

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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March 2025

By Paul von Goertz – KRHCC Board Member

KNIFE RIVER CHECKS ALL THE BOXES AS “SMALL TOWN AMERICA.”



*Knife River as seen on Julebyen weekend 2024.
Photo credit: Dave Schauer*

I love small towns starting as a child when my older sister and I spent several weeks each summer at my grandparent's home in Elmore, Minnesota, in the southern center of the state within sight of the Iowa border. It was a tightknit community where everyone knew each other and truly cared for one other as all were tied in some way to the local economy, which was farming.

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Mary and I will sometimes depart from an interstate highway and travel the back roads through rural country and its small towns. You can certainly see which have a sense of community pride and “place.” Nearly all have one or more common characteristics.

From my observation:

- Church
- Post office
- Community building
- Recreation area/access
- Lodging/campground
- Railroad access (usually adjacent to a grain elevator)
- Community/civic flagpole
- Recognition for local veterans
- Some kind of community annual celebration
- Recognition for its history
- Bar
- Small businesses that serve visitors and the local economy
- Has its own zip code
- Cemetery

As you read through the list, Knife River (KR) checks all the boxes including “bar,” if we include the sandbar at the mouth of the Knife River. It would be nice if we had a food outlet and maybe we do. Besides selling destination smoked fish, Kendall’s sells cheese, crackers and beer. Enjoy at a nearby picnic table. For someone like me who loves smoked fish, Kendall’s offers a tasty and complete meal featuring local fare.

What about a gas station? Sometime during the late ‘90s a convenience store/gas station was proposed by Pat LeBlanc from Silver Bay for the west side at the intersection of Hawk Hill Road and the north side of the southbound Expressway. It was met with resistance from locals who expressed issues with something called “spot zoning” as well as contributing to “light pollution.” Knife River native Pete Bugge, who operated the marina at the time, favored the idea as he was tired of people low on gas and wanting to buy from the marina.

A hearing was held and given local opposition and the zoning issue, county Planning & Zoning rejected the application. County commissioners concurred and that was the end of it. And really, anyone traveling to Knife River must pass through Duluth or Two Harbors, both of which have “C” stores. So, plan ahead. *(See related stories “Don’t mess with Knife River” September 2022 issue of KRHCC newsletter online at krhcc.org under “Recent News.”)*

Many people may not be aware that Knife River has a “Memorial Wall” into which is incorporated a columbarium. This allows us to check the “cemetery” box.

Our columbarium is on Knife River Lutheran Church (KRLC) property and owned by it. I was on the committee that initiated the columbarium. The chair was long-time KRLC member Steve Carlson, who stick-handled the project start to finish and did an excellent job.

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Image left: The Knife River Columbarium and Memorial Wall is within the church's Memorial Garden. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

Church members approved the columbarium at their 2014 annual meeting. After much research the columbarium committee recommended partnering with Homecoming, Inc. for the columbarium mechanics and Cavallin Funeral Home in Two Harbors for inurnment. Construction of the 80-niche columbarium was completed in 2018 with dedication on September 16.

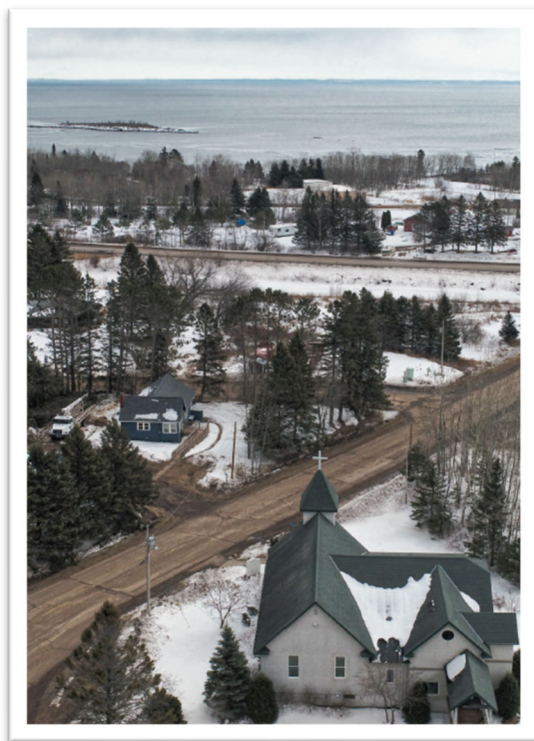
The KRLC columbarium is the only sacred burial place for cremains on the North Shore. It is open to current and past church members, their immediate family members, anyone confirmed or baptized at KRLC, any person associated with KRLC through their attendance or service, any minister and spouse, any Knife River resident, season resident or property owner within the 55609 zip code.

