

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

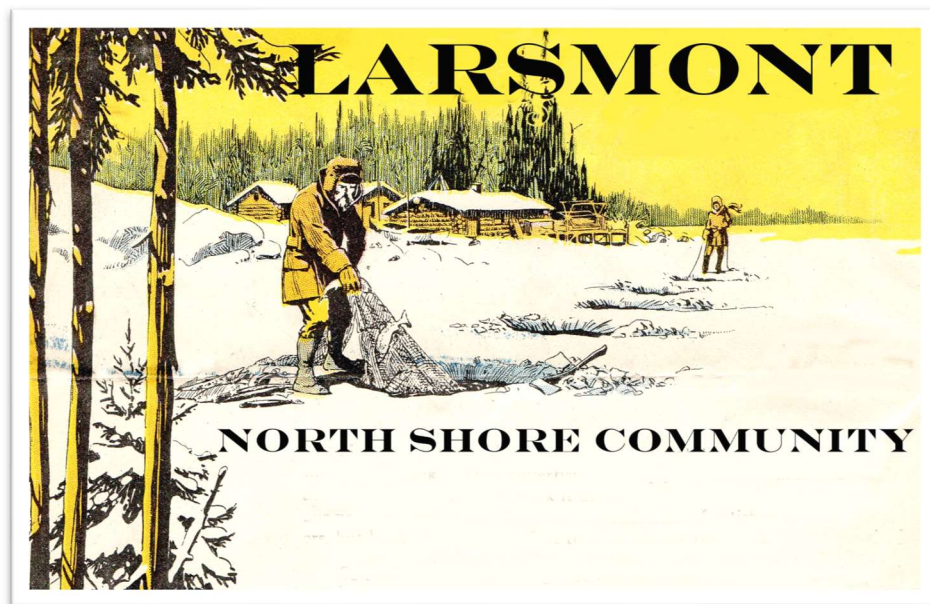
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By Paul von Goertz – KRHCC Board Member

HISTORY OF THE LARSMONT COMMUNITY

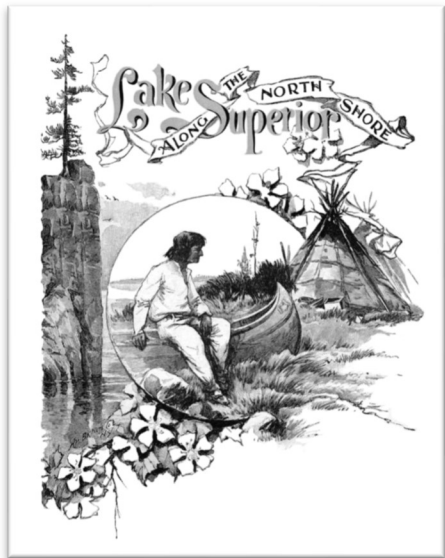
By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian & Archaeologist



For perhaps up to 10,000 years the Indigenous people inhabited this region. First as roving nomadic hunters, and then as the climate changed, along with the forest environment, seasonal villages were established. These were mostly centered around important resources such as mining, fishing, ricing, collection of berries along with other edible plants, and those used for medicines.

Various species of trees and brush were used as building materials for boats, lodges, and other necessary items. Over this long period of time, Indigenous people became well adapted to living in the Lake Superior region. The Europeans, arriving here shortly after 1660, by comparison are still the “new kids on the block.”

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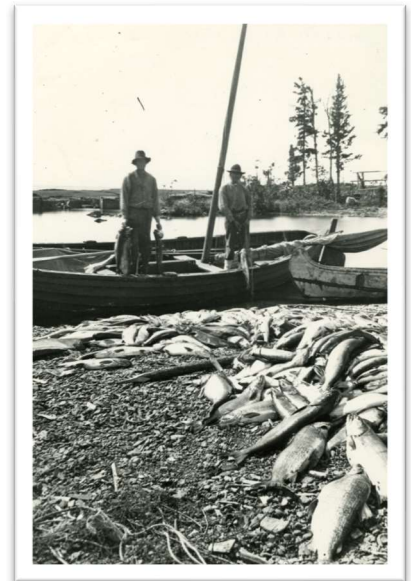
Larsmont, much like its neighbor Knife River, was heavily invested in the commercial fishing business for much of its existence. Commercial fishing started in 1834 with the American Fur Company. All the fur company posts traded with the Indigenous tribes for fish, game and other items, but just for their own consumption and not eastern markets. Whitefish and herring were cheap so early immigrants could afford it.

