

KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



& CULTURAL CENTER

September 2025

By Paul von Goertz

KRHCC BOARD MEMBER

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Posting of sign signals completion of KRHCC restorations.

An epic moment in the history of the KRHCC took place on August 27th when a sign was hung announcing, in effect, that the historical and educational center was “Open for Business”.



While the depot is usually open only for special occasions or by advance notice, the Center offers self-guided tours through nine interpretive displays and viewing of the interior of CRUSADER II.

The sign (photo left) was created by Duluth Sign with artwork reflecting Norwegian heritage provided by the KRHCC and installed by Donald Holm Construction of Duluth. Both did a very professional job!

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

The goals of the KRHCC since its founding in 2017 was to restore Knife River's (KR) most prominent icons, the train depot that arrived by flatcar from Duluth in 1900 and the fish tug CRUSADER II, launched in Knife River in 1938 and christened by Crown Prince Olav of Norway the same year.

Thanks to passionate volunteers who donated hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars, along with grants from several organizations, the restoration goals have been met. Some landscaping and painting of the interior of CRUSADER II remain to be done, but our woodworking tools can be put away!

The next chapter in the KRHCC's story-book existence will be to develop educational programming and encouraging community involvement in activities all age groups can enjoy. Any event supported by the Knife River Rec Council would be welcome!

Restoring CRUSADER II's interior.

One of the KRHCC projects this summer was researching and rebuilding CRUSADER II's interior. It was gutted and stripped by a previous owner who had intended to convert the 35' fish tug to a cruising boat capable of navigating the Mississippi to New Orleans. It was an ambitious undertaking and, perhaps to no surprise, it never happened.

What did happen was the whole layout of the interior was lost along with irreplaceable components that would have been helpful in telling the story of KR's commercial fishing heritage.

The good news is that with the help of photos from Randy Ellestad's extensive collection of Knife River photos, and the recall of Knife River natives' Mike Ojard, Rich Ojard, Larry Ronning, Bob Entzion (who is the grandson of Carl Erickson, the original owner of CRUSADER II) as well as Randy, a reasonable re-creation of the interior is taking place. It required all the trade skills possessed by Doug Hill, the nephew of Hjelmer Hill, who along with his brother, Reuben, built CRUSADER II in 1938-39.

We are fortunate the original coal stove, hand-operated bilge pump, gaff hook and tiller have been found. Many thanks to Duane Madison who totally disassembled and restored the bilge pump.

A huge find was a net lifter that is probably a very close match to the original. It was found intact in a pile of scrap iron at the back of Bill and Dorothy Ojard's home in Knife River by Mike Ojard, their nephew and a good friend of mine.

The story is a bit involved, but worth retelling. In 2001, I bought a 27' tired wood lobster boat built in East Booth, Maine, in 1947, to restore and use for fishing on Lake Superior. I know there are no lobsters in our Lake, but I figured a lobster boat would make a good Lake Superior fishing boat with its seaworthy design and high bow. The engine was junk and so I looked for a period-correct engine.

Mechanical wizard Mike said he thought "Uncle Bill" had a four-cylinder Gray Marine that might be in a pile of scrap behind what was his house, along with pieces and parts of drill rigs used in his well drilling business. The homeowner at this time was Delores Jackson, who was agreeable to Mike poking around in the scrap pile, but with the caveat that if he found the engine he would have to remove all the scrap along with the engine! A tough negotiator!

Mike did find the engine, and a net lifter with its accompanying net roller! Mike recalls the lifter and roller were out of the fish tug PETER A. which had been owned by Uncle Bill. Mike could not remember who built the PETER A., but thought the builder was not "local". He recalls Uncle Bill removing the cabin from the boat and surmises he probably ended up burning it.

Mike rebuilt the Gray Marine and it served as power for my lobster boat very well. He placed the net lifter in a corner of his yard where weeds began to claim it. When the KRHCC began looking for a replacement net lifter, Mike was happy to give us the one he salvaged.

So after about 70+ years of exposure to the elements, the net lifter and roller were restored and placed in a new home where it will be greatly appreciated in telling the history of KR's commercial fishing legacy.

Photo right: The interior of CRUSADER II from the stern showing the net lifter and roller, and the picking table with net box. The coal stove is at left. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz.



A word about the net lifter:

Net lifters were an important piece of machinery aboard a fish tug. A tug could set hundreds of feet of net at various depths depending upon the fish species, all of which would need to be retrieved to “pick” fish. The lifter would gather the net through a forward cabin door and, in the case of CRUSADER II, send the “picked” net out the stern to be reset. An efficient operation! Drive for the net lifter was either by a power take off (PTO) from the engine or a separate gas engine.

