



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

THE GHOST MINES OF KNIFE RIVER

By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian & Archeologist

Prehistoric people in the Lake Superior basin discovered deposits of elemental, otherwise known as natural copper, in the region as much as 7,000 years ago. They soon found that this strange metal could be worked and fabricated into a variety of useful tools and ornaments. This was the first-time people anywhere in the western hemisphere had done this. Copper became a sought after and revered trade item by other prehistoric people far from the Great Lakes region.



Prehistoric mines have been found near the Knife River along with a 52-pound, three-quarter grooved basalt copper-working anvil. It is twice as large as any ever found in the Keweenaw Peninsula copper country in Michigan. Unfortunately, most prehistoric copper mines have been destroyed by later historic period prospecting.

Photo left: Grooved copper-working anvil is studied by archeologists/historians. The groove is for a rope to tie the anvil to a tree to keep it stationary.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl

Newly arrived Europeans soon found the best way to find copper deposits was to look for ancient diggings and then dig deeper. Ancient people had no way of pumping water out of pits or shafts and were therefore unable to dig very deep before running into water problems.

In 1535, only 43 years after the discovery of the new world by Christopher Columbus (or was it Leif Erikson?!), French explorer Jacques Cartier located the St. Lawrence River. After contacting local Indigenous peoples, he was shown a large lump of copper that he was told came from an inland sea far to the west. Already by this early date the newly arrived Europeans were aware of Lake Superior copper, even before the Great Lakes had been seen. Later in 1610 Samuel de

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Champlain saw a lump of copper and a large copper knife along the St. Lawrence in the possession of the Indigenous peoples with whom he was trading.

Then in 1668 Jean Perés began a voyage that lasted three years to explore Lake Superior and possible routes to the north. Upon returning to France, he reported that the Indigenous peoples were mining copper on the north shore of the lake and was told to return and begin developing a mine there for France. He never returned and afterward his son went to search for his missing father. The son found the Dakota and Ojibwa war raging at the western end of the lake. He tried to stop it without success and was forced to leave the region quickly. The fate of his father was never uncovered nor was the location of the mine he observed.

In 1854 copper prospector John Parry found a very old shaft along a small tributary of the Knife River in which the log cribbing was mossy and very rotted. He sank the shaft down another 40 feet and worked the site over the next three years. Could this have been the lost mine of Jean Perés and as such the first European ghost mine of Knife River?

Photo right: Remnants of log cribbing. Photo credit: Todd Lindahl

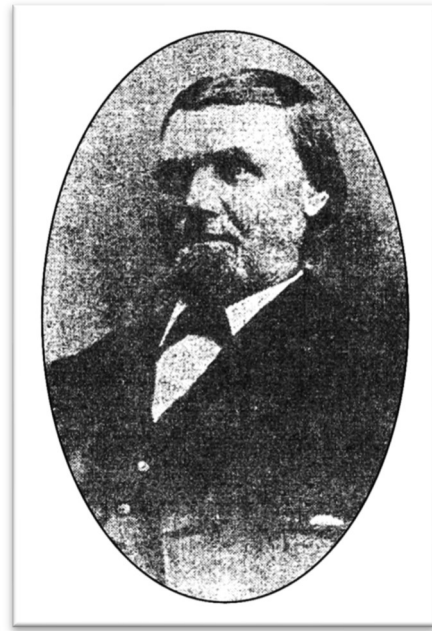
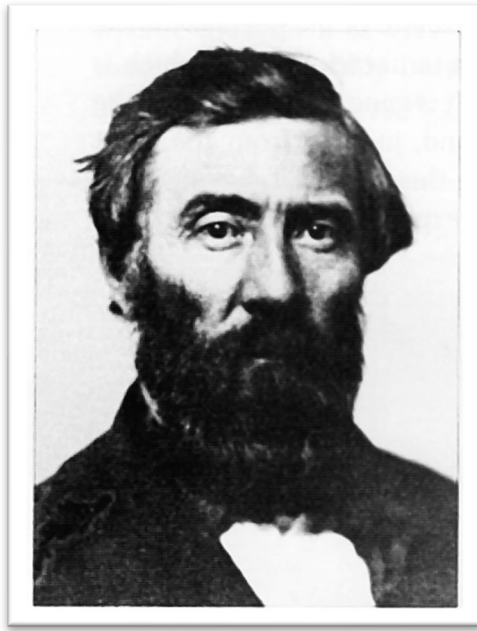


The fur companies did try some mining to a small degree. One waste rock pile near the Knife River had a huge white pine that began growing about 1799, although it is impossible to say how long the pile was there before the tree started growing.