As the fur trade began to wind down and new immigrants rapidly increased in number to the east, a new market for fish grew rapidly. Fish collection stations were established along the north shore and Isle Royale. They operated much like the earlier traditional fur trade posts. They included a trader, interpreter, blacksmith, laborers, carpenter, and a cooper to make barrels. The carpenter would build and repair skiffs along with wooden boxes for shipping fish.

Indigenous people did all the fishing and were supplied nets and other necessary gear by the Europeans. They much preferred fishing rather than the more difficult trapping. The Hudson Bay Company complained that they could not get anyone to trap furs and that many of them left for Lake Superior to commercial fish instead.

Image right: Indigenous people and Europeans worked in partnership to harvest the lake's bounty. The man on the left may be Ojibwe.

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



Fish collection stations were built at Knife River and Encampment Island in 1837. The Indigenous village on Granite Point that forms the west entry to the Knife River harbor provided the manpower to do the fishing. This village had been on Granite Point since the French first documented it in the early 1660s. It undoubtedly went farther back into the prehistoric past and was primarily there because of the fishing. It was at this time that the first traditional commercial fishing in the Larsmont and Knife River area began.

None of the streams along the north shore were suitable for canoe travel. For this reason, trail networks were established over thousands of years. They enabled people to get to important places to collect needed resources or access inland waterways on which a canoe could be used. These were the best routes available and for this reason many of our modern-day roads follow these ancient trails.

One of these trails ran parallel to Lake Superior and was used occasionally by fur traders and later by U.S. Mail carriers on dogsleds during the winter months. R. B. McLean made the first mail run in

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July 1856 from Duluth to Grand Marais and return. During the summer this was done by rowboat and in winter by dogsled.

Each rowboat round-trip took two weeks since they would stop at every homestead as well as the few post offices that were in existence at the time. Legendary John Beargrease delivered mail too, by rowboat and dog sled from 1879 to early 1883 on the Duluth to Two Harbors section and from Two Harbors to Grand Marais from later in 1883 to 1899. In 1899 a stage/sleigh road was built from Two Harbors to Grand Marais. The new stage company ran out of Beckman's Livery on 2nd Ave. in Two Harbors. It put the dogsled mail service out of business for good. It ran a stage/sleigh until 1922 when bus service put them out of business.



Image above: U. S. Mail carrier dogsled



Image left: R.B. McLean

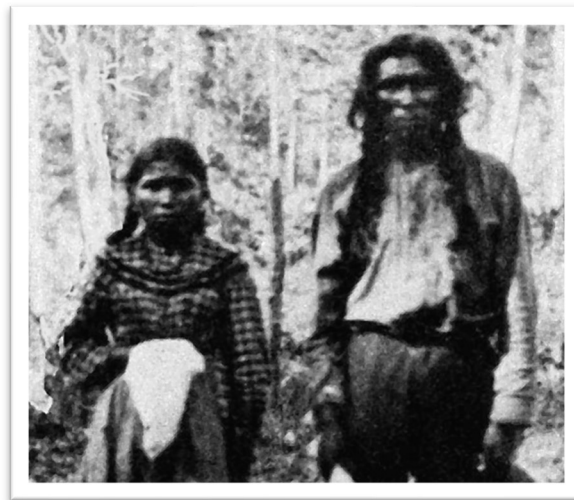


Image right: John Beargrease and wife

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Northeastern Minnesota was ceded by the Ojibway tribe to the U.S. government at the Treaty of La Point in 1854. This opened the region to settlement, mining, logging and all other types of activities. The price was set for the sale of government lands in 1840 by congress at \$1.25 per acre.