The lifter uses a “pinching mechanism” to engage a line attached to the length of the net float line (top line) to bring the net into the boat and delivers its contents to the “picking table” as it rotates. Once on the table fish are “picked” free of the net. The net then returns to the water from a roller at the stern of the tug.

The lifter was made by the Pentwater Machinery Company of Pentwater, Michigan. It was a Model No. 41965P, size B3S. According to an internet search, the company was founded sometime before 1900. The small company made specialized woodworking machinery in their earlier years. In 1914 the company reorganized to focus on making net lifters for commercial fishing boats, but at least some woodworking machinery remained in their line. By 1941 the company was reduced to just a couple of employees.

War business led to a revival and reorganization of the company, but by this time the woodworking machinery business seems to have been phased out.



Following the war, the company made various products, including an outdoor grill and machinery for making concrete blocks. Late in 1953 the business relocated to Fort Wayne, Indiana, but as far as it is known, the company did not survive much longer.

An interpretive display that will feature a panorama image of CRUSADER's interior is in process and may be installed by Julebyen 2025, December 6 & 7. The display will be mounted by the open cabin door that allows visitors to see the tug's interior through a plexiglass panel.

Photo left: Doug Hill (left) and Larry Ronning (right) make the final net lifter mounting adjustments.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

Bringing light to the “dark hole.”

Mary and I live just west of the marina along the lake and for almost 50 years we would drive along Marina Road at night and see a dark patch of land east of the road above the railroad tracks with a depot and freight building about to collapse and probably haunted as well. No more!

Since 2019 the KRHCC has brought light to the “dark hole” almost every year starting with lighting the community flag and Veteran’s memorial, placing a green light in our replacement order board pole, and now lighting CRUSADER II with both interior lights and what would be regulation running lights were the tug in the water running at night. All lights are on timers to go on at dusk and off at sunrise.

The lights inside the fish tug throw enough light that the KRHCC feels there no need for overhead lights. Many thanks to Doug Hill for finding the red and green galvanized running lights on the internet and Mike Ojard for donating the bow white light. The stern white light on the pilot house is original. Photo right: CRUSADER II with all four running lights turned on. If the tug was running on the lake the lights would tell you the tug was heading directly towards you. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



Photo left: From this vantage point, CRUSADER II’s interior lights would lead one to suspect its crew is inside actively dressing out fish after a long day on the lake. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

More thanks to Doug for converting all the lights to 110 power and wiring them. I look forward to a fresh snowfall during the holiday season with the red and green running lights reflecting on the snow!

Additional lighting to be added yet this building season are motion-sensitive floods at both ends of the CRUSADER II shelter, and between the depot and freight house. Out of respect for our neighbors who may enjoy the night skies, motion-sensitive flood lights on a timer have been chosen over all-night flood lights.

The Viking boat team are working on a lighting plan for the LEIF ERIKSON shelter that will also be implemented this building season.

KRHCC MULLS LANDSCAPING PLAN

With the completion of the Viking ship and CRUSADER II shelters, and therefore the end of heavy equipment passing over the KRHCC site, the KRHCC has been working with our SOS ("Save Our Ship") friends in developing a detailed landscaping plan.

We've been following a general concept that's been pretty much determined by the placement of the boat shelters, parking lot, the drainage swale, roadway to the depot to accommodate handicapped visitors, and an effort to maximize public green space.

Considerations for a final working plan include:

- How to define the parking area so cars do not spill over into the green space
- Using vegetation to protect our Legacy Trees
- Where and how to create a pathway from the parking lot to the walkway between the depot and ramp to the CRUSADER II shelter.

There are a lot of options available to define use of space. These include movable concrete curbs, landscape rocks, split-rail fencing, replicated dolphins (groupings of pilings used to distance boats from dock faces), and shrubs to name a few.

Most recently a rather novel option became available to help define space and that is six steamboat dock bollards (photo right) that will be salvaged from the Johnson slip near the west entry into the Knife River Harbor. It is believed the bollards once moored steamboats at the coal dock in Two Harbors. The slip will be removed and replaced by a boat launch relocated from its current location. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



The KRHCC made a request of the MN DNR, owner of the marina, that the bollards be transferred to the KRHCC. The request has been approved and although funding to relocate the current launch site is in place, no date has been established when this will occur. Many thanks to Eric Thomas, contract Marina Manager, for providing DNR contact information. Eric has been a very good friend of the KRHCC since CRUSADER II arrived in Knife River in late 2016.

Because the KRHCC is a community non-profit managed by a local board of directors, we invite people to become involved with developing the landscape plan and actively help to implement and maintain it. The KRHCC will cover reasonable costs associated with any plantings. To get involved email: vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com

The landscape plan will be finalized over the winter months and implemented spring of 2026 in time for the 2027 gala celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON's arrival in Duluth. Landscaping is yet not funded in the 2026 KRHCC budget. If you can help with a donation or a sponsorship of a landscape component, contact vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com Donations to the KRHCC are totally tax deductible.

