

# Newsletter



## Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz, KRHCC Board Member

### **“EXPLAIN THE LEASE THE KRHCC HAS WITH THE RAILROAD AUTHORITY – AND WHAT ARE THEIR EXPECTATIONS OF THE KRHCC?”**

#### **We're glad you asked!**

Those are good questions and at the end of the second year of the KRHCC as a non-profit, it's good to review for our readers and other interested parties, our lease and expectations that go with it.

Drone photo by Dave Schauer shows much of the KRHCC 1.7 acres leased from the Regional Rail Authority. The lot is shaped much like a triangle. The west boundary is Marina Road, the north boundary the campground and south the railroad right of way.



#### The short answer

KRHCC has a five-year renewable lease with the St. Louis & Lake Counties Railroad Authority (RRA). Aspects of land use that are addressed within the lease acknowledge that:

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1. The KRHCC will provide space for a railroad siding parallel to the mainline and a spur from the mainline that heads in a northwest direction capable of accommodating up to three B&B business cars.
2. The freight building will be moved northward about 15 feet to accommodate the siding.
3. For safety purposes, the KRHCC will fence the perimeter of the property (1.7 acres)
4. The KRHCC will restore the depot and freight building.
5. The KRHCC recognizes the leased property is adjacent to an operating railroad and that activities related to the operation of trains and maintenance of the railway may occur from time to time and affect the leased property.

## To better understand our lease, you should know why and how the RRA was created

In 1987, the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range Railroad attempted to divest itself from its rail line between Duluth and Two Harbors known as Lake Front Line Railroad. The DM&IR petitioned the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) to abandon the track, but was told the track needed to be kept in service in the interest of national security.

Those who saw the potential for a tourist railroad took the initiative to create the RRA to own the right-of-way. The RRA became a political subdivision and local government unit under the laws of the State of MN (M.S.398A). A Joint Powers Agreement between Lake and St. Louis Counties made that possible. A board of elected officials made up of two Lake County Commissioners and three St. Louis County Commissioners would govern the Authority.

## The new railroad owner looks for an operator

The RRA asked for bids for a railroad operator for what was now called the North Shore Scenic Railroad (NSSR). The bid went to members of the Goldfine family, prominent and well-respected Duluthians well entrenched in the local lodging and hospitality industry, and operators of the Vista Fleet of excursion boats. Hard as they tried, they could not generate sufficient income to make the NSSR viable.

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## First operator fails; can railroad be run with volunteers?

The idea of a NSSR was about to collapse when a group from the Lake Superior Railroad Museum along with Duluth and North Shore citizens, petitioned the RRA to operate the NSSR with volunteers. The idea was met with skepticism, but a contract was signed and a five-year renewable lease was written. The mostly volunteer-railroad has been a success and its lease has been renewed every five years since 1993.

## KR depot faces demolition; KR railroad land faces uncertain future

Fast forward to 2017 when the lease for the KR land held by Randy Ellestad, who owned the depot on the land, was not renewed as a result of failed expectations from each party. The depot and freight building were in danger of being demolished and the future of the land uncertain. Then, a group of KR people approached the RRA to allow the townspeople of KR to lease the land to a yet to be created non-profit, which they pledged would restore the depot and surrounding area.

## RRA: "Rail line remains a commercial railroad to support economic development."

The KR people were told in clear language that the Lake Front Line Railroad continued to be a federally designated commercial railroad. It would be only leased on the expectation that a business plan would be developed that supported economic development.

Eventually a lease would be signed at \$1 per year and renewable every five years.

With the lease in place, some of KR's most desirable land for development had been placed under the stewardship and control of the KR community through the KRHCC.

## Why the KRHCC is comfortable with a five-year renewable lease:

- Historically, railroads do not sell land adjacent to their rights-of-way because the land can be leased to a commercial enterprise that can benefit the railroad. The RRA has never sold any of its land in 34 years of existence. What has been the national norm for railroads for years is to offer a five-year renewable lease. Case in point: the current operator of the railroad, the North Shore Scenic Railroad, has had a five-year renewable lease with the RRA since 1993.