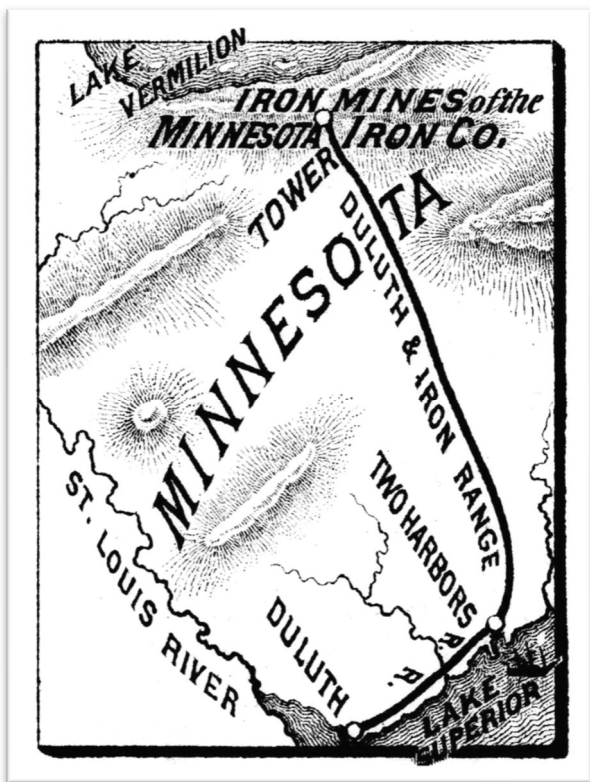
Michael Lane came from Maysville, Kentucky, and purchased land near Larsmont on March 20, 1858 and built a cabin there. This was two months before Minnesota became a state. That property remained in his family for well over a hundred years. Lane kept a daily diary and recorded that when he arrived the Indigenous people were making dugout canoes out of the largest pine around. Birchbark canoes had been in use for around 5,000 years and had replaced the earlier dugout canoes. Lack of available birchbark, probably due to forest fires here in the early 1850s, had forced them to revert to building dugouts again.

Lane occupied the land until 1861 when he left to fight in the Civil War and never returned. His relatives did come back and continued to occupy the property. In 1883 they sold their pine timber to the Duluth & Iron Range Railway for use in building the first wooden ore dock at Two Harbors.

At the same time, the railroad was being built from Two Harbors to the mines at Tower on Lake Vermilion. In addition to the railroad construction, they also built a vital stage road to Duluth.

Barney Lynch's stage company had the winter U.S. Mail contract, which put an abrupt end to the dog sled delivery between Two Harbors and Duluth. This road also followed the ancient Indigenous trail along the north shore.

Image left: Railroad line connecting Duluth and Two Harbors with the Tower iron ore mines.



A telegraph line was temporarily erected beside the road so the railroad could communicate with the outside world. An original sleigh and wagon used by the telegraph maintenance crews in winter or summer can still be seen at the Lake County Historical Society Museum at Two Harbors. This wagon and sleigh would have been seen often on the stage road at Larsmont or Knife River up until 1887 when the track was finished between Two Harbors and Duluth. At that time the telegraph line was relocated from the road to the tracks for better access.

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Image above: Summer and winter stage

The stage was an open-air sleigh pulled by two horses and could carry a few passengers, the U.S. Mail, and a small amount of baggage and freight. Each day one stage would leave Duluth after stopping at several prominent hotels, and a second one, would leave Two Harbors heading toward Duluth. Both sleighs would meet at the stage stop at Sucker River where the passengers could have a meal provided by the Searles Smith, the cook. While the passengers ate, the horses were changed out with fresh ones for the remainder of the trip.

The railroad and construction company needed cash monthly for payrolls and businesses at Two Harbors needed cash for their daily trade. During the summer months this was handled by the railroad company tug. When winter came and the shipping season stopped, the money was transported by one man on a dog sled at night. That man was Paddy McDonald who was fourth in line for the world heavy weight boxing championship. This was the era of bare-knuckle fighting before boxing gloves became a standard. He was also deadly with firearms and other lethal weapons.

McDonald carried an average of \$33,000 in gold and silver coin inside a heavy wooden box that was nailed shut. From 1883 to 1887 he was never held up perhaps due to his varied schedule at night, or his fearsome reputation. Few people living at Larsmont at the time would have been aware of the activity on the stage road. The road in more recent times became U.T. #101, or Unorganized Territory, found today below the railroad tracks.

The old business section of Two Harbors on the waterfront up to 1887 became known as "Whiskey Row" due to its 22 saloons, houses of ill repute, and gambling halls. As a result of the army of construction workers with pockets full of cash, the party atmosphere continued 24 hours per day, much to the dismay of the railroad company. Men would get drunk and not show up for work until their money was gone and they had sobered up. It was a reenactment of the old "hell on wheels" days during the building of the Union Pacific transcontinental railroad in the late 1860s. Among the transients were crooked gamblers, thieves, prostitutes, and men wanted in other states for murder.

