

KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



& CULTURAL CENTER

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By Paul von Goertz

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Surprising Discoveries of where we live - and who before us.

By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian and Archeologist

With edits and comments by Paul von Goertz

Please note: After living in Knife River (KR) since 1972, I am surprised and a bit embarrassed about how little I knew about the history of the land to just east and west of where Mary and I live.

We live on the lake at what could be the foot of Granite Point. Grant Point forms the west entry to the KR marina. To the east of us just about 200 yards was an Indigenous village that was inhabited to the early 1800s. To the west about another 200 yards was the east border of Town of Buchanan, once described as "the commercial hub of Lake Superior's bustling North Shore."

*For all my years here, I blew off the town of Buchanan as a long-lost neighboring community to Knife River with its only relevance the seat of the U. S. Land Office for the Northeastern District of Minnesota. I had this notion because of the historical marker placed at the Scenic 61 wayside by the State of Minnesota about a half mile west of the "S" turn railroad underpass. **This marker does not mark the site of Buchanan. Buchanan was actually further east in the vicinity of Hanson Road, about across from Kendall's smokehouse. Buchanan was early Knife River!***

My longtime friend, Bruce Von Riedel, who was a co- owner of Dodge's Log Lodges, near the state's historical marker, used to boast he was mayor of Buchanan when now I know he didn't even live in Buchanan! Ha!

Thanks to Todd Lindahl, I now know that Mary and I are surrounded by some of Knife River's most interesting history. I hope you enjoy Todd's research as much as I did in uncovering some of KR's former lives.

Native Village of Mookomaani-ziibi

According to the Captain Charles Anderson, when he settled at Knife River in 1869, there was still an Indigenous village on Granite Point, which forms the west entry into the KR harbor. He became friends with an Indigenous elder who told him he was born on the point about 100 years earlier. This meant that the village site had been in use since about 1769.

Granite Point may have been occupied in prehistoric times, though this remains unproven. It is common in archaeology that historic sites are often found on top of prehistoric ones.



Image left: An Ojibwe village on the banks of the St. Louis River like what may have been on Granite Point. Photo credit: Paul B. Gaylord - Courtesy University of Minnesota Duluth Archives, NE Minnesota Historical Collection.

People were sometimes attracted to certain locations in different time periods because of repeated advantages. The old Indigenous village site may have been on Granite point because of prehistoric copper mining up the Knife River and

because Granite Point also sheltered the village from the wind.

One important asset was the sand beach that was between Granite Point and the mouth of the Knife River. Remember, at this time there was no natural harbor. The beach was a good place to land a canoe as there were no dangerous rocks with which to contend. The sand carried by the river was deposited westward to what is now the Agate Beach. Currents and constant depositing of sand was probably disrupted for a while after the Alger-Smith pulpwood and coal dock was built, since it partially blocked the current like a breakwater.

Another important asset for prehistoric people was fishing in the river. Granite Point is centrally located near the river's first falls. Fish would have congregated in the pool just below the falls making it and the narrow opening at the mouth a good place to spear or net fish. Sturgeons were known to use the river until recent times along with other fish. The village site, along with most in northeastern Minnesota was probably used seasonally and not on a yearly permanent basis.

The American Fur Company had commercial fish collection stations spaced all along the north shore and at Isle Royale starting in 1834. One of these was at Knife River and may have been influenced by the fish in the river and the Native American village on Granite Point. The fur company provided a cooper for making barrels and crates, a blacksmith, a carpenter for building and repairing skiffs, traders, and more than likely some laborers at each station.



Image right: American Fur Company flag. Photo credit: Internet public domain

Indigenous People did all the fishing and were provided with the boats and equipment by the fur company. After the initial cost of the equipment was deducted, the Indigenous People could trade using the fish they caught. Within a couple of years, the American Fur Company was making more money on commercial fishing than furs. Undoubtedly some of this type of trading would also have gone on at these stations at the same time. The same sand beach may have been used during this early American Fur Company commercial fishing period as it had in prehistoric times.

The fish would be taken out to an anchored fur company schooner by skiff and delivered to Fond du Lac, MN/WI for processing. From there the fish were transported to the lower lakes and population centers for sale.