Niches are \$2,200 which includes a 10% perpetual care fee. Each niche has space for two urns and may be used as a single, companion or shared niche. Memorial plaques for the face of the niche are additional and cost \$350. For more information on the KRLC columbarium visit the church's website www.kniferiverlutheran.church or call 218-834-5172.

I have lobbied for a cemetery or columbarium ever since Mary and I realized we would never leave KR. Our only final resting options at the time were Two Harbors or Palmers in Duluth Township, neither community of which we felt a part.

There is a third option of which many first and second KR generations took advantage, and that is Knife Island. However, current residents are not welcoming, and I prefer my earthly remains to spend eternity surrounded by the fragrance of memorial garden flowers as opposed to guano.

Image right: The Knife River Lutheran Church is viewed by many as "Heart of the community." Photo credit: Scott Shelerud



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MARINA MANAGER GIVES STATUS OF MARINA FOR SUMMER BOATING

By Eric Thomas

I sometimes provide news that's current along with that which is historical because "today's news is tomorrow's history." With that thought I asked Eric Thomas, owner of Sailboats, Inc. and managing agent for the KR Marina, what the latest developments are for the foggy future of the marina as boaters look to the 2025 boating season.

Here is his report, exclusive to the KRHCC newsletter:



Image left: Eric Thomas, owner of Sailboats, Inc

"Things at the marina are slow to change and that will continue to be the theme this year, I believe.

"Sailboat's Inc. has a lease currently through mid-summer of 2026. There has been lots of talk, speculation and even some whispers. Currently nothing bold is in the works.

"Even though our current lease is short, we intend to continue to act like we will be there for some time. To that end, we will be refreshing the office area space and bringing in some inventory of local interest, then likely hanging a shingle out to invite you in. Watch for a sign or invitation in the coming months.

"It is my understanding that the MN DNR is working to replace the boat ramp with a newly constructed one in the historic Gunnar Johnson basin on the SW corner of the marina property. This project is still in the design phase. Funding was secured in last year's DNR public access package.

I am told the DNR envisions a modest footprint for the new boat ramp in keeping with the light use and small area of the basin and wishing to reinforce and reuse some of the existing structures. I have long advocated for relocating the launch ramp to help solve the storm water runoff problem from the paved roadway going directly to the ramp and to the lake, as well as quieting the traffic flow in the center of the facility.

"For the walkers and visitors to the marina, look for a change on the gravel road leading to the point that forms the east entry to the harbor, which is along the backside of the beach. Parking will be on the opposite side of the road (north side) to allow the boardwalk along the docks to be used. It's a small thing, we hope to keep nibbling away.

"We as operators of the marina will be installing the docks once the ice is gone from the basin. Boats will follow soon after.

"Eric Thomas for all the crew at Knife River Marina"

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Editor's note:

Eric Thomas and all who comprise his crew have been exceptionally generous to the KR community. They retrieved CRUSADER II from Lighthouse Point in Two Harbors in 2016, stored it for three years and placed it on its new shelter slab. They also applied new shrink-wrap to Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON when it arrived from Duluth in late 2021. All this work performed, and material provide at no cost to the KRHCC or SOS! Thank you, Eric and crew!

THE JULY 1900 WRECK OF ENGINE # 105 AT LARSMONT

By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian & Archeologist

All photos from the Todd Lindahl Collection

Train wrecks were the scourge and dread of railroad companies and railroad men alike since the very beginning of railroading in this country. They could happen in an instant or over prolonged seconds that seem to last for an agonizing eternity. There are countless ways for these wrecks to happen and all of them are terrifying.