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Image left: "Whisky Row" on the Two Harbors Waterfront

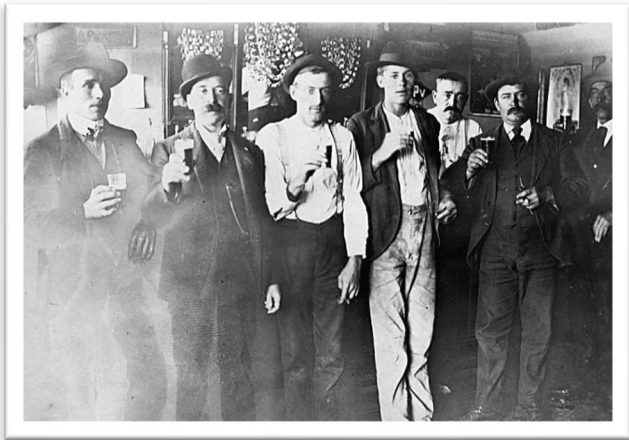


Image right: "Bar flies"



Image above: Tough morning after night on "Whisky Row"

Into this menagerie of miscreants came Norwegian commercial fisherman, Hans Isackson, wife Karen, and three children Ole, Jacob, and Elin. Hans had been a fisherman all his life and in 1883 moved his family in a skiff from Duluth to Two Harbors and established a fish market there. Thomas Sexton owned the four acres where Whiskey Row stood and had it platted into lots, which he leased to businesses. Hans Isackson was the only one who was allowed to purchase a lot from Sexton and personally own it.

Image right: Hans and Karen Isackson and daughter Elin, center.



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There were many Norwegian immigrants working on construction and quite a few of them would come to Karen Isackson and ask her to send part of the wages back to their families still in Norway. She would do this for any of them, but it was a very dangerous undertaking considering criminal element all around her. The railroad company was pleased she agreed to do this as it meant badly needed workers would be back on the job rather than absent after payday.

At the end of 1886, the railroad had had quite enough of Whiskey Row and the problems it caused. They paid Thomas Sexton \$20,000 for his four acres, provided a nice office for him in downtown Duluth, which he could use for any purpose he chose, and gave him a large salary for the rest of his life. The land sale was 5,000 times more than he had paid for it when he bought it back in 1863. This was the most expensive land acquisition in Minnesota for many decades to come.

The railroad intended to make their new acquisition into a coal storage area. But then the Isackson family was still there on their property. One railroad official suggested they could be evicted by the eminent domain law. Now in a rare example, the railroad went out of its way to help the Isacksons. It may have been because they had helped the railroad when they needed it the most and now, they would return the favor. They purchased the lot from him for full price and made a contract that stated both Hans and Karen could live there until they died. And at that time the railroad would take possession. They also moved his house, barn, fish market, and other various buildings closer to the lakeshore out of the way of the coal dock. They built a concrete basement under the house at no cost to them.

Karen died in 1908 and Hans in 1909. Son Jacob was given a job on the coal dock and eventually became foreman and lead mechanic. Ole the other son started as a brakeman and later conductor on the railroad in 1888 until he retired in 1934 with 46 years of service. He went on to live for another 33 years on pension and died at the age of 98 in 1967. He commercial fished on the side with his family for much of his life and until into his 90s.

Ole and his son, Oliver, moved to Larsmont and played an important role in that community for years to come. Oliver married Vera Hill, daughter of Charles Hill, the famous boat builder at Larsmont in 1927. In 1931 they built a store, post office, and home there. This was during the depression, so a couple of cousins did all the construction, mostly for food and maybe a little cash. The first home was incorporated into the store, but later a separate house was built behind it. Later still a gas station was added. "Ollie" was postmaster of Larsmont from 1931 until 1965.

One of Ollie's jobs as postmaster was to deliver the outgoing mail at the depot to the mail car on the passenger train and pick up the incoming mailbag at the same time. The track at Larsmont is on a grade running to the east and the engineers hated stopping here since it was hard to get started again. This was especially true in the winter when the rails were frosty, or some snow covered the track.

