

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz – KRHCC Board Member

STUPID STUNTS ON FROZEN LAKE SUPERIOR

It has been several years since Lake Superior has been considered “froze over.” According to Geographic FAQ, the last time it totally froze over was February 1994. It has been “nearly all” froze over several times since.

I have three stupid stunts that I feel compelled to write about as I participated in two and the other was told to me by a friend who was one of the four who fortunately completed the stunt. So, these are credible stories and should be recorded as part of western Lake Superior lore.

Stupid Stunt #1

It was a challenge to go to Duluth by snowmobile during one of the years the lake was either totally, or almost all, frozen over sometime during the ‘90s. An unnamed friend and I launched our sleds from the Knife River (KR) Marina launch ramp and headed west, gradually increasing speed as there were no visible cracks exposing open water or windrows.

There were patches of shallow windswept drifted snow to lubricate the track rails on our sleds. Amazing how fast a sled can move on frozen ice! The experience, besides being novel, was quite enjoyable. Near Perkins at 25th Avenue East we saw a menacing ice windrow several feet high. Time to turn around.



On the way back near the Lakewood water treatment plant, we spotted what looked like a village on the ice about a mile offshore. This has always been a favorite fishing spot for summer anglers. We spotted several ATVs with sleds attached, ice houses, snowmobiles, a float plane with skis, and several groups of what appeared to be congenial ice anglers. With a wave of a hand, we passed them by and returned safely to the KR Marina.

Image credit: Cartoon art Internet Public Domain

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Stupid Stunt #2

I can pretty much pinpoint this one to 1976 since it was told to me by a friend, who was part of the stunt, while we were trolling on the lake in my boat. I remember the date because we got into a political debate over Jimmy Carter, who was running for president that fall. The adventure had taken place the previous winter. Please keep in mind that sleds made in the late '70s were low horsepower compared to today and not very reliable. As a result, snowmobilers always carried a pocket full of spare sparkplugs and a tow rope.

Image right: A '70s-era snowmobile. By far the most popular were Ski-Doos made by Bombardier. Photo Credit: Public Domain



The idea among the four Two Harborite adventurers was to sled from the Two Harbors (TH) harbor across the lake and a bit east to Cornucopia, WI – about 30 miles as a crow fly and close to about the max fuel sleds of that era could carry. As a precaution, one of the adventurers wore a life jacket (!?). (Note: hypothermia can kill in as little as 15 minutes.) Once ashore, they would have a burger and a beer at “Ponchos,” brag about their accomplishment to locals, refuel, and get back before dark.

Unbeknownst to our adventurers, while they enjoyed their break in Cornucopia, conditions on the lake had changed. Cracks had appeared in the ice which required some “water skipping.” Ice will crack from the pressure of wind, but also from the force of air between the water and ice being warmed by the sun and expanding, thereby causing the ice to crack with a frightening “boom.” But so far, so good!



A moment of horror occurred when they spotted the Coast Guard icebreaker/buoy tender USCGC WOODRUSH downbound cutting a path through the ice. Its home port in Duluth in the 1970's (Image left: Public Domain).

It was imperative they pass the bow of the ship before it marooned them on the south side of its impending path. As they got closer, they realized the ship was not moving but apparently stuck in the ice. They came alongside and talked to some crew members who

remarked they had seen four objects heading towards them on their radar but could not identify what they were!

Our adventurers made it safely back to TH and the story they told was repeated many a time around the tables at the coffee shops and bars in TH.

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Stupid Stunt #3

In the early '70s I was an enthusiastic scuba diver and one of the organizers of the Lake Superior Scuba Divers Club. The club lasted only a few years as we lacked a mission and focus, leadership, and no one wanted to pay dues.

In January of 1971 several of us were anxious to get in the water and decided to make a dive through the ice just off about 4th Avenue East. The attraction was remnants of the original Duluth docks prior to a cut being made through Park Point to form the Duluth entry. By way of historical fact, the exposed outer harbor was a bad idea; northeast gales constantly tore it apart, which spurred construction of the Duluth entry in 1871.

We dressed in our wetsuits on shore, dragged our gear and chainsaw out on the ice, and began setting up at a spot where we had seen outer harbor docks in old photos. Anyone looking out over the lake could see us and probably wondered what we were up to. Soon a television crew was on site.

