

# KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



## & CULTURAL CENTER

November 2025

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## KRHCC NEWSLETTER

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### Is Knife River “The Gateway to the North Shore?”



Since a year ago the Knife River Rec Council (KRRC) has been participating in a program called “Empowering Small Minnesota Communities” (ESMC). It is a community-driven action effort that creates a community-scale strategy, identifies projects that support the strategy, and strengthens the project’s funding proposals.

ESMC is led by the Minnesota Design Center, in a Regional Sustainable Development Partnership. ESMC uses an asset-based and community-focused process, and a design thinking approach. The program is a partnership between communities and the University of Minnesota, funded by the State of Minnesota. The KRRC’s cost to participate in the program is covered by a \$5,000 grant for which the KRRC had applied.

Image above: Todd Lindahl Collection

On Thursday, October 30<sup>th</sup>, the design team held two consecutive and well-attended meetings in Knife River (KR) to go over community comments on KR’s future and approaches for what’s next.

One of the design team’s suggestions was to “position” Knife River as “Gateway to the North Shore.” According to internet AI, “Gateway to the North Shore” can refer to Duluth the

starting point of the scenic drive, Two Harbors a common gateway town and popular first stop, or Gooseberry Falls State Park, the first major park one encounters when driving north. Each location serves as a different kind of entry point, either to the scenic route, a charming town, or the beginning of the state park system along Lake Superior.”

At first mention, I thought KR as “Gateway to the North Shore” was a bit of a stretch. But after some thought, perhaps this statement may be somewhat true, when one considers:

- Knife River is the first place along the North Shore **where people can interact with and access the lake** through the marina, agate beach and Knife River with its confluence at Lake Superior.
- Six miles of trails with panoramic views of Lake Superior
- First village with a historical center that summarizes the evolution of the north shore through its natural resource periods: copper mining, logging, mining/railroading and commercial fishing.
- First natural offshore structure (the island)

KR as the “Gateway to the North Shore” may or may not become KR’s moniker, but a viable concept in the context of the above.

## **KRHCC Newsletter reaches more than 300+ readers!**

Mary and I subscribe to the *Lake County Free Press* and enjoy reading it, especially the coverage given to THHS sports, in which our three Two Harbors (TH) grandchildren all participate. The paper also reprints stories from the KRHCC newsletter which it feels may be of interest to their readers. We only ask the story to be credited to the KRHCC.

Recently the paper published its paid circulation, which apparently is a legal requirement. I was surprised to see that the circulation of the KRHCC newsletter is nearly half that of the *Free Press*. Granted the *Free Press* circulation is a paid circulation and ours is emailed free. But our circulation, like the *Free Press*, is also by request.

As of the October issue, we have 312 readers plus “pass-along” to family and friends which could be another twenty percent or more. With each issue I get several requests from apparent pass-a-long readers who request the newsletter. Just this week we received a generous check from a party in Wisconsin who is a “pass-a-long” reader from someone on our email list. They wrote “I was so impressed by the history of Knife River and what the KRHCC has done to preserve the heritage of the area.” Yes!!!

When I first started writing the newsletter 4 1/2 years ago, I created a list of about 50 that included local government officials, persons who could influence grant requests, local media, opinion leaders, and others who I felt valued KR history and culture. So since then, the list has grown by more than 250, all by request.

I want to thank all those who have helped create the readership of the newsletter. They include historians Todd Lindahl and Randy Ellestad, individuals who have shared their family’s history and photos, and a big shout out to Anne-Lù Hovis who produces the newsletter. We try to get the newsletter out by the end of the month it is dated, but sometimes we miss it due to vacations, travel or a computer glitch.

In case you’re wondering, the KRHCC would never sell the newsletter email list.

# **The one-man telephone disaster.**

By Todd Lindahl, KRHCC Historian & Archeologist

The Duluth & Iron Range Ry (D&IRR) opened its telephone service to the public in 1900. During both World War I and World War II installation of new private phones was curtailed because the copper used in the phone lines was needed for the war effort. The exceptions were those essential services such as fire departments, police, hospitals, and of course military and military related facilities. The public was asked to voluntarily keep telephone calls to a minimum.

Following World War II installation of private phones resumed. In 1954 Duluth converted to the dial system so one did not have to tell the operator what number to which they wished to be connected. In 1958 the D&IRR Telephone & Telegraph Company decided to convert to dial phones as well and Knife River was chosen to be the first community to test the new system.

On the old candlestick and magneto wall phones, the cord entered at the top of the earpiece and the mouthpiece was separate. The new dial phones had a single handset into which one listened and talked. People were used to the cord coming into the top of the old earpieces so they would hold the new handset upside down leaving the cord at the top. This resulted in a lot of complaints from people that their phones did not work. One fellow even asked for his old wooden wall phone back. An effort was made to inform the public about how the handsets were supposed to be held and before long everybody caught on to the new technology.

In the fall of 1957, a newcomer moved into an old homestead off the Big Rock Road on the west side of Stewart River. He requested a private phone, but when the Telephone & Telegraph Department arrived, they found the bridge across the river was in very bad shape. They told him they could not get their truck in there to erect the necessary telephone poles.