The first severe wreck on the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad (D&IRR) happened sometime in the first 11 days of August 1884, even before the D&IRR took possession of the railroad from the John S. Wolff Construction Company. A mainline ore engine, one of six, rear-ended a standing train crushing the caboose and badly damaging the engine. Fortunately, there were no fatalities in this instance.

On August 11, 1884, the D&IRR was satisfied Wolff had fulfilled all the requirements of the contract and officially took control of the railroad. Since the construction company was solely responsible at the time of the wreck, it was never reported by the D&IRR to the government agencies that were tasked with overseeing railroads in Minnesota. As a result of this, the first train wreck has become a phantom with the only evidence being the locomotive and rail car debris still found at the wreck site.

The railroad has always tried to hide wrecks from the public, since they considered them embarrassing and bad for business. This covert practice has carried on to this day.

The D&IRR was set up as a "common carrier," which meant that it moved ore trains, local freight, mixed trains (both freight cars and passenger cars together), and passenger trains. In 1900 these four types of trains were regulated by government timetables and official clocks since radios and CTC (Centralized Traffic Control) were far in the future. Each train was assigned a specific number for identification.

On July 31, 1900, mixed train #3 left Duluth heading northbound to Two Harbors and eventually Ely. Locomotive 105 was pulling seven freight cars, a refrigerator car, and a caboose outfitted with coach seats for passengers. It was supposed to meet local freight #4 and pass it at the Knife River siding. That freight was supposed to pick up some log cars there. At 6:56 A.M. #3 arrived at Knife River as scheduled and found #4 had not arrived. At this time head brakeman F. W. Clippert left the engine cab and went back to the caboose. Soon #3, due in Two Harbors at 7:15 AM, continued cautiously on, with the trainmen keeping an eye peeled for the missing #4.

But #4 never showed up. That freight had derailed on a washout close to where Sonju's car lot is today. Engineer Charles Watson and conductor John Finnegan were in control of derailed #4 and

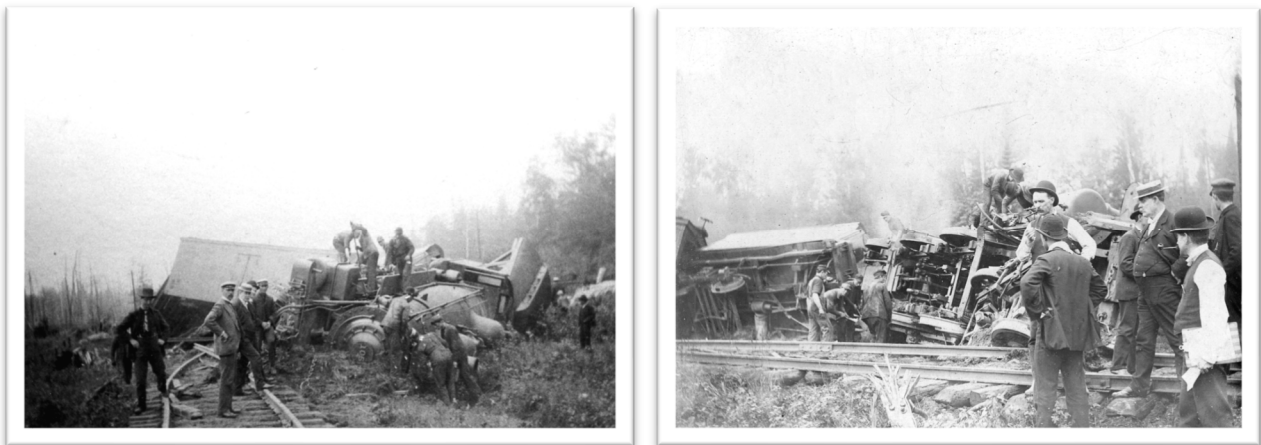
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sent a brakeman a quarter mile ahead to flag down #3 when it appeared. While waiting, the brakeman heard #3 crash.

Shortly after 7:00 A.M., at the first curve west of Larsmont, #3's engineer William Pettibone saw a washout ahead that had been created by heavy rain during the night.

