So now, we are in a “wait and see” mode as is pretty much the rest of the world. **We will let volunteers know when we expect to begin work.**



Herring Gulls wait for spring crew to begin work at the KRHCC. Wish we could tell them when to expert us.

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Thankfully, with what we were able to accomplish in 2019 leaves us with a manageable work plan for 2020 and it goes something like this:

## **Depot**

Some exterior details need to be attended to starting with caulking; interior needs are wall insulation, baseboards, T&G paneling on walls, box in the boiler, ceiling moldings, undercoat and final coats of paint. We still have our scaffolding on site in the freight building. We have written a grant for a coal-burning period stove and three display cases. If that comes through, we will add those to the summer's work plan.

## **Depot grounds**

The cement apron surrounding the depot has cracked and heaved and creates a tripping hazard. We have written a grant to replace it and if the grant is awarded, we will mount both our order board signal pole and flagpole at the same time the slab is poured. A foundation contractor will do the apron work.

## **Freight building**

There is still some discussion about where it should go so not to interfere with the B&B business car spur. Once that is decided, we will restore it as a visual counterpart to the depot. We will replace both doors with a single door. Many thanks to Randy Ellestad for stickhandling the moving of the building late last fall. It had to be moved about 20 feet back from the track to make room for a siding to the mainline, perhaps installed as early as this summer.

We have written four grants over the course of the winter. Funds available for distribution for two of the funds are dependent upon investment portfolios, which we know have taken a hit. This, plus societal needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic will affect their giving and giving priorities.

We are fortunate to have enough money remaining from Phase I (Depot Reconstruction) to carry us into Phase II (Depot Interior and Freight Building), so we can still have a productive and rewarding schedule of summer work.

*(Now is probably a good time to remind readers that nearly all of the money raised for the KRHCC to date has come from individual donations. Please consider the KRHCC in your gifting plans. We are a 501(c3) so all donations are tax deductible. For more information: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org))*

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If you were hesitant to volunteer last year because you sensed your construction skills are marginal, rest assured this spring's work, for the most part, is mostly insulating, paneling and painting – lots of painting! So please get active this year!

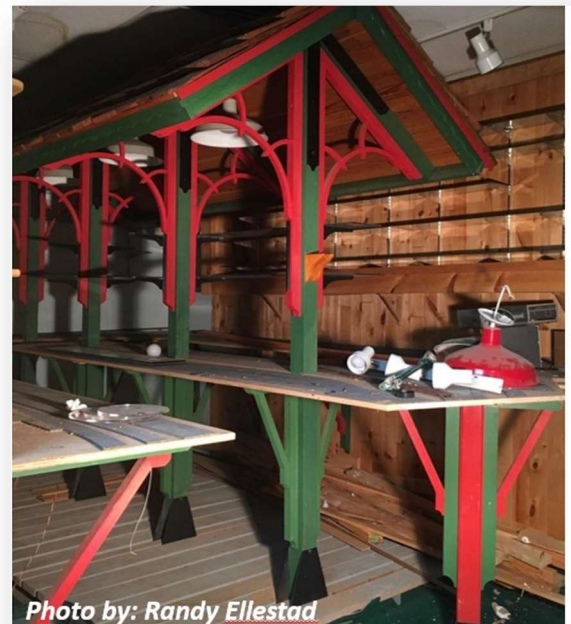
## A FEELING OF “WOW!” WHEN ENTERING THE DEPOT

Thanks to the alertness of Randy Ellestad and Todd Lindahl, both KRHCC board members, we can offer visitors entering our depot a “wow” reaction with a reduced size “railway platform.” A “railway platform” is an area alongside a railway track that provides convenient and often covered access to trains. The architecture and filigree of this platform is both stunning and consistent to the time period of our depot. It will be used to display KR photos and depot memorabilia. It is about 12 feet long.

Randy and Todd found the platform at Carr Hobby in Duluth following a huge “Going Out of Business” online action that cleared the place of some of the most interesting and sought after railroad and marine memorabilia, along with the store's complete hobby inventory. What remained were the displays, and when Randy and Todd saw the platform, and at an attractive price, they grabbed it.

At this time, our intent is to have the platform inside the depot, but it could be outside, too. If outside, it would need to be covered during the winter months.

If you are interested in “sponsoring” the platform and being recognized for it, please email [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org) for more information.



*Photo by: Randy Ellestad*

Replication of a 1900s depot railway platform in reduced size will get a “Wow!” reaction from depot visitors.

## KRHCC WILL BE SITE FOR MEMORIAL TO LAKE COUNTY VETERANS

For more than a year, the KRHCC has been working with the Two Harbors Anderson Claffy American Legion Post 109 to have a memorial to Lake County Veterans, and we are very honored the site will be at the KRHCC.

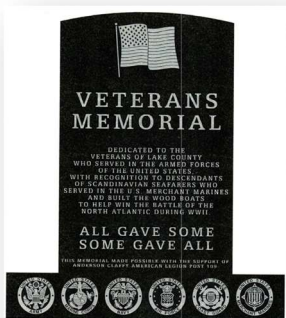
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Jim Latvala, Post Commander, said up to now there has not been a memorial to Lake County Veterans. The KRHCC will incorporate the memorial into our “Place of Reflection,” adjacent to the depot. It will consist of the memorial, flagpole, gazebo and interpretive signage that explains our Veterans and Lake County’s contribution to our country’s war efforts.

Latvala said the Post will hold one or more fundraisers in the near future to pay for a good portion of the memorial. All funds raised will be designated for the memorial. Look for date and details of the fundraiser(s) in future issues of this newsletter and elsewhere.

The drawing shown is a concept of the finished memorial. It stands 4’ tall and is made of Minnesota granite. The seals of all five traditional service branches and the Merchant Marine are on the base. Drawing courtesy of Cavallin Funeral Home.