The American Fur Company tried copper mining in 1849 near Pattison State Park south of Superior, Wisconsin. These shafts roughly 50 feet in depth and are still open today.

The geology of the North Shore is very similar to that of the Michigan Keweenaw Peninsula, and it was known for a long time that there was copper there. In 1825 the government was allowed by treaty to look for copper north of the lake, but not to dig or establish mines on Indigenous lands. Some copper was observed and pressure from mining companies finally brought about the Treaty of La Pointe in 1854. This ceded much of the land north of the lake to the government and opened the region to settlement and mining.

The R. B. Carlton Land Mineral & Mining Company and its subsidiary, the North Shore Mining Company, were soon formed. John Parry and others worked for these companies in the Knife River area prospecting and mining. Mine captain Salisbury sank the shaft at the second falls on Knife River to a considerable depth in 1863 and took out several hundred pounds of copper. He was soon replaced by Thomas Sexton who is well-known as the owner of the platted town site of Whiskey Row at Two Harbors. Like the “hell on wheels” towns during the construction period of the Union Pacific Railroad, Whiskey Row boasted 22 saloons and houses of ill repute.



R. B. Carlton (left) and Thomas Sexton (right)
Photo credit: Todd Lindahl collection

It was during this time that a stamp mill, otherwise known as a crusher, was hauled from the mouth of the Knife River to the second falls mine site. This was no easy task in the 1860s and shows they had great expectations for this mine if they went through all this trouble and expense.



About one ton of copper was removed including two lumps of 15 pounds each. The copper was on top of ancient lava flows in soft decomposed vesicular rock with amygdule and intermingled with prehnite. The mine operated until 1866 when it was abandoned. Towards the end of its existence for a short time John Mallman of Iron Range fame was the last mine captain.

Photo left: Artifacts from a miner's cabin.
Photo credit: Todd Lindahl

In 1903 another shaft to the south of the second falls about 100 feet-deep was filled in since it was considered too dangerous. The second falls mine site may have been filled in at the same time.

Only one other mine on the Knife River made use of a crusher like Sexton's mine. It was on the Little Knife and was the last copper mine to shut down in 1929 when the stock market crashed. It was run by a Canadian firm and had been recovering copper and a small amount of silver. The shaft was left open. They apparently intended to return, but the Great Depression lasted much longer than anyone had imagined. The shaft is roughly 320 feet-deep with three drifts (horizontal

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tunnels) leading to between 200 to 300 feet away from the shaft to different stopes (a mined-out void).

The Canadian company has never disclosed how much copper it took out. Nearby an artesian well pipe still spurts out a steady stream of water as it has done since 1929. Not too far from this location is an ancient prehistoric mine. And a short distance from it are trenches that may or may not be prehistoric.

Photo right: The artesian well head.
Photo credit : Todd Lindahl



So far, the farthest mine upstream on the Knife River is 22 miles from the mouth. Other known historic period ghost mines have yet to be located and are still actively hunted for. In addition to the copper found in veins in the bedrock, nuggets are also found in glacial till along the North Shore. Ultimately, no large deposits have been found.

It is difficult to say how much copper has been taken out over the years. Miners who are taking out minerals generally do not want anyone else to know about it so there will be no competition. Others who are finding little or nothing may want to sell their property to recover some of the money they spent and speak of these sites as “very promising.” Perhaps Mark Twain said it best when he described a miner as “*a liar who just happens to own a hole in the ground.*”

“ONCE UPON AN ISLE”

By Paul von Goertz

Please note:

Several Knife River (KR) fishers lived and fished on Isle Royale spring through fall and returned to KR for the winter months to work for the railroad and/or fish the waters off KR though the ice.

The headline above is the name of one of several books written and illustrated by Howard “Bud” Sivertson who spent his childhood at the family homestead on Isle Royale living and working with family members as all part of Sivertson Brothers Fisheries. I chose this headline because by chance I had an experience on this isle that was right out of Bud’s books.