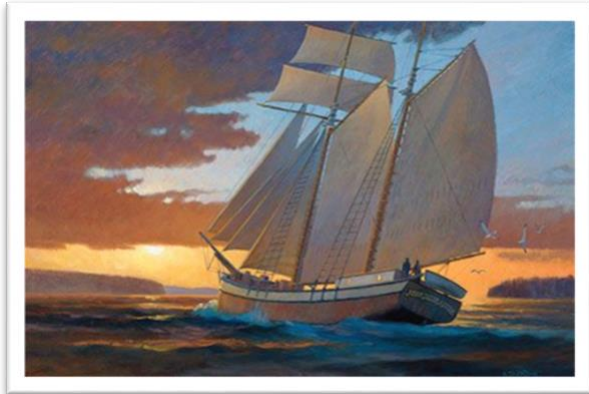


Image left: American Fur Company schooner. They were typically not built for speed but for cargo capacity. They were about 43' long. Painting by Howard Sivertson used with permission of Sivertson Galleries in Grand Marais and Duluth.

In 2019 a broken mast axe was dug up at the Knife River depot restoration site when a trench was being dug for a power line. The axe was identified as being no newer than 1840, which is very close to the 1837 date of the Knife River fish collection station. It was blacksmith-made, perhaps right at Knife River, but of crude quality. A hand-wrought iron nail was also dug up next to the axe suggesting that a building of some sort may have existed here at the time.

Image right: Mast axe found about a foot underground at depot restoration site. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

A mast axe is a nautical tool used on wooden sailing ships that is similar to a small broad axe. It would have been the type of tool used by the carpenter to build boats for fishing. Because of the poor workmanship, the tool snapped off between the poll and blade where a forge weld had been made. These old iron tools were often broken in winter weather because they got brittle in the cold.



Through the mists of time, knowledge of the Granite Point Indigenous village has faded from memory.

Town of Buchanan: "Once the commercial hub of Lake Superior's bustling North Shore".

In 1856 the town of Buchanan was established on the west end of Granite Point, named after then President James Buchanan, Jr. The U. S. Land Office was built there shortly after the Treaty of LaPointe in 1854, which opened the north shore to settlement.

The site was chosen because Granite Point afforded some protection from northeast winds. This allowed a dock to be built about a block west of the foot of Granite Point where the water becomes shallower, but deep enough for steamboats to deliver supplies and take on cargo.

There were lofty expectations that extensive copper mining would develop, especially in the area surrounding French River and Knife River. This activity would attract settlers, miners, and others who wanted to make claims on the land now made available. Buchanan was situated to be more convenient, so people did not have to travel as far west as Duluth to file their claims.

Buchanan and what would become Knife River were ground zero for the expected population surge that was believed to be coming primarily due to the copper explorations. At this same time the government surveyors were in the field establishing township and section lines starting at Lake Superior and later working inland.

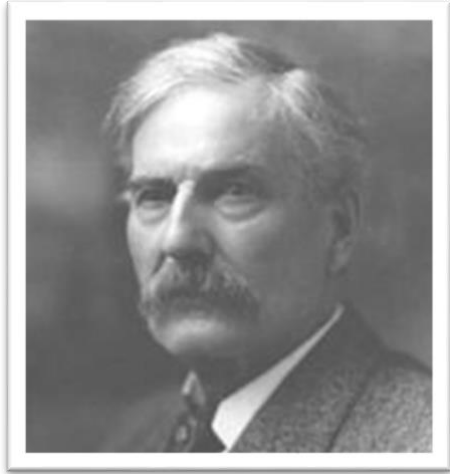
To get ahead of the game, surveyors were instructed to plat several sites where communities might be established. This was done so they would not have to return to these places from far in the field to do the plats at an inconvenient time. If people were to build homes in communities that were not platted, it would result in numerous lawsuits when it was found that one's house was built on someone else's land. The platting was an attempt to prevent the chaos that would have happened. Oddly, it was found that the Land Office itself was actually on the wrong lot, which was owned by a private party due to an error!