If there were no passengers to pick up, the train would slow down, and the postmaster would try to throw the outgoing mailbag through the open sliding door on the mail car. If successful, the trainmen would throw the incoming bag out the door down the track. The postmaster then had to walk down to where it landed, which could be an annoying task in heavy winter snow. If he missed

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the door and hit the outside of the car instead, the train crew pulled the overhead cord to signal the engineer to stop. The bags were then exchanged by hand.

Image right: Train mailbag

One day a fellow who made Ollie feel uneasy, showed up at the store. He purchased a bottle of pop and a candy bar. Ollie asked him where he was from and the man replied, "Duluth, I was born and grew up there." It was a hot summer day, and the front door of the store was open giving a clear view of Lake Superior below. The man stood in the open door eating his candy bar and drinking his pop while looking out onto the lake.



An ore boat happened to be passing by at that moment and the fellow turned and asked, "Hey what kind of boat is that?" Anyone living in Duluth all their life would certainly have known what an ore boat looked like. He then asked when the passenger train was due. Ollie told him and said he could wait for it at the depot. He then left, but Ollie was troubled and called the sheriff and explained what had happened. The sheriff asked for a description of the man and then told Ollie to lock the doors and stay away from the windows. It turned out the man was a bank robber and soon the depot was surrounded by police. He gave up without a fight and went to prison probably never knowing he had been done in by an ore boat.

This was not the only criminal act to happen at Larsmont. Back in August 1919, one Charles Evens committed what we would call today a home invasion. He assaulted Mrs. Ricard and robbed the home of valuables and stole a pair of Mr. Ricard's pants. He then made his way to Two Harbors where he checked in at the Windsor Hotel, now "Do North Pizzeria & Pub" for the night. The next morning, he left for Beaver Bay pursued by sheriff Emil Nelson and deputy August Tabor. They caught up with him at Beaver Bay and "got the drop on him and disarmed the desperado." Mr. Ricard happily got his pants back. And Mr. Evens got a new pair of pants at Stillwater State Prison with black and white stripes on them solving his former wardrobe problems.



Image left: Sheriff E. Nelson

By 1886 the D&IR RR had made enough money from the sale of its iron ore to start building the "Lake Division" track between Two Harbors and Duluth. Construction began in June with D&IR engine #3 (The "Three Spot") at the head of the track-laying crew with William Tracy at the throttle. It would be the first of" countless locomotives to pass through Larsmont in the years to come.

On December 20, 1886, the first non-construction scheduled train pulling passenger coaches made a run from Duluth to Tower at Lake Vermilion. This caused the instant death of Barney Lynch's

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stage line. Riding all day in an open sleigh at -30° could not compete with riding inside a heated railroad coach on a trip that takes only 1½ hours. As soon as the tracks reached Duluth, the railroad could legally sell over 606,000 acres of government land given to it in the last land grant ever issued to a railroad in Minnesota. This grant was provided to offset the high cost of railroad construction.

By 1911 there were enough residents living at Larsmont to justify establishing a depot at that location. The railroad started building the Larsmont depot in December 1911 and finished it in January 1912 at a cost of \$220.03. It was a type IV flag stop depot, which meant that the passenger train would not stop there unless “flagged down” by a person waving a flag or light at night. The historic freight depot at the Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center in Knife River today is very similar to the Larsmont flag stop depot.



Image left: Larsmont train depot



Image right :Larsmont train depot

Each flag stop had a caretaker who made \$15 per month. Their job was to make sure the depot stove kept the waiting room warm in the winter, shovel snow, and clean the interior. They also took care of the unheated freight room and would lock this room when expensive freight arrived by express. Live poultry, food, or other perishables may need special attention if recipients are not there when delivered. The first caretaker is unknown but was likely John Strom who was the first postmaster in 1915 and ran a store.

The second caretaker and postmaster was John Sjoblom who served from 1919 to 1932 when railroad cutbacks ended the caretaker position. The caretaker responsibilities were assigned to the Palmer townsite section foreman to carry out with no increase in his pay.

In 1916 the Larsmont depot was moved west of the rock cut and closer to the Larsmont school, which was built in 1914. The grade was not as steep here, but the train still did not like to stop for the mail if there were no passengers getting on or off. In 1940 the depot was enlarged, and the roof was changed. The locations of windows and doors were changed, and asbestos cement shingles covered the old wood clapboard siding. In addition to the depot move in November 1916, a commercial fish loading platform was built west of the depot for \$53.87. This one and the fish loading platform at Knife River were the only two on the D&IR.