I graduated Duluth East High School in June of 1963 at age 17. In my senior year I took a class in psychology from Bill Fayling, who was also the school’s cross-country coach. Being 6’1” and with a string-bean build, he thought I could be a runner. I frankly didn’t care for running, but if I were to earn a letter jacket, I’d be a chick magnet. That never happened.

Bill and I shared an interest in Lake Superior, and he asked me and John Oventile, who had just received an appointment to West Point, to experience camping on Isle Royale. My father had just fulfilled a dream of owning a Norwegian-built motorsailer and with its robust design and

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construction planned to take it to Isle Royale at some point. So, I accepted Bill's offer to scout "The Island."



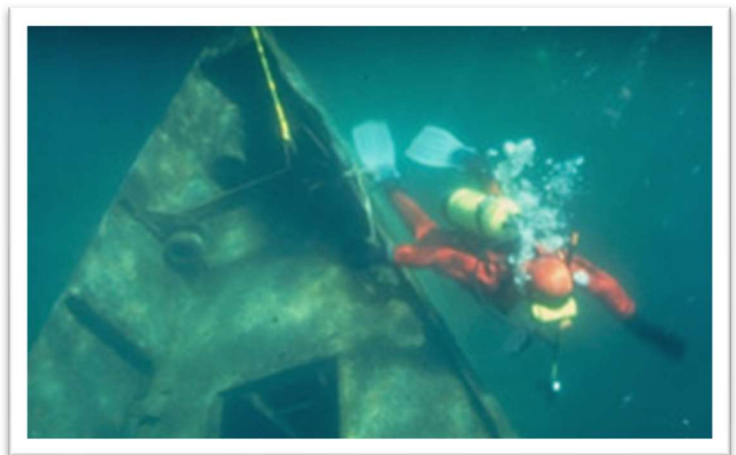
At the time, Sivertson Bros. Fisheries had the National Park Service contract to bring people from Grand Portage, MN, to the island and return. The boat was the HIAWATHA about 45-50' long and its skipper that day was no other than Stan Sivertson, one of the Sivertson brothers.

Photo left: Excursion boat HIAWATHA. It may have also been a packet (freight) boat at one time given the amount of enclosed space. Photo credit: Public domain undated

Bill knew Stan so was able to get John and me into the wheelhouse where on the 90-minute trip to the island Stan told story after story of his family's life on Isle Royale. One story told how his parents escaped the sinking of the 183' packet ship AMERICA in 1928 after she hit a rock while departing Isle Royale's North Gap in Washington Harbor on the far west end of the island.

Stan said he would take us up to the AMERICA where it rests at a steep angle from the bottom of the lake with its bow only about three feet below the surface. The water was so clear we could see the entry into the crew's quarters forward. I was fascinated and vowed someday I would dive on it. That I did, making several dives on it in the early to mid-'70s exploring its full length and down into the crew's quarters.

Photo right: The AMERICA rests at a steep angle in 90 feet of water with its bow just a few feet beneath the surface. In 1976 Rich Ojard and myself dove down through the open passageway seen here to explore the crew's quarters. Photo credit: Public domain



From the AMERICA site we went to the Sivertson family fish camp on Singer Island in Washington Harbor, and that's where my "Once Upon an Isle" day began. It was right out of Bud's book illustrations. There was the summer cabin, skiffs pulled ashore, fish cleaning shed, nets and markers.

Stan did not bring HIAWATHA totally dockside, just enough for people to get off and on as the boat was too big and the water becoming shallow. Stan stayed in the wheelhouse while activity buzzed all around him. Campers and canoeists were dropped off, mail, groceries and supplies unloaded,

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items brought on board in a wood wheelbarrow, and lots of pleasant talk and news shared among all who came to welcome the boat. Looking back it was “magical!”

John and I took the opportunity to take a quick look around. “Look at this!” said John as he opened the door to a small shed under some trees. It was the icehouse. Covered with thick straw huge blocks of lake ice were to be used for preserving fish. How the ice was cut and got to the shed I have no idea. I have since learned that ice could be stored in this manner well into the summer months, and even longer.