The newcomer said he didn't care and demanded a phone be installed. He then began calling the Telephone & Telegraph superintendent from a phone elsewhere and would not take no for an answer. When this failed to get any response, he began calling Fred Voss, the president of the DM&IR, at his office and at home relentlessly. After being constantly badgered, Voss told Mike Brickley, the T&T superintendent, to install the phone and get this guy off his back.

The next day the T&T truck crashed through the rickety bridge that led to the house and dropped into the Stewart River. Two large wreckers from the Tourist Garage and Sonju's were needed to recover the truck. A temporary road had to be cut to the river from a county road west of the river.

Photo right: This is not going to be a good day.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

With a great deal of trouble, the truck was finally pulled out on the west bank. At this point the B&B Department (Bridge & Building) had to replace the destroyed bridge with a new one at the railroad's expense. Once done the telephone poles were placed, the wire strung, and a telephone installed in the house.



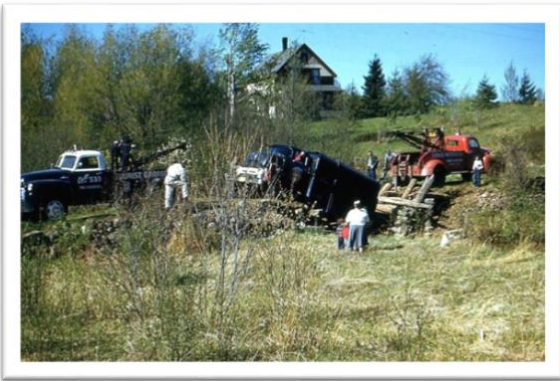


Photo left: Two wreckers were needed to extricate the T&T truck from the Stewart River.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

One month later the fellow left the area and never paid his one-month phone bill.

## Did you know?

The Northwestern Mutual Life insurance company, owner of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*, wanted to name the ship after its president and chairman of the board, Edmund Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald's grandfather and all great uncles had been lake captains, and his father owned the Milwaukee Drydock Company, which built and repaired ships.

Fitzgerald had attempted to dissuade naming of the boat after himself, proposing the names *Centennial*, *Seaway*, *Milwaukee* and *Northwestern*. The board was resolute, and Edmund abstained from voting; the 36 board members voted unanimously to name her the *SS Edmund Fitzgerald*.

On June 7, 1958, Edmund and Elizabeth Fitzgerald attended the ship's launching in River Rouge, Michigan. More than 15,000 people came out to watch the event. Mrs. Fitzgerald christened the vessel, though it took her three attempts to break the champagne bottle.

Some would later whisper that this was a bad omen for the new *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Image right: Official flag of the *Edmund Fitzgerald*

Image credit: Public Domain



Despite the champagne bottle incident, the bulk carrier had a highly successful career for nearly two decades. Although Edmund Fitzgerald retired as chairman in 1960, he remained deeply connected to the ship that bore his name.

When the freighter went down in Lake Superior on November 10, 1975, he felt the loss deeply and grieved for the 29 men and their families. His son later recalled that it was "Probably the worst day of my father's life."



Source WikipediA

Photo left: Edmund and Elizabeth Fitzgerald aboard the *Edmund Fitzgerald*.

Photo credit: Public Domain



# The Dragon is Back!

After 24 years, the dragon head and tail, and the Viking shields are back on LEIF ERIKSON. They had been removed to accommodate shrink wrapping and to protect them from theft, vandalism and weathering. The completion of the ship's shelter, its first ever, allowed the return of the most noticeable components of the ship.

Many thanks to Larry Ronning (who also provided the scaffolding), Randy Ellestad, Ray Privette and John Vigen who put the historical pieces in place.

Photo right: Randy Ellestad prepares the dragon head for mounting on the ship, while Larry Ronning waits at very bow of ship to position it in place.

Photo credit: John Vigen

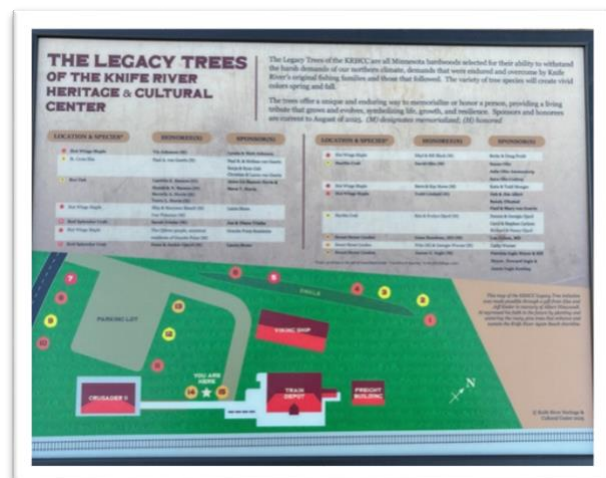


## Legacy Tree map mounted

The last step of the Legacy Tree initiative, the mounting of the tree map, was completed on November 5th, just days before cold weather hit. Many thanks to Larry Ronning and his Kubota backhoe, and able assistants David Grong and Randy Ellestad.