As the roads along the north shore steadily improved, and automobiles increased rapidly in number, people riding the passenger train decreased to new lows. The railroad U.S. Mail contract ended on

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July 16, 1957, while the express contract lasted until 1960. Both the mail service and fish shipping on the north shore were now handled by truck. Due to a lack of business the Larsmont depot was closed on December 15, 1958. In April 1959 it was donated to the Two Harbors Gun Club and moved north of Two Harbors. Around 1990 it was sold to a private party and moved to Brimson to be used as a hunting shack. Image right: Two Harbors Gun Club members with former Larsmont depot in background.



In March 1938 there were 29 licensed fishermen at Knife River and 26 licensed fishermen at Larsmont. By July 10, 1946, there were 24 remaining at Knife River, a drop of 6, and only 6 at Larsmont, a drop of 20. This was the same year the sea lamprey was found in Lake Superior. Up until 1946 the average annual catch for lake trout was one million pounds. Herring was five million pounds annually. There were five times as many herring fishermen as trout fishermen. A steep decline began in 1954 and by 1958 the trout catch was down to an all-time low of 35,000 pounds. Where once there were over four hundred commercial fishermen on the north shore, there is now only a few left.

Lake trout numbers have recovered significantly with a little over 50 percent of the trout caught by sport fishermen today are naturally spawned and not planted. A method for controlling the sea lamprey and various issues concerning pollution have made a difference.

The important commercial fishing industry in both Larsmont and Knife River has been to a large degree replaced by visitors who enjoy the recreational opportunities of the area and the natural beauty.

26 LICENSED COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN AT LARSMONT IN 1938

David Anderson
Gilbert Anderson
Noble Erickson
William Hill
Saxoni Erickson
Robert Hanson
Welman Hanson
Helmer Hill
Rueben Hill

Rowland Hill
Oliver Isackson
Nils Johnson
Isak Jacobson
Ingvald Jacobson
Roger Johnson
Robert W. Myers
Henry Nyquist
Ragnvald Sannes

John Seagren
John Sjoblom
Torleif Thompson
T. A. Thompson
Victor Sjoblom
John Hendrickson
Magnus Jensen
George Nyquist

SIX LICENSED LARSMONT COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN July 16, 1946

Gilbert E. Anderson
Robert A. Hanson

Ole E. Isackson
Isak Jacobson

John Sjoblom
Tollof Thompson

* All of the above image credits: Collection of Todd Lindahl, unless specifically noted.

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“CHRISTMAS TREE TRAIN” WILL LIKELY BE ANOTHER A SELL-OUT.

The North Shore Scenic Railroad’s “Christmas Tree Train” run in conjunction with the KRHCC’s “Trees. Trains. Traditions” event is likely to be another sell-out if past years’ ridership remains the same. Families ride from Duluth to a local tree lot at the KRHCC where they select a tree, have it wrapped and placed on a flatcar for the return to Duluth. They can then drive up to the flatcar and claim their tree.



Hot food and beverages will be available at the depot through Larsmont Trading Post. Live music. The date is the Saturday after Thanksgiving, November 30. For tickets and more information on the “Christmas Tree Train” go to the North Shore Scenic Railroad’s website: Duluthtrains.com

Image left: Families riding the “Christmas Tree Train” as part of the KRHCC’s “Trees. Trains. Traditions” celebration select a tree from the KRHCC tree lot.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

DON’T FORGET THE KRHCC IN YOUR HOLIDAY GIVING!

The KRHCC’s fixed overhead continues to rise with insurance the main culprit exacerbated by building insurance for the completed commercial fishing shelter. We also want to give the shelter some Scandinavian design amenities. Can you help? The KRHCC is an IRS-recognized 501(c3) so your gift is totally tax deductible. Send to: KRHCC. POB 240, Knife River, MN 55609. Thank you!

PLEASE REMEMBER NOVEMBER 11th IS VETERAN’S DAY

Please take a moment on Veteran’s Day to thank our veterans past and present who have preserved our freedoms. If you have not already seen the KRHCC granite memorial to Lake County veterans at the depot, Veterans Day would be a good time to do so.

OCTOBER DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donation:

- Gift from Doug and Becky Pruitt to the general fund.

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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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