Two toots on the HIAWATHA’s whistle told us it was time to go. I walked to the end of the dock before boarding and looked at the north wall of the fish cleaning shed. The site was a bit shocking. There were about eight parasitic sea lamprey crucified to the wall with a single nail through the head, their bodies dried and twisted from the sun. Justice for commercial fishers whose livelihoods depended on lake trout.

The HIAWATHA dropped us and several other campers at the Washington Harbor dock at the very end of the harbor. We spent about five enchanted days on the island, hiking, fishing and enjoying the wildlife, beauty and natural state of an island left nearly untouched by humans since it became a wilderness national park in 1931.



It wasn’t until years later that I realized I was blessed to witness a narrow and fleeting slice of Lake Superior history, now forever gone, but preserved in the writings and illustrations so well done by Howard Sivertson in his series of books of “Once Upon an Isle.”

Left: An illustration by Howard Sivertson that shows a lot of what I saw and experienced “Once Upon An Isle.” Image credit: Painting by Howard Sivertson used with permission of Sivertson Galleries Grand Marais and Duluth.

- Opinion -

PARK POINT DRAMA COULD HAVE A MESSAGE FOR KR

It was interesting to read the report from Minnesota Public Radio’s Dan Kraker on mega-billionaire Kathy Cargill’s attempt to reconfigure Park Point to her liking.

For those not familiar with this story, Cargill, from Ashland, WI, married into the Cargill family, the largest privately-owned company in the United States. She went on a buying spree of homes and properties on Duluth’s Park Point, often paying much more than assessed values, then bulldozing them. When Duluth mayor Roger Reinhart asked (in what I consider a nice way), what her intentions were, she responded with a defensive statement than can be summarized best as “none of your business,” followed by a barnyard insult. This kicked off an exchange among her,

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the mayor, Park Pointers and Duluthians that eventually made national news.

Photo right: Park Point seen from Duluth hillside. Photo credit: Wikipedia

Mary and I found this incident interesting as we are former “Pointers.” In 1967, I completed active duty in the Coast Guard and bought a small home on the lake side of Park Point. It was a converted summer cabin and at some point, a leaky basement was added. The lot was 35’ wide by two lots deep and stretched from Minnesota Avenue to the sand dunes.



In 1969 Mary and I married and together became “Pointers.” We loved living on Park Point, had great neighbors, enjoyed bicycling on flat surfaces and having beach kegger parties. We noticed that many Pointers were second and third generation and had special attachment to the sand spit that no other Duluthian could claim. Getting “bridged” by the aerial bridge was an inconvenience we learned to live with, but the bigger issue was my allergies from the weeds that thrived in the sand and grain dust from the grain elevators.

We realized we had a “starter” home and if we were ever to have a family we would need a bigger home. We looked at three-bedroom homes on Park Point, but the lots were small and even back then we felt taxes were high. Our search for waterfront land took us to KR where we would found a lot, built a home and moved in by 1972.

In Kraker’s report on the Kathy Cargill property grab, he provided a bit of Park Point history. The sand spit that forms the western boundary of Lake Superior was originally populated by Indigenous people, then commercial fishers, and later summer cabin owners.

To many Duluthians Park Point was viewed as a low-income neighborhood. I could attest to that as my parents had close friends living on about 13th Avenue and I remember the smell of heating oil emanating from their space-heater in the middle of their living room. It was a small home for a family of four and no central heating.

When we lived on Park Point, housing was diversified beginning with low income. Many of the larger and more elegant homes dated back to the ‘20s and ‘30s. It has been our observation that over the years people have taken advantage of the spectacular views of Lake Superior from the lake side and built beautiful homes, many two stories to maximize the view of the lake. Even our tiny one-bedroom home on our 35’ lakeside lot grew a second story.

I find it interesting the parallel of Park Point’s beginning to that of KR. Settled by commercial fishers, followed by summer cottage owners. While Park Point struggles with its identity and future, KR has preserved has its Scandinavian history and culture through its third generation of commercial fishing families, many still living here. It all comes together with our Julebyen, our heritage center, the Viking ship display, and the commercial fishing that still exists out of Knife River.

FIRST OF 13 MEMORIAL/HONORARIUM TREES PLANTED.