The inscription reads:



*Dedicated to the Veterans of Lake County who served in the Armed Forces of the United States, with recognition to descendants of Scandinavian seafarers who served in the U. S. Merchant Marine and built the wood boats to help win the Battle of the North Atlantic during WWII. This memorial made possible with the support of Anderson Claffy American Legion Post 109.*

In addition to recognizing Veterans from the traditional five service branches, the memorial recognizes Lake County men who served in the Merchant Marine, and those from Larsmont and Knife River who used the ship building skills they brought from Scandinavia to build wood boats on Park Point in Duluth. The SC 670 was one of four 110-foot sub-chasers built by Inland Waterways of Duluth.



Duluth was a good location for building wood boats because of the talented boat builders living in the area, and the abundance of raw materials for rapid construction.



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## REMEMBERING THE KR SMELT RUNS (But do we really want to?)

This time of year 50 years ago KR would have made a Florida college spring break look like a Sunday School picnic. It was nothing less than pandemonium as thousands of downstate Minnesotans headed for North Shore streams for the first rite of spring after a long winter – smelt fishing! Free fish! All you can net!

The little silvery fish about 5 – 8” long would head for North Shore streams in about mid-April to spawn. “Smelters” would use long handled dip nets that were sold at nearly every gas station north of Hinckley. KR was a favorite location for many people because of its’ rural setting, lack of organized crowd control, easy access to the river, and parking along both sides of Scenic 61 from Kendall’s east to Salakka Road.



Smelt usually ran the heaviest at night. Smelters would often times be shoulder to shoulder.



Photo: LAKE COUNTY NEWS CHRONICLE.

What our guests left us. For many years, the Steelheaders Association would help clean up the mess, for which we were very grateful.

Many chose to tent in any open area, including local’s yards and anything burnable nearby became campfire wood. Locals defended their property with fists, pitchforks and even shotguns (as witnessed by your writer). As I recall, Porta-Potties were either not available at that time, or were few to be found. That created another problem for property owners.

Revelers, well fueled with alcohol, frequently found themselves swimming with the fish. It was almost expected at least one smelter would loose his life every year by being swept into the Lake by fast-flowing spring run-off.

I was a member of the Lake County Volunteer Rescue Squad for several years in the early 70s, and as a diver was assigned to body recovery. One poor soul chose to seine the mouth of the Stewart River (illegal) at

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daybreak and was swept into the Lake. Another lost his life in the Knife; weeks later his body was quietly recovered from our agate beach.



**Duluth had a strong law enforcement presence to keep smelters under control. Lake County did not, even with armed Conservation Officers assisting our Deputies.**

The Liberty Store and later the Jackson Store probably viewed the KR smelt run as both a blessing and a curse – maybe more of a curse. Sales were good, but there was also theft and an occasional fight within the crowded store.

Mel and Sophie Bugge sold deep fried smelt from Mel's Fish stand which was somewhat cantilevered over the river just west of what was once Emily's. Locals agreed their fish was the best!

The smelt run would eventually become history as the fish developed a disease that attacked their liver and they died by the millions in the 80s, leaving the beaches of Park

Point very smelly and unusable for weeks. There is still a smelt run today, but it may last only for a couple hours or so, and the only way to know it is taking place is by noticing Herring Gulls diving for them in the river.

Interesting, while smelt was forage for Lake Trout, herring stocks, which were the original forage for Lake Trout prior to the arrival of smelt in the late 40s, have now risen to a level where Lake Trout can once again be sustained by herring, with a few smelt occasionally thrown in.

RIP...North Shore smelt fishing.



**Smelt could be taken by the wash tub. Early on no fishing license was required and people could take all they wanted**

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## **THE MARCH 23, 1975 STORM THAT LASHED KR**

It's only appropriate in this March issue to remember the March 23, 1975 storm of 45 years ago. In the 48 years your newsletter editor has lived in KR, this is the worst Lake storm in my memory and I'm sure many others. The severity of the storm was really the near-hurricane northeast gales. I can't recall the amount of snowfall, other than the only means of travel was by snowmobile.

While the whole North Shore was ravished by the winds, Granite Point took a special beating when the winds became more east than northeast later in the day. A car next to a waterfront home on the Point was spun 180 degrees by both wind and waves breaking onto shore.

Windows on waterfront homes had to be boarded to prevent being broken by flying pieces of ice and rocks. In the marina parking lot, a sailboat was blown over while resting in its winter cradle. As you can imagine, damage was severe.

At another home near the far west end of Granite Point, a 20' gas boat was washed off its skid and within minutes beached and pounded into splinters, with only the engine and engine beds remaining.

Waves broke over the break wall, sending a surge through the marina.

The agate beach was breached by waves, sending torrents of water into the marina in several places. This damage would lead to the Army Corps of Engineers placing steel piling along the distance of the beach to prevent wave action breaking once again into the marina. In recent years, with high water levels and increased winds on the Lake, this steel piling has been breached, but not to a level of great concern.

The memory of this storm is still fresh in your writer's mind as March 23 was the due date for our first child. We were thankful our son held off on his entry into the world, but then, a week later a second storm hit with nearly the same intensity. Good grief! But that was the end of the spring 1975 storms.

Our son was born without drama on April 8.... healthy and beautiful, of course.

## **MEMORIAL SERVICE FOR JOHN SAFSTROM**

The memorial service for John Safstrom, who passed away unexpectedly on February 13 in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, has been postponed. It was originally planned for April

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18, but will be rescheduled when COVID-19 is no longer an immediate health threat. We'll let you know in a future newsletter.

John was an enthusiastic and hardworking volunteer for KR and a beloved member of the community. We still grieve his death.

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