Buchanan faded away partially because of the financial panic of 1857 and the failed anticipated copper mining boom. Settlers left the north shore in droves never to return. Money became worthless and the region reverted to a trade and barter system for a while. During and after the Civil War there was an increase in copper exploration, but the results were disappointing. In 1929 the stock market crash ended the last of the copper mine ventures in Knife River. It had recovered small amounts of copper, silver, and gold from scattered tiny deposits. A mine shaft was left open since the intent was to renew mining once the depression was over, but it persisted too long, and the interest faded away over time.

Today the shaft, which is over 300 feet-deep, remains open. It had three levels with drifts (horizontal tunnels) running up to 300 feet back from the shaft. It is unknown how many "stopes" (open mined spaces) are located along these drifts.

Leonidas Merritt describes the Town of Buchanan

Leonidas Merritt, commemorated as "One of the Seven Iron Men of Minnesota," wrote a description of the Buchanan townsite in 1914. It was recorded in the story "Land Office Buchanan, Emporium of the North Shore" by Glenn N. Sandvik written in 1983 and appearing in MINNESOTA HISTORY magazine.



Merritt arrived in Superior as a child in 1856 and spent most of his life exploring and exploiting the region's wilderness. From memories of his youth, the iron man reconstructed the forest community. He wrote: "Not many may know that in 1856 and 1857, on the North Shore of Lake Superior, just this side of Knife Island, was located a pretty little city called Buchanan, at that time the emporium* of the North Shore, with a pretentious hotel, kept by one George Stull, the United States Land Office, steamboat docks, several saloons, boarding houses, etc."

Photo left: Leonidas Merritt. Photo credit: Public domain

Merritt goes on to say "The town was abandoned soon after Minnesota was admitted to the Union. The several homes and business mentioned stood for many years tenantless and intact, until finally destroyed by forest fire."

Sandvik wrote in his story that "Merritt recalled the true air of Land Office Buchanan, now totally gone but once the commercial hub of Lake Superior's bustling North Shore."

*Definition of "Emporium:" A place of trade; a marketplace; a mart; esp., a city or town with extensive commerce; the commercial center of a country. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 5th Edition

Granite Point becomes part of Town of Millie.

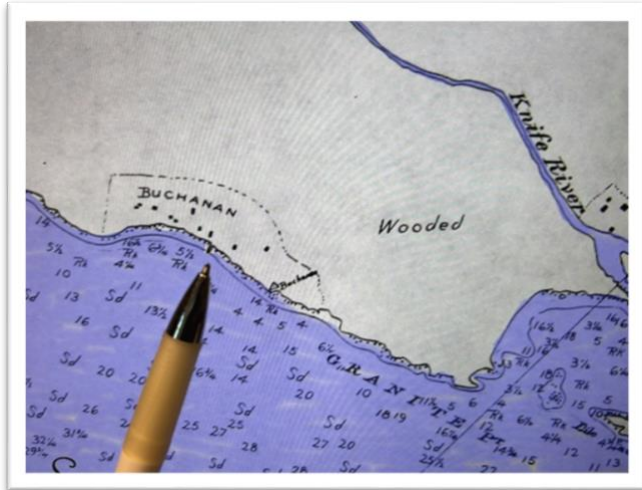
From 1898 to 1903 the community of Knife River was called "Millie." The origin of the name is not known but may have had something to do with the arrival of the Duluth & Iron Range Ry and its water tank that was built in 1886. The name was changed to "Knife River" in 1903 because the postal service claimed there was another community named "Millie" in Minnesota and that two "Millies" would create confusion.

The Duluth & Northern Minnesota logging railroad of the Alger-Smith Lumber Company made Millie their terminus in 1898, and the town grew quickly after that point.

For chronological reference, commercial fishing has been going on at the Knife River site almost continually from 1837 to today.

More on the dock at Buchanan.

We now know the town of Buchanan was not at the site of the Scenic 61 historical marker, but more across from Kendall's Smokehouse as shown on the map.



This site was chosen because the water is shallower here and so a dock could be built to extend out into the lake to accommodate a ship of considerable length. One must remember in 1856 the only access to the North Shore was by water, so any location that offered any hope for land access was exploited.

Mary and I live near the far east border of what the map shows as the Town of Buchanan. I have boated past what was Buchanan more than a hundred times and often close to shore to wave to neighbors.