Four of what will be up to 13 memorial/honorarium trees have been planted along the north border the KRHCC shares with the Knife River Campground. About three more will be planted along the north boarder in the spring along with up to six along Marina Road. The oak and maple trees have been purchased from Anderson's Greenhouse in Two Harbors ("buy local"). As part of the \$600 purchase price, Anderson's will plant, wrap and stake the trees and monitor their health for three months.

Trees are a wonderful and thoughtful way to memorialize or honor a loved one who may have ties to KR and/or the North Shore. We anticipate all 13 trees will be sponsored for planting next spring. For more information and to reserve a tree, email: info@krhcc.org.



Photo credits: Anderson's Greenhouse

Photo left: Associates of Anderson's Greenhouse plant the first of 13 memorial/honorarium trees. Photo right: Savannah Krech, owner of Anderson's Greenhouse, applies mulch around the base of an oak. All memorial/honorarium trees are either oaks or maples.

WHY BULK CARRIERS SUDDENLY START SINKING

Being a self-acknowledged “boat nerd,” I carefully followed the developments of the 689’ bulk carrier MICHIPICOTEN that suddenly began leaking on its way from Two Harbors to Thunder Bay on June 3. The captain surmised they had hit an uncharted rock off Isle Royale, which I though odd given hundreds of ships over the last 150 years or so had made the same passage without incident.



Photo left; MICHIPICOTEN sporting a 15-degree list in Thunder Bay. This was later corrected through pumping to a 5-degree list.

Photo credit: Wikipedia

As it turns out, the boat apparently suffered a stress fracture that ran from side to side. After temporary repairs in Thunder Bay, the boat traveled under its own power with a tug escort to the Frazer shipyards in Superior for inspection.

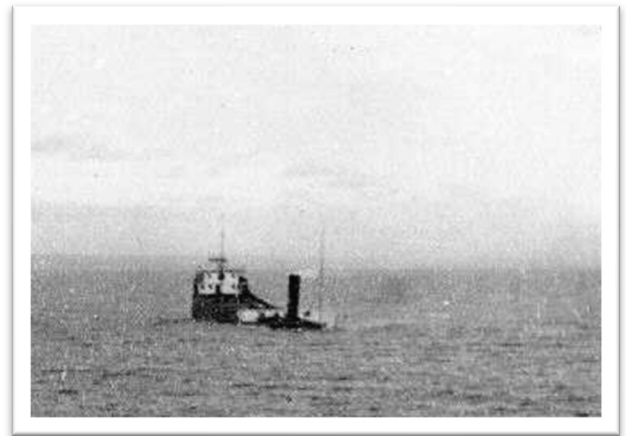
The buzz among the Duluth/Superior marine community is that the inspection revealed the boat, built in 1952, has serious hull fatigue and so an uncertain future, which could include scrapping. For now, she sits idle at the Frazer yard in Superior.

Hull fatigue is not uncommon among bulk carriers, particularly those that carry cement. Cement is very corrosive. I don’t know if the MICHIPICOTEN ever carried cement over its long career.

KR was witness to a form of hull fatigue in September of 1915, when the steamer ONOKO, carrying 110,000 bushels of wheat, suddenly developed a serious leak about nine miles outside of Knife Island. The ONOKO was old, having been launched in 1882 and credited with being the first iron-hull freighter on the Great Lakes. Like all steel-hulled boats at the time, her hull was riveted as opposed to welded. Because of this and its age, it is thought an inaccessible hull plate suddenly broke free, allowing a torrent of water to enter. It sank in 35 minutes in 220 feet of water. All crew were saved. For weeks, if not months thereafter, KR fishers were frustrated with nets plugged with an oatmeal-like gloppy substance.

Photo right: The ONOKO in final stages, photo taken from a passing boat. It is believed a riveted plate under the coal bunker or engine fell off, which explains her sinking from the stern.

Photo credit: Wikipedia



DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Memorials/Honorariums:

- Dennis and Georgia Ojard, Carol and Stephen Carlson, and Rich and Nancy Ojard – memorial tree in memory of parents Ken and Evelyn Ojard.
- Jim and Deb Allert, Paul and Mary von Goertz, and Randy Ellestad in honor of Todd Lindahl, recognized historian and archeologist state-wide.

The KRHCC is a 501 (c3) non-profit 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

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