He threw the air brakes into emergency, called "dynamiting," and dove head-first out the cab window. While doing so, he yelled at fireman William Bruley to "Jump!" It was a common practice to get out of the cab if an imminent bad wreck was about to happen. There are a a lot of exposed steam pipes on the boiler head and if the wooden cab is crushed, these pipes are likely to break sending deadly high-pressure steam everywhere. The unspoken rule was to jump and get as far away as possible. This act of "taking to the air" was known as "joining the bird man club."

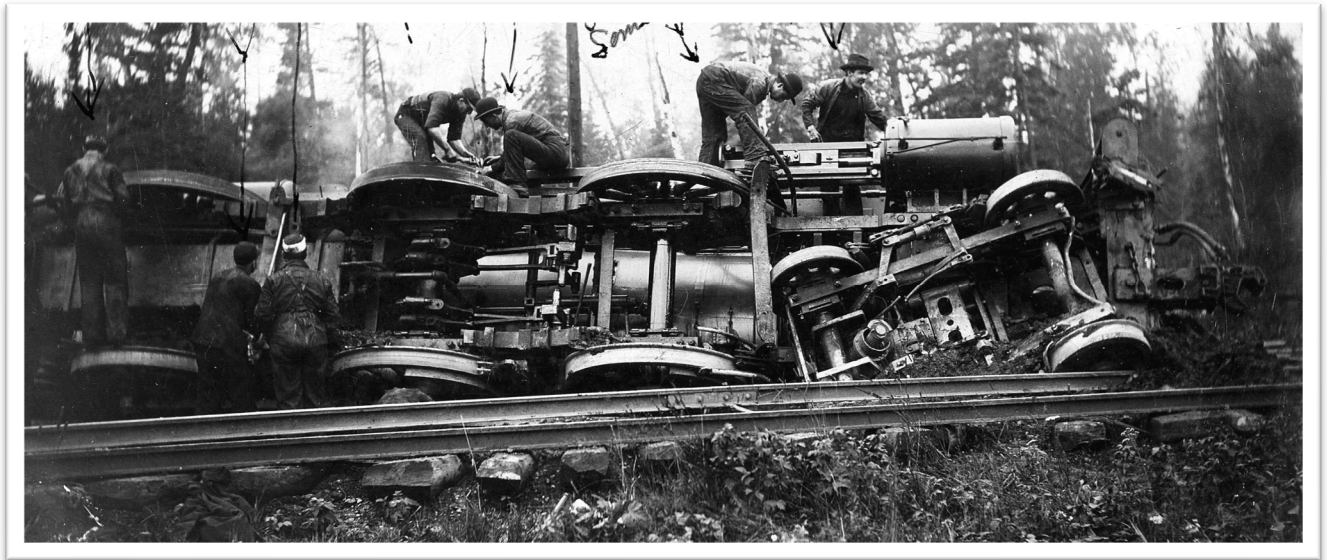
Pettibone received a laceration on his head and some bad bruises but was otherwise alright. Bruley however never made it out of the cab. The engine turned over on the north side of the tracks crushing the fireman's side of the cab.



Images above: The washout caused the 105 to roll over on its side.

The crew searched in vain for Bruley and some thought he might have gone to a nearby home for help. Head brakeman Clippert was not satisfied and wanted to keep looking. A short time later as escaping steam dissipated, they located Bruley's body in the cab. He had received a devastating head wound that likely killed him instantly. But the steam had scalded him horribly and undoubtedly would have killed him within seconds if the head injury had not. This was yet another stark reminder of why you sometimes need to join the exclusive bird man club.

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Images above: The wreck provided a unique opportunity to see the underside of a locomotive.

It took some time for the railroad officials to learn of the wreck and dispatch the wrecking crew to the location. The one refrigerator car in the train had been filled with beer kegs that were covered with ice to keep the beer cold. By the time the officials got to Larsmont all the beer kegs were missing.

In these early days of railroading, if an engine was involved in a wreck, the machinists from the Two Harbors shops were required to accompany the wrecking crew. My grandfather, Gust Elg, and his brother Adolph, who were both machinists, had to assist at the wreck site.

Engine #105 was new and had just arrived from the Schenectady Locomotive Works. It was one of six identical engines #101 - #106 that were purchased for mainline passenger and freight service. Clerestory windows (grouping of small windows) on top of their cabs matched the clerestory windows on the passenger coaches they pulled. Always kept shiny and clean, they were the best representatives of the elegant D&IRR passenger trains in the public's eye.