The water is surprisingly shallow, maybe only 15-20 feet deep 200 feet from shore, apparently enough depth to accommodate a 190' steamer's draft as we will soon discover. On the map, the dock is about in the middle of the town limits of Buchanan.

From Todd's research, we know of at least two steamers that tied to the Buchanan dock, which undoubtedly was comprised of a series of rock-filled cribs. One was the Str. *SENECA*, built in 1853, 94 feet long with a single shaft propeller. The *SENECA* was owned by T. G. Barnes at the time. It was brought up from the lower lakes specifically to run between the ports of Superior, Wisconsin, Portland, Minnesota (Duluth), and Buchanan at Knife River. It was used in this service from 1857 to 1859 when it was sent back to the lower lakes. The *SENECA* exploded in 1864 but was raised and rebuilt in 1871. It remained in service for several years.

The second was the propeller-driven CITY OF SUPERIOR. It was launched July 18, 1857, and owned by Hanna, Garretson Company out of Cleveland, Ohio. It was 190 feet in length, which implies the dock at Buchanan would have had to extend as much as 250 feet into the lake. And it was fast, making about 15 mph.

The boat was destroyed on the rocks outside Copper Harbor, MI, while trying to enter the harbor during a snowstorm on November 10, 1857. Its crew was saved, but the boat was a big financial loss with only \$32,000 in insurance on a value of \$50,000. During its short life on the lakes, the boat made at least five trips between Cleveland and Superior with stops at Buchanan. It was on its sixth trip when disaster occurred.

The dock at Buchanan, like almost all crib docks that were not capped with concrete, finally succumbed to the powers of Lake Superior and exists today only as a memory. I should note

that the Kendall family also had a dock for their power boats in the vicinity of the Buchanan dock. That too, in time, was carried away by Mother Superior.

Story revelations (take-aways):

- There was an Indigenous village on Granite Point from the late 1700s into the 1800s.
- Town of Buchanan was about a third of a mile closer to Knife River than where the Town of Buchanan roadside historical marker is located on Scenic 61.
- Buchanan may have had “several steamboat docks” including one up 250 feet in length.
- Knife River was originally called “Millie” for reasons not known.

For first time in nearly 100 years Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON will have a shelter over it.

With repressed outward jubilation, supporters of Save Our Ship (SOS) watched as a crew from Gerald F. David Restoration Timber Framing Company out of Grand Rapids, MN, began fitting the timbers together that will create the new post and beam shelter for Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON.

All the white pine timbers were precut and mortised to fit perfectly. So fun to watch true professionals at work! When the red metal roofing is complete, it will mark the first time in nearly 100 years the ship will be protected from rain, snow, ice and sun.

Much credit goes to SOS for never losing sight of their goal to preserve and display the ship for the enjoyment and education of the public. SOS was organized in 1984 for just this purpose.

The shelter not only preserves a piece of maritime history but also anchors Knife River’s role in celebrating Nordic heritage and artisanship. An open house of the KRHCC site is planned this fall and will showcase the completion of shelters for both CRUSADER II and LEIF ERIKSON. Watch for further information.

Photo right: All timbers were cut, mortised and numbered to fit perfectly together, then fastened with hardwood pins.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

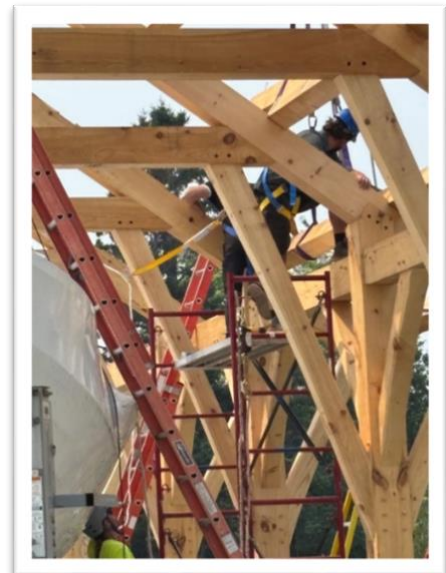




Photo credits: Paul von Goertz

Images left: Trusses were assembled on the ground, then lifted into place with a crane. Image right: The completed framework.