Photo right: Setting up the tether line. Your writer is in the middle. Photo credit: Mary von Goertz



We cut about a four-foot square hole which would allow one diver at a time to enter the water while holding a rope lifeline with a buddy topside on the other end. Looking into the black hole was a bit threatening, but once in the water, bright daylight streamed through the hole. Clearly this was not a dive for the claustrophobic for one's life depended on never losing sight of the exit hole or losing the tether.



Our ¼" thick foam wetsuits made the freezing water tolerable, but we would need to rely on the cold water to numb the pain our exposed faces had to endure. "Are we having fun yet?"

Photo left: Your writer ready to fall backwards into the open hole, which is the proper way to enter. Note how much of my face is exposed to the frigid water. Photo credit: Mary von Goertz

The dive itself was less than thrilling as none of us wanted to get out of sight of the beacon of sunlight shining through the hole and we were breaking a hard-and-fast rule against diving without a buddy. The payoff, if there was one, was that we could say we had made an ice dive with bragging rights to the TV news crew and those onlookers who had ventured out on the ice to see what we were up to.

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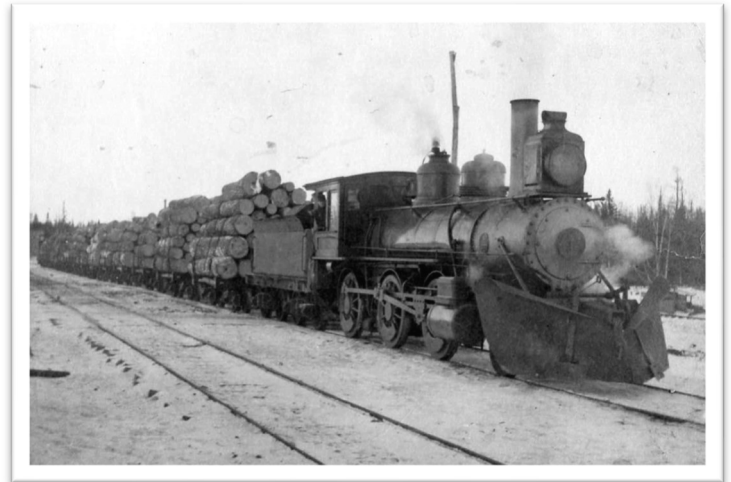
SNOWPLOWING ON THE ALGER LINE

By Todd Lindahl - KRHCC Historian & Archeologist

Snow could be a blessing and a curse for the Alger-Smith Lumber Company and its railroad, the Duluth & Northern Minnesota Railway (D&NM). Snow was necessary for the logging operations so logs could be moved by skidding or by sleigh. Without snow it is almost impossible to move logs to a railroad landing. But, on the other hand, snow can make transporting logs on the railroad difficult and challenging.

At the start of the railroad in 1898, engine #1 was equipped with a “butterfly snowplow”. The blades looked like butterfly wings on the front of the engine. This was sufficient for clearing the track for the first few years as the mainline was slowly extended farther away from Knife River as timber was depleted.

Image right: Engine #1 with a butterfly snowplow on the front at the Knife River yard in 1898. Photo collection: Todd Lindahl



In 1902 Alger-Smith bought the Mitchell & McClure sawmill at Grassy Point in West Duluth and its logging railroad. This included two locomotives, 83 Russel cars, a log loader, and a rather nice wedge snowplow.

In 1909 the Estate of the Thomas Nestor Railroad (TNR), a logging line that had its terminus at the mouth of the Gooseberry River in what is today, Gooseberry Falls State Park, decided to abandon its operation when its dam washed out. They sold all their remaining large timber tract to the Virginia & Rainy Lake Lumber Company (V&RL). As the TNR pulled up their rails, the V&RL laid down its own track.

The V&RL purchased the huge St. Louis Lumber Company sawmill on Grassy Point in Duluth just to saw the logs from this sale. They obtained “running rights” for their trains over the D&NM from Buell to York Transfer yard. From there, the Duluth & Iron Range Railway (D&IR) would move their log trains for them to West Duluth. The V&RL moved two locomotives to Gooseberry to work on the spurs and a third, engine #19, to move the loaded cars between Buell and York Transfer. Movement over the D&NM mainline had to be cleared with the dispatcher in Knife River.