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- The RRA has made it clear to the KRHCC that it does not want to own anything but the right-of-way – no buildings or trains. That will be the responsibility of a lessee. They are very pleased the KR depot has been restored to a functioning level in less than a year, something the RRA has wanted done since it was created in 1987.
- The RRA is governed by elected county officials – all county commissioners. Three are from St. Louis County and two from Lake. Our current commissioners are Rick Goutermont and Jeremy Hurd. Goutermont is the current president of the Authority. Commissioners are elected to act in the best interests of their constituents, which includes the KRHCC and its supporters.
- The KRHCC anticipated from the time it was first organized that grantors would be reluctant to award grants for buildings on property not owned by the applicant. But, thankfully, this has not been the case when grantors learn our landlord (the RRA) is a government body governed by elected officials, and has endorsed the project. To date, the KRHCC has been awarded just over \$28,000 from five different grant sources.
- The KRHCC hopes that its developing partnerships with other non-profits such as the KR Rec Council, the NSSR, Larssmont's Little Red School House Days, and the Two Harbors American Legion Post 109, which will create a memorial to county Veterans at the KRHCC site, will show that the KRHCC has positively impacted the greater Lake County community.

## **HOW THE KRHCC INTENDS TO SUSTAIN ITSELF**

Grantors will not provide grants to cover overhead, which explains why non-profits, in part, sponsor fundraisers. Private donations that are undesignated and so could be used to offset overhead can also not be counted on. So this winter the KRHCC will begin planning a "Friends of the KRHCC" endowment from which funds can be used discretionarily to cover overhead and purchase items needed to accurately replicate a 1900's train depot.

A major source of revenue for the KRHCC will be to use fees for its properties, which in 2021 will be an accurately replicated 1900's train depot and, if all goes well, covered public space. Users of KRHCC property will understand that the KRHCC is "a work in progress" and is a "minimum services" facility. This will affect the number of people the site can safely and comfortably accommodate.

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A rate structure is yet in place, but special consideration will be given to KR residents, much like the policy of the KRRC. User guidelines and type and number of events will be determined by the KRHCC with guidance from the community.

See related story “REVISITING OUR SITE PLAN – GIVE US YOUR THOUGHTS” elsewhere in this issue.

## **Namesakes of Knife River Part III – JOHN GEIST TENNIS COURTS**

In 1985, John and Lois Geist retired as school counselors in Rochester, MN, and in a spirit of adventure, moved to Knife River. With that decision, the lives of many in KR would be forever enriched.

John loved all kinds of sports and being a natural organizer, promptly became involved with all the KR Rec Council’s programs, organizing and working with children of all ages. Besides teaching them team sports, he taught them sportsmanship, fairness and respect for others. He helped adults discover or rediscover tennis.



John, born in 1923, was introduced to tennis when he discovered a court near his parent’s summer cabin in White Bear Lake. His father and uncles owned a jewelry store in nearby St. Paul and also for a time, one in Duluth. If you look at the clock in the stairway of the Two Harbors Library, you will see it has the “Geist Jewelry” store logo on it.

John attended the U of M and played center for the Gophers and would have played for legendary coach, Bernie Bierman, had he not been called for duty in WWII. John enrolled in the Navy ROTC and following graduation served as an Ensign aboard a destroyer in the South Pacific.

KR resident Jim Allert, moved with his family to Rochester in 1958. Jim’s dad and John met at the Rochester Y’s Men’s Club, where John was the president. Jim remembers working with his dad and John at the Y’s Men’s Christmas tree lot, and participating in many events that John organized including Indian Guides (similar to Boy Scouts) and Thanksgiving hosting of international students.

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Jim was shocked to be reintroduced to John by Lee Cohen one day on the KR tennis courts.