THE GREAT KNIFE RIVER “WHODUNIT”

Sometime in the mid-1980s I believe, a 25’-28’ Chris Craft (?) cabin-cruiser (photo left) went missing one summer night from the Knife River Marina. One boat owner, who was awake in his bunk at the time, heard the boat pass his boat about 2-3 AM, sounding like it was heading out of the harbor.



Curious as to why someone would choose to go boating at such a time, he looked to see who it might be, only to see a dark shadow moving through the water - and with no running lights.

Strangely, over the next few days no one seemed to know anything about what had taken place, other than the boat was gone and later found washed up a mile or two down the shore, thanks to a northeast wind.

As far as I can recall, there was not a formal investigation, or at least a serious one, so there apparently was not an investigative report that was made public, at least to my knowledge.

As you may be able tell from the photo, the boat is pretty well beat up, with most of its windshield and cockpit canopy missing. That would not be expected if it was just blown ashore. And how did the operator get off the boat? A second party? Walk to shore once the boat was beached? Was this just a simple theft, joy ride and abandonment? As I recall, the boat owner, an avid fisher, had no explanation, public comment, or insight into what may have happened. The boat was not replaced. So, whodunit?

Swimmer's itch on KR beaches? Yes!

It was early August; the lake was finally warming so we asked our three Two Harbors grandchildren to enjoy a swim off our beach. The day was sunny and warm, and the kids spent the better part of the afternoon enjoying the warm surface water.

No sooner had they left the water than they complained of an itch. Suspecting the possibility of "swimmer's itch" we tossed them in the shower with a bar of Dove soap. Too late, within 24 hours a red rash appeared on their skin followed by more itching. The itch was treated with hydrocortisone and Calamine lotion and lasted about three days, according to our daughter-in-law.

We alerted our neighbors on Granite Point to the itch and they, too, had a similar experience.

It was a bit disheartening to know our usually cold and clear lake could harbor a swimmer's itch parasite, but I blame it on the recent weather that warmed the waters off Park Point and blown to our shore by southerly winds. From what I understand, there was a beach advisory for swimmer's itch for Park Point and Two Harbors, but excluded KR, which has the most swimmable beach between Park Point and Two Harbors.

Here's more info on "Swimmer's Itch" from the internet:

Swimmer's itch, also known as cercarial dermatitis is an itchy rash caused by a parasite that infects birds and snails. The parasite releases larvae into the water, and when they burrow into human skin, they cause an allergic reaction, resulting in a rash. Symptoms include tingling, itching, and small reddish pimples or blisters. While it can be uncomfortable, swimmer's itch is not contagious and usually clears up on its own within a week.

Swimmer's itch is more common in freshwater lakes and ponds but can occur in saltwater areas like ocean bays. It is often associated with shallow warm water. It is more common during the summer months, when temperatures are warmer and more people are swimming.

Painters needed!

We decided to face the underside of the eaves of the CRUSADER II shelter and add decorative brackets under them as well. A very nice embellishment to the shelter with thanks to Larry Ronning for the suggestion and making the brackets. Thanks, too, to Dave Grong, Brad Ronning and Jim Allert who helped face the eaves and mount the brackets.

All these embellishments require us to paint the eaves and stain the brackets and roof posts a light gray. Can you help? Some work can be done from the ground and a stepladder, but also from a ladder. Painting days are getting shorter so we can use help now. If you can help at any level, please email: vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com Thanks much!

Larsmont Community Interest Program

Gabe Sweet, geologist, will speak about the geology of our area. Bring a rock to see if you can stump Gabe on what it is made of and where it comes from. It is free to the public. Snacks and beverages will be provided.

04 September 2025, Thursday from 6:30pm to 08:00pm. Little Red School House at Larsmont.

AUGUST DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS.

Donations

- Gary Stenson to general fund.
- Mike Ojard - Pentwater Machinery net lifter for installation in CRUSADER II.
- Joanne Lind - Combination bow running light from 26' fish tug VEGA. (Note: the engine mounted in CRUSADER II once powered VEGA).
- Rich Ojard - Net lifter stern roller.
- Doug Hill - Vintage telephone circa early 1900s

Memorial

- Elsa and Jeff Keeler donation to cover cost of KRHCC Legacy Tree pedestal map of tree locations, sponsors and those honored or memorialized. Donated in memory of Albert Nisswandt.

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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