On March 19, 1913, a snowstorm hit the region, and the D&NM snowplow was called into action to clear the line. Their train orders were to stop before the York Transfer yard switch to allow a V&RL log train to enter the yard and then proceed. Unfortunately, so much snow was being thrown up by the plow blade that conductor Dave Ratford did not see the switch. They hit V&RL engine #19 head-on about eight car-lengths east of the switch. The snowplow was instantly turned into kindling wood and conductor Ratford was sent spinning head over heels through the air. Luckily, he landed in deep snow and suffered only cuts, bruises, and a broken collarbone. The snowplow was a total loss.

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The D&NM decided to plate-over the cowcatcher of engine #2 (the former Duluth & Iron Range 3 Spot) and make it into a snowplow/flanger. The air-operated flanger blades were lifted and lowered using rods and a brake cylinder in a rather unique and interesting invention to scrape the rails free of snow. But in the winter of 1914, another severe snowstorm hit, and snow drifted under the viaduct to the D&NM coal dock next to the D&IR Knife River trestle.

Engine #2, with the new snowplow, was called out to clear the track. The drift was big, so the crew attacked it at a high rate of speed. The engine burrowed deep and stalled. Snow packed in behind the blade and there was nothing they could do to free the engine. The fire was dropped, the boiler was emptied, and water was let out of the tender. The company had to hire a large crew of men from an employment agency in Duluth to come up and hand-shovel the engine to free it.

Thus, the engine snowplow experiment ended in disaster. The plow and flanger mechanism were removed and a new plow was built out of an old D& IR wooden ore car. It was filled with scrap iron for weight and pushed by one or two locomotives. A separate short flanger car was pushed by a separate locomotive and its flanger blades were raised or lowered manually. Each plow train had a caboose behind for the conductor, brakeman, and a crew of section men who had to clean out switches by hand.



This was winter railroading on the D&NM.

Image above: Engine #8 with a butterfly plow covered with snow. Several trainmen pictured have familiar Knife River last names. Left to right more or less are Ed Sommers, Edwin Dyer, Joe Rabey (engineer), Frank Bissel, Otto Norton (engineer), ? Pitkowski (fireman), Alex Wedlund, ? Erickson, Albert Ambler, and Claud Lusk. Todd has placed the names with the faces if anyone may be related to those pictured, please email info@krhcc.org Photo collection: Todd Lindahl

TILLIE LARSON'S BEAVER CROSSING STAGE STOP SERVED MANY INTERESTS.

By Todd Lindahl -KRHCC Historian & Archeologist

Tillie Larson bought the Beaver Crossing stage stop (now part of the Superior Hiking Trail) from William Towl and expanded it into a saloon, restaurant, hotel and house of ill repute. It was all about "location, location, and location." The stage line was in front, the Alger-Smith line to the left, and the estate of the Thomas Nestor Railroad (another logging company) to the right. Needless to say, it was a popular hangout for loggers, railroad men and travelers.

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When Engine 8 derailed, the joke among railroaders on the Alger-Smith line was that it did not derail at all. It was just going to Tillie's place. Real cause of the derailment was ice between crossing planks and train rails.

Image right: Engine #8 derailed by snow on the North Shore Stage Road (now Lake County Hwy 3) at Beaver Crossing Mile Post 30. The engine was built in 1876 by the Pennsylvania Railroad. Alger-Smith RR bought it from Mitchell & McClure Lumber Company in 1902. Photo collection: Todd Lindahl



When Alger-Smith logging stopped in 1919, Tillie abandoned the place. Rudolph B. Illgen (namesake of Illgen City?) bought it and gave it the strange name of "Hotel Scientific Ranch." It burned down in 1925.

FREE! FORTY-FOUR 1938 CARS NEVER DRIVEN!

This headline sure reads like a "too good to be true" claim from a used car dealership. Of course there's a catch. The cars are resting on the bottom of Lake Superior in 900 feet of water.

In the February 2022 issue of this newsletter (online at krhcc.org under "Recent News"), I tried to correct the longtime rumor that a lake carrier had sunk with its deck full of cars direct from Detroit. True, the bulk carrier CITY OF BANGOR had been stranded on the Keweenaw peninsula during a 1926 winter storm, but the cars were later driven off the boat that winter on an ice road and for the most part salvaged.

Also, the same story I acknowledged that in 1940 the J.M. DAVIS lost four cars on Lake Superior when the boat went into a trough while making a sudden turn to escape seas driven by gale-force winds.