However, by 1913, these beautiful engines had been demoted to freight and branch line passenger service. This happened because they were too light to pull the heavy new steel passenger coaches that replaced the lighter old wooden coaches. Class M #105 (renumbered as #1105 after 1930) lasted in service until Depression-era cutbacks resulted in it being sold for scrap in 1933. Once the pride of the railroad's passenger service, it had fallen from grace and surrendered to the scrapper's torch.

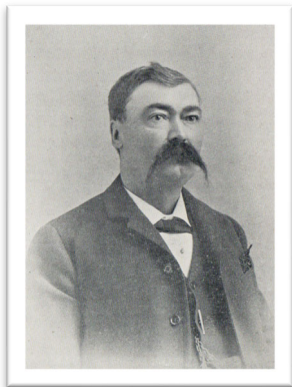
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More on those who were involved with the wreck:

Engineer Charles Watson (right) began his railroading career as a fireman on the old Terre Haute RR in 1865 and was promoted to engineer three years later. He came to the D&IRR as an engineer in 1889, served for 11 years, and retired in the fall of 1900 due to failing health. He was however, shortly afterward appointed as a special agent for the Minnesota Railroad & Warehouse Commission (MRR&WC).



Conductor John D. Finnegan (below left) came to this country with his parents at the age of six in 1855 from Ireland. At age 14 he ran away from home and tried to enlist in the Union Army but was turned down three times. He succeeded on his fourth try and was given a job as a captain's waiter. In 1863 he became a regular soldier as a private and was later promoted to corporal in 1864 at the battle of Prairie Grove, Arkansas. John was honorably discharged at Madison, Wisconsin, on April 28, 1865.

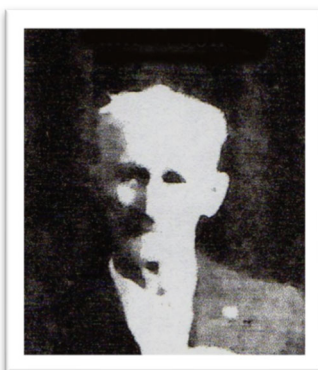


Upon his discharge, he began working for the Chicago Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad (Milwaukee Road) as a brakeman and later a conductor. He worked in this same capacity for two other railroads before coming to the D&IRR in 1889 at age 40 as a conductor.

William F. Pettibone (right) was the engineer on northbound #3. He was born in St. Louis, Missouri, on December 20, 1859, and came to the D&IRR as a fireman on October 28, 1883, at the age of 24. At this time the railroad was still under construction with only three engines. In May 1886, he was promoted to locomotive engineer.



Sam Woolen (below left) was the conductor on mixed #3 and a resident of Knife River. At the age of 20 in 1872 he enlisted in company G, 9th Infantry, at Evansville, Indiana. His company was immediately assigned to Fort D. A. Russel in Wyoming in the heart of the Sioux nation. He and his fellow soldiers marched on foot all the way from Fort Snelling in St. Paul, Minnesota, to Fort D. A. Russel. By June 1876 his company G had been moved to Fort Ellis in western Montana and became part of General Alfred Terry's three-pronged pincer movement against the hostile Sioux. The other two forces involved in the engagement were led by General George Cook and Lieutenant Colonel George Custer. Custer had formerly served as a Brevet General (National Guard general) during the Civil War.



The Sioux first defeated Cook on the Rosebud River on June 17th and then Custer on June 25th and 26th on the Little Bighorn River. On June 27th Sam arrived at the Little Bighorn battlefield with Terry and helped bury the 7th Cavalry dead including Custer.

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VANDELISM CONTINUES TO PLAGUE THE KRHCC SITE

A third act of vandalism since last fall took place at the KRHCC sometime on the evening of March 11 when a vehicle circled the perimeter of the site leaving deep ruts in the ground wet from snow melt. I am beginning to think this vandalism is purposeful and nasty when one thinks about how the community has supported the work of the center with hours of volunteer time and thousands of donated dollars.