"We shared memories and played a lot of tennis" Jim says. "His tennis prowess was legendary, as was his kind and forgiving nature. Even today, we who knew him are charitable to opposing players by letting them get away with something they shouldn't. A serve that is really fast, but not accurate, might be called an "Ace" by telling the server that the ball that really landed just barely outside the line, was really "in by a Geist."

"To know the protocols of how to conduct yourself on the court was important to John, as was the game and how it's played," said Mary von Goertz "He told us we would play with greater confidence, and earn the respect from others on their courts".

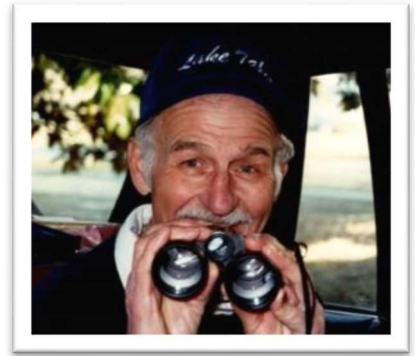
Neighbors Bob and Pam Ashenmacher said John was a model of good sportsmanship to their four children. "Anyone on the tennis court with John could see he truly cared more about the joy of the game played well, than about personal victory. Most of us would fake that attitude as best we could, but with John it was genuine. We were blessed to know him."

John also worked tirelessly to make sure Rec properties were safe and well maintained. Lee Cohen recalls "John would get up early in the morning, check out the tennis court, Peterson Park, Oden Alreck ball field and skating rink, and even pick up the KRRC's beach property. Whatever needed to be done to make the Rec Council's properties ready for the day's activities, he would do it. I wouldn't expect anyone to do all that John did, but we've learned that if we all do a small part of what he did, we can get things done."

John was coaching high school football in Waconia, MN, one fall, when a beautiful young teacher walked by the practice field and caught the attention of the whole team. John was smitten and in 1950 Lois and he married. By 1958, sons Peter and David were born and the family moved to Rochester, MN, where John taught civics and history. Lois was a homemaker and in time both became school counselors.

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The Geists had many outside interests. John was an avid birder and took part in the Cornell University Feeder-Watch Survey for many years. Lois was active in League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, and the Rochester Family Consultation Center. They were also active in Minnesota DFL politics.



Lois liked to walk with varying groups of women in the mornings and share her great knowledge about many things. She loved gardening and helped others discover or rediscover gardening. Thanks to Lois, many KR gardens today display beautiful flowers grown from bulbs or cuttings from her gardens.

In the spring of 2009, John and Lois were forced for health reasons to move to Northfield, MN, to be closer to David and family. In doing so, they traded their view of Lake Superior for a Wells Fargo parking lot.

Lois passed away in 2010 and John, a most devoted husband, was determined to make the best of life without Lois. He hiked daily, attended classes and enjoyed his grandchildren until suffering a stroke in 2011. He passed away soon after.

John and Lois were humble people, yet John was a hero in the day-to-day kindness he showed to everyone in which he came in contact. So many young lives were touched by him, or redirected down a better path. Those who John helped discover tennis, or improve their game now pass their love for the game down to their children and even grandchildren.

John would be thrilled to see the activity on the courts today and by all age groups. Knife River was blessed with all 22 years John and Lois were with us. John's memory will be forever remembered for the tennis courts named in his honor, and in the spirit of deep gratitude for enriching so many lives.

*Many thanks to David Geist, Lee Cohen, Jim Allert and Mary von Goertz for their contributions to a most beloved KR namesake and Lois. Thanks too, to Dave Geist for the photos.*



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## REVISITING OUR SITE PLAN – GIVE US YOUR THOUGHTS

In the spring of 2018, the KRHCC unveiled a site plan to generate discussion from the community on initial plans for KRHCC property. Overall, comment was judged supportive and the plan has been a good planning guide. But, now it is time to take it to its next stage with the help of professionals.

The KRHCC recently received a grant from NOAA's Office for Coastal Management through the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for architectural and engineering services. The grant required a 20% local match (\$2,000) from the KRHCC for a total of \$12,000.