Corn sale report

By Lee Bujold

2021: \$1,981
2022: \$1,237
2023: \$1,295
2024: \$1,772
2025: \$1,893

5 Year Total: \$8,178!

"We are happy to report that the 2025 annual KRHCC fundraiser was a great success and it's all thanks to YOU - our amazing community. Your enthusiasm for purchasing corn, flexible attitudes during pickup and unwavering support year after year makes this event a joy of which to be a part!

"From the camaraderie during ordering/pickup to the pride of supporting the depot and CRUSADER II restoration projects, every moment is full of laughter, teamwork and the fun of "just corn"! Thanks to the "Betzler Baggers" (Steve & Cindy) this year! Together we've proven once again that our sweet community of Knife River knows how to come together for a great cause.

"This year, we logged four trips to Wisconsin and 800 miles, delivering a whopping 90 dozen ears of corn (that's 1,080 ears of corn if you're keeping track!) for the Knife River Rec Center picnic and the KRHCC corn fundraiser. A testament to the fact that "Bob the Corn Man" indeed grows the best sweet corn ever!



"Look at what we can do together...one kernel at a time! What say we do it again next year!"



"With gratitude and a little corn silk in our hair,"

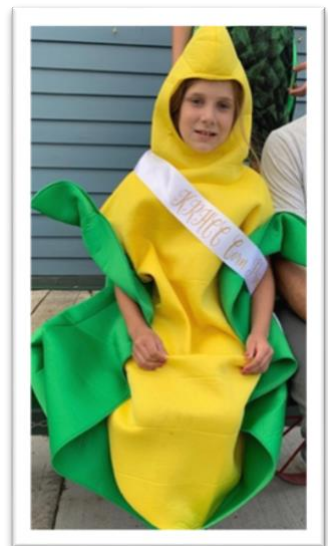
Lee & Jim Bujold (& our two Corn Dogs)

Editor's note:

The only downside to this "a-maze-ing" fund-raiser is having to put up with Lee's "corny" puns. Many, many, thanks to the Bujolds who conceived the idea of a sweet corn fund-raiser, handling all aspects of getting the corn during an unpredictable growing season, and distributing it. Thanks, too, to those who bought corn in support of the KRHCC!

Photo right: Corn Queen Elin von Goertz from a previous corn sale. Both our Two Harbors grand daughters have been selected as Corn Queens, but now as older they do not think wearing a corn cob costume is "cool". Any volunteers for Corn Queen 2026?

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



NSSR releases KH Holiday Train Plans.



The North Shore Scenic Railroad (NSSR) has released its plans for Knife River holiday trains and it's all good!

"Christmas Tree Train" (ties to the KRHCC "Trees. Trains. Traditions." event)

This event will expand over three-fold as the NSSR will increase ridership from the previous max of 60 riders to 200!

As hoped for, over the past four years since its inception, this event has become a family holiday tradition. Families take the train to a tree-lot at the KRHCC to select a tree, wreath or garland, have the tree wrapped, and placed on a flatcar for the return to the Duluth Depot. From there the tree can be loaded directly to car or truck.

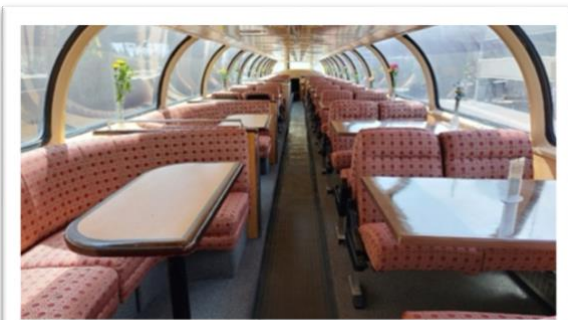
The KRHCC'S "Trees. Trains. Traditions." event expands the "Christmas Tree Train" to include holiday music, food, and décor. By agreement with the NSSR, the tree vendor and food service must be from Lake County. Trees, wreaths and garland are provided by the Hanal family of Two Harbors; food service by Larsmont Trading Post.

To reserve tickets on the "Christmas Tree Train," go to duluthtrains.com Act soon as of mid-September 30 tickets had already been sold.