Now I learn that a ship did lose its cargo of cars during a storm on the Big Lake on November 22, 1938, although the ship itself made it safely to Duluth. The whole story was printed in the August 31, 1975, edition of the *Duluth News Tribune* researched and written by Richard L. Pomeroy. Pomeroy wrote about all things marine under his column "Port Beams." As a boat nerd I always looked forward to his columns.

I came across the story thanks to former KR resident Knute Nisswandt who found most of the story by chance rather crudely ripped from a page of the paper.

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The boat was the JOHN P. GEISTMAN. She was upbound from Detroit, MI, to Duluth with 44 brand



new cars on her deck. The boat was old, built in 1896, and was small by today's standards at 406'. She was powered by a triple-expansion steam engine that produced 2,000 HP. She was designed to tow a barge of about the same length, so was given extra horsepower.

Image left: In better days the JOHN P. GEISTMAN was captured entering the Duluth ship canal with a full load of new cars. Photographer unknown.

She was working her way to Duluth in a northeast wind that built into a gale ("Gales of November"). From personal experience when running from the Soo to Duluth and encountering a nor'easter, it is best to get to the north shore to take advantage of following seas. But, to get there the boat must spend time in the trough, which rolls the boat from side to side. Part of Pomeroy's story was missing as it was torn from a page, but it states that the GEISTMAN made it to the north shore near Grand Marais coated in ice.

I am going to assume the cars were lost when the GEISTMAN was tossed about in the trough. Pomeroy states that crew watched the 44 cars bob astern of the ship in a line and then sink in 900 feet of water. The gale would die down only to be replaced by "sea smoke" generated by bitter cold. Near Duluth the fog lifted and the GEISTMAN, sheathed in ice, and her crew of 34, passed through the Duluth entry after being tormented by the lake for 24 hours.

The GEISTMAN would continue to sail under several different names until it was scrapped in Thunder Bay, Ontario, in 1974. I feel very fortunate to share the story of the GEISTMAN and its lost cars with newsletter readers as there is no mention of the boat in Julius F. Wolff's book "Lake Superior Shipwrecks." The book is considered the best source on Lake Superior shipwrecks, ship strandings and ship mishaps. I also could not find any mention of the lost cars during an internet search.

Image right: A crew member of the J.M. DAVIS caught this car going overboard in a 1940 storm on Lake Superior. Total of four new cars were lost. Photo has been retouched by someone to enhance contrast. Photographer unknown

Thanks again to Knute Nisswandt for bringing this newspaper clipping to my attention.



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KRHCC BOARD PLANS SUMMER WORK

At the KRHC'S annual meeting held on January 17, the board identified three summer projects. Most important is to face the OSB on the boat shelter gable ends with pine or cedar. OSB is a fiberboard and not suitable for long term exposure to weather. Site signage will be placed on the west gable that faces Marina Road.



Second is to cover the shelter trusses with pine plywood to keep birds from nesting within them and for aesthetic purposes.

Image left: Exposed roof trusses will be covered with plywood.

Lastly, we need to install security lighting on the shelter ends as well as between the depot and freight building which, right now, is a black hole. The lighting will be motion-sensitive in respect to our neighbor's privacy. Additional lighting will illuminate the interiors of both the shelter and CRUSADER. That lighting will be on a timer to turn off at 10 PM.

The KRHCC has applied to the IRRR for \$15,000 to help with cost. The grant requires a match of the same amount. This means that your donation to the KRHCC will be doubled with the match. If we can make the match, we'll have \$30,000 to apply to this summer's work. Can you help? Your donation is totally tax deductible as the KRHCC is an IRS-approved 501 (c3) non-profit. Thanks!
Email: info@krhcc.org

ORDER MEMORIAL/HONORARIUM TREES NOW FOR SPRING PLANTING

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. With that in mind, the KRHCC has made available up to 13 oak and maple trees for planting along the north border the KRHCC shares with the Knife River Campground, and along Marina Road.

Image right: Four memorial/honorarium trees were planted along the north border this past September and the rest we expect to plant this spring. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



The 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, stake the trees, and monitor their health for three months. The KRHCC makes no money on these trees.

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We anticipate all 13 trees will be sponsored for spring planting. For more information and to reserve a tree, email: info@krhcc.org.

FEBRUARY DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations

- None received.

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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