The challenge we will present to the engineering firm will be for "best use" of our 1.7 acres to fulfill our goals of replicating a 1900s train depot and freight building in which to present the history of KR and its people, to display historical boats, and create "covered public space" that can be used for a variety of activities.



Site plan provided through the courtesy of Krech Ojard & Associates, Inc.

Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center is a 501(c3) Non-profit organization.



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To aid the design firm, we need comment from the community on (1) what is planned to be located on the site, and (2) what form covered public space should take.

At this point we envision the public space to be a shelter open on three sides and a windbreak wall from the northwest to the northeast. The wall side would have enclosed storage for grounds maintenance equipment. The shelter for boats would be open on three sides.

See photo below of a structure as described, but smaller than what is envisioned currently. Your writer saw this at a wayside rest along I-90 in South Dakota.

Design of the public space will be determined on how it could be used. Here are ideas so far:

- Family events of all kinds
- Could replace a Julebyen tent with drop-down curtains
- Farmer's market
- Local music concerts
- Flea markets
- Kite flying



Keep in mind that the KRHCC for the next few years will be a “work in progress” and is a “minimum services” facility. This will affect the number of people the site can safely and comfortably accommodate.

We need current thinking on the site plan and uses for covered public space. Please email your comments and suggestions to: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)

## **SIGNS THAT THE KR DEPOT IS BEING RESTORED BACK TO 1914**

KRHCC board member and historian Todd Lindahl has done a commendable job in finding signage that was on, or could have been on or in, the depot. Todd has been meticulous in signage details including type style - and colors, which took a lot of research given photos at the time were all black and white. Many thanks to Todd for these great enhancements to the depot and freight building.

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Following are signs that are either currently on the depot or will be. Thanks too, to Dick Bohrer of Silver Creek Signs for his artistic skill in producing the signs.



## HAPPY 90<sup>th</sup> BIRTHDAY JOANNE LIND!



We couldn't let the 90<sup>th</sup> birthday of lifetime KR resident Joanne Lind pass by without wishing her a belated HAPPY BIRTHDAY August 29th! Daughter of a commercial fisherman, Joanne is one of those people for whom you're thankful to know in life.

Her memories of early KR are still vivid and we thank her again for her help in the story that appeared in the May issue about her parents Riverview Coffee Shop.

Still an active member of our community, we expect to enjoy Joanne's friendship for many more years.

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## WHO WAS THAT LOOKING FOR LUDWIG?

We hope you enjoyed meeting Clara Brandtner in the August issue of the newsletter. So who is she really? If you guessed Diane Friebe you would be right!

Diane is active in Lake County Community Theater and probably best remembered as Golde, wife of Tevye, in the musical "Fiddler On The Roof" performed at Two Harbors High School a few years ago. Diane jumped at the opportunity to portray a woman from Boston who through a love-letter romance, was to meet future husband, Ludwig, at the KR depot. Unfortunately, Ludwig failed to appear.



Diane played the forlorn Clara for two of the three North Shore Scenic Railroad Picnic Trains to visit KR this summer with Lee Bujold taking the third.

Much thanks to both Diane and Lee for giving Picnic Train riders a little unexpected theater!

## TWO INTERPRETIVE DISPLAYS LOOKING FOR SPONSORS



Last issue we told you about the four outdoor interpretive displays that will be commissioned and completed over the winter, with installation next spring (example on left). One presents the history of KR from native people through copper exploration, the second on railroading and logging, a third on commercial fishing and the fourth on the depot itself.

The two historical displays have found sponsors, but someone out there must have family ties to, or special memories of, the depot or commercial fishing that would make a sponsorship personally very satisfying and meaningful. Each sponsorship is \$1,000 and the sponsor would be noted on the display. Remember the KRHCC is a non-profit 501(c3), so your sponsorship is tax deductible.

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To sponsor one of the two remaining displays, contract: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)

*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.*

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