The Legacy Tree initiative honored or memorialized 15 individuals with one of six native hardwood trees. Twenty-six people sponsored the trees as some trees have more than one sponsor.

The KRHCC partnered with Anderson's Greenhouse in Two Harbors in selecting the tree varieties with a focus on their fall color brilliance.



Photos above: Legacy Tree display

Photo credits: Paul von Goertz

Elsa and Jeff Keeler sponsored the display in memory of Albert (Al) Nisswandt. Al is remembered for stabilizing and beautifying the entire agate beach shoreline with pine trees. It was a family enterprise with Al and Winnie and all seven children watering and caring for the trees as the trees took root.

The KRHCC worked with Pannier Graphics of Gibsonia, Pennsylvania, builder of the display, to create the map graphics.

If you're out for a walk or a Sunday afternoon drive, stop by and see the display that honors or memorializes the legacy of loved ones.

## **NSSR Julebyen trains will offer dome car seating.**

During Julebyen weekend the North Shore Scenic Railroad (NSSR) provides trains to and from Knife River on the **Julebyen Express**, and optional trips on the **Troll Train** to Troll Canyon for those inspired to search for mischievous trolls.

New this year is dome car seating on both trains, available at an additional charge.

### **Julebyen Express times, fares and tickets:**

Go to: [DuluthTrains.com](http://DuluthTrains.com)

### **Troll Train times, fares and tickets:**

Tickets are available only at the KR train depot both days of Julebyen starting at 9:00 AM Saturday and 10 AM Sunday. Trains depart at 11 AM and noon both days of Julebyen. It's a 45-minute round trip ride to Troll Canyon. It is suggested persons intending to ride a Troll Train purchase tickets early in the day.

Two ticket options:

#### **Main Level Seats:**

Adults - \$15

Children through age 12 - \$10

Children 3 and under - FREE

#### **Dome Car Seats:**

Adults - \$20

Children through age 12 - \$15

Children 3 and under - FREE

Photo right: Dome cars offer 360-degree panorama viewing and living room seating.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



# Why boats are “put on the hard” every fall?

This story could be told just by the photos.

The fiberglass sailboat experienced significant structural damage and had to be cut up and recycled. The wooden fish tug survived the winter, in part, because the owner kept heat in the boat. Commercial fishermen could winter fish by keeping heat in the boat. Winter fishing could be profitable when other fishermen pulled their boats.

The issues with letting a boat freeze in are (1) the formation of ice that expands and places immense pressures on a boat's hull to where it structurally fails, and (2) spring breakup.

In the spring, strong off-lake winds create surges that break harbor ice, some of which is locked around any object in the harbor, including dock posts. When the wind shifts to offshore, it blows the broken pieces of ice out into the lake and stresses any object in its path.

The KR harbor was built in 1973 using technology current to that time, which was to mount docks posts on concrete pads resting on the lake bottom. This method led to many dock posts failing by being caught in moving ice. Docks today are floating and hinged to the dock wall



A sad state of affairs.



There's ice and then there's snow, too.

Photo credits: Paul von Goertz

## Time to renew your membership in the Knife River Rec Council (KRRC)

If you live in Knife River or the surrounding area, please consider membership in the KRRC, if you are already not a member. The purpose of the Knife River Recreation Council is to develop and maintain recreational facilities and opportunities for residents of the Knife River area. It does this through maintaining tennis and pickle ball courts, a ballfield, ice skating rink, 350' feet of beach access with parking lot, six miles of scenic trails, a playground and sponsorship the annual Julebyen Scandinavian-themed Christmas festival. The festival is financially supported by Lovin' Lake County, the county's marketing arm.

While KR is an unorganized territory under the governance of the county, the non-profit KRRC often speaks for the community as it is governed by a volunteer board of local citizens.

Now is the time to get involved with the council as it has accepted the task to work with local and state organizations and agencies to help plan the community's future.

Membership for 2026 is due the end of January. Family membership is just \$25 and individual \$15. For more information contact [KRRCemail@gmail.com](mailto:KRRCemail@gmail.com).

## **Julebyen can use more help!**

The Knife River Rec Council (KRRC) needs more volunteers to keep pace with the growth of Julebyen, which early website hits indicate a greater interest this year than ever before. The Julebyen committee can use help just about everywhere, but especially this year with security.

Julebyen is a great family holiday experience and now in its 12<sup>th</sup> year a family tradition for many. It's fun for all of us who make it all possible! If you would like to help in any way, contact Helene Hedlund, our Julebyen chair: [hhedlund.dl@gmail.com](mailto:hhedlund.dl@gmail.com)

## **NOVEMBER DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS**

### **Donations**

- David and Linda Grong to general fund.
- Louise Talbot to general fund.

**Please remember the KRHCC if you plan to gift in 2025. The KRHCC is an IRS recognized 501(c)(3) so all donations are fully tax deductible. Send to KRHCC, POB 240, Knife River, MN, 55609. Thank you!**

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