Image right: Deep tire ruts left by vandals the night of March 11. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



To prevent a reoccurrence, I encourage all who live near the KRHCC site or travel Marina Road to be aware of vehicles driving recklessly outside the parking lot area and report to the Lake County Sheriff's Department or take a photo of the vehicle and send to info@krhcc.org, along with pertinent information.

It is the KRHCC's intent to raise enough money this spring to place motion-activated security lighting on the CRUSADER II shelter and between the depot and freight building to discourage unwanted nighttime activity.

We will need help this spring to rake out the ruts and plant new grass. Please email info@krhcc.org if you can help and we'll let you know the day and time that we'll attempt to repair the damage.

ANNUAL BOAT BREAK OUT WAS A MUCH-ANTICIPATED SPRING EVENT



Image left: Boats locked in pack ice outside the Duluth entry in June of 1917. Photo credit: University of Wisconsin Superior Jim Dan Hill library.

I was fortunate to grow up on London Road at 26th Ave. East where today London Road and I-35 merge. From this vantage point in the mid-1950s my family could see the attempts of ore boats trying to break out into the open lake from their winter berths in the Duluth harbor.

My mother had many minutes of Super 8 film recording this annual event starting about the end of March. The Coast Guard buoy tender/icebreaker WOODRUSH would do a commendable job in

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making a path through the ice, but then a northeast wind would blow up and rearrange the path and add some huge windrows.

Nevertheless, boat captains accepted the challenge, each one seemingly having a sense of where a viable path to open water might present itself. Successful captains could then claim bragging rights when they reached the Soo.

I remember half a dozen or so boats stranded in front of our house when one captain chose a path very close to shore. I had never seen an ore boat so close to shore and far from the normal shipping lane. I think he made it out. Eventually the Coast Guard would send its “Mighty Mac” up from Lake Michigan and break everyone out. But for a few days it was fun to watch the boats wrestle with the ice. Boats in the ‘50s were much smaller and with less horsepower from those today and so found it difficult to break the grip of Lake Superior ice.

Image left: The Coast Guard icebreaker MACKINAW at 290' feet with beam of 74' was up to tackling Lake Superior's ice. With its combined engines delivering 10,000 HP, it could break ice up to 42." I remember first seeing it in Duluth on an early spring day in the late 1940s. A very impressive ship. Launched in 1944 to extend the Great Lakes shipping season, it was decommissioned in 2006 and now is a museum boat in Mackinaw City, Michigan. Photo credit: Public Domain.



AND... GREAT! LAKES CANDY KITCHEN OPENS APRIL 17!

ORDER A MEMORIAL/HONORARIUM TREE NOW FOR MEMORIAL DAY

As a reminder, the KRHCC began a program last year where people can memorialize or honor a loved one with an oak or sugar maple tree planted at the KRHCC. Trees will be planted along our north border with the Knife River Campground and along Marina Road.

Four trees were planted late last summer along the north border. We envision up to 13 trees will be planted during the 2025 growing season. Anderson's Greenhouse in Two Harbors is handling the whole program: providing the trees, planting, wrapping and staking the trees, and insuring their health for three months. Cost is \$600 per tree. To reserve a tree please email me at: vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com Trees reserved to April 1.

Individual Honored (H) or Memorialized (M)	Tree Species	Donated by
Todd Lindahl (H)	Oak	Deb & Jim Alert, Randy Ellestad, Mary & Paul A. von Goertz

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Paul A. von Goertz (H)	Sugar Maple	Paul R. & Missy von Goertz, Sonja & Ryan Gab, Christian & Laura von Goertz
Ken & Evelyn Ojard (M)	TBD	Dennis & Georgia Ojard, Carol and Stephen Carlson, Richard & Nancy Ojard
David Olin (M)	Sugar Maple	Susan Olin, Julie Olin-Ammentorp, & Sara Olin Codrea
James G. Ingle (M)	Sugar Maple	Patricia Ingle Meyer, Howard Ingle & Jamie Ingle Keelin
Steve & Kay Howe (M)	Sugar maple	Katie & Todd Monger

MARCH DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations:

- John and Kathleen Baumgarten to general fund in honor of Paul von Goertz
- Warren and Julie Olin-Ammentorp to general fund in memory of David Olin

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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