Photo right: Families select their Christmas Tree from a tree lot at the KRHCC. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



"Julebyen Express"



This train brings Julebyen festivalgoers from Duluth to Knife River both days of Julebyen, Saturday, December 6 and Sunday the 7th. This year the NSSR will offer two-tier pricing – standard car seating and "first class" dome car. Tickets available will be capped depending upon how many train cars the NSSR may have available. For tickets and schedule info go to <https://duluthtrains.com/event/julebyen/>

Photo above left: Dome cars give riders a panoramic view of surroundings in "first class" comfort. Photo credit: North Shore Scenic Railroad.

“Troll Trains” to Troll Canyon

These very popular trains will run twice a day each day of Julebyen weekend to bring riders into the woods of Knife River in search of trolls. In year’s past more than 1,000 passengers ride the Troll Trains each Julebyen weekend. Tickets are sold at the Knife River depot on a first-come basis. Festivalgoers are encouraged to purchase tickets early in the day. Train schedules and prices will be posted at Julebyen.org after November 15 and each day of Julebyen at the Knife River depot. Seats cannot be reserved.

All holiday trains are sponsored in part by Lovin’ Lake County, Lake County’s tourism marketing arm.

Photo right: Families line up to board a Troll Train to see trolls reported to be at Troll Canyon. Each train can take up to 300 riders. Trains fill up fast. Get tickets early in the day. Photo credit: Marilyn Magnuson, the “Viking Lady”.



Doug Hill honored for volunteerism at KR “Community Night Out.”

Doug Hill was recognized for his volunteerism at the annual Knife River “Community Night Out Dinner” at the rec building August 26. The dinner also recognizes all those who volunteer for KR’s non-profits.



This year Doug Hill was singled out for the better part of two summers he spent helping restore CRUSADER II, the KR fish tug now a featured attraction at the Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center.

Photo left: The cake that served almost 100 people!
Photo: Paul von Goertz

Doug camped on site in a fifth wheel provided by his cousin, John Hill, and worked long hours seven days a week during the summers of 2023 and 2025.

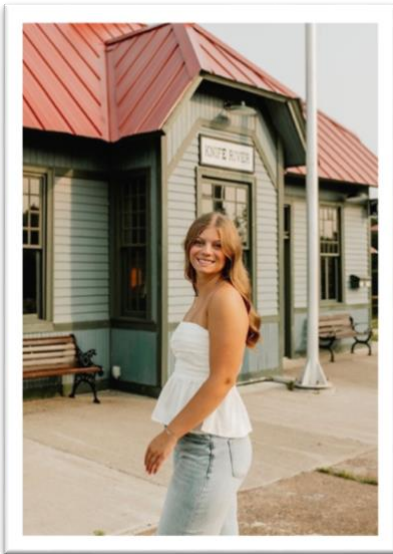
Doug is related to the Hill family of boat builders in Larsmont and said he wanted to honor his family by helping bring back CRUSADER II to original condition. The boat was built in 1938 for Carl Erickson of Knife River by Doug’s great uncle Rueben, grandfather Helmer, and great grandfather Charles Hill.

In accepting his recognition, Doug (photo right) thanked all the people of Knife River and picnic-goers for welcoming him into the community, for dinner and event invitations, and opportunities to fish on Lake Superior. All the friends he made look forward to seeing him at future Hill family reunions!

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



KR Depot as venue for grad pix.



Our oldest granddaughter, SoLace Kristen Gab (photo left), lives with her family in Rapid City, SD. She and her family visit us at least once a year. She has always had a special attraction to the place where her mom (our daughter), Sonja, grew up next to the lake. This attraction may be that she was baptized with water from Lake Superior!

Anyway, one of the venues (backgrounds) she considered for her high school grad photo was the restored KR train depot. I fully agreed with this as she is a very bright student (of course!) and certain to “go place”.

I thought the photo with this story turned out well and encourage other high school grads from the KR area to consider the depot as venue for their grad photo.

Photo credit: Sonia Gab

Larsmont Community Interest program for October

The speaker will be Dr. Claire Zukowski, a theoretical physicist with expertise in quantum gravity, including holography, black holes, and cosmology. She is an Assistant Professor at UMD.

Thursday, October 30

6:30 PM – 8:00 PM

Little Red Schoolhouse – Larsmont

DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations

- Mike Ojard: White bow light for CRUSADER II.
 - Rich Ojard: Net stern roller for CRUSADER II.
 - John Hill: Use of 5th wheel camper to allow Cousin Doug Hill to live on the KRHCC site while restoring CRUSADER II during the summers of 2023 and 2025.
 - Lee & Jim Bujold: Donation of 90 dozen ears of corn for the Knife River Rec Center picnic and the KRHCC Corn Fundraiser.
 - Becky and Doug Pruitt to general fund.
 - Larry Ronning: Use of his construction trailer and tools to complete construction of CRUSADER II shelter.
 - Jim Allert: Paint and painting supplies used to complete CRUSADER II shelter.
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