

# KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



## & CULTURAL CENTER

January/February 2026

By Paul von Goertz

KRHCC BOARD MEMBER

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### **With restoration goals met, KRHCC focuses on being a center for education and community events.**

Over the next several months, the KRHCC will transition from focusing on restoration of our iconic depot and fish tug, to encourage the community to embrace the center as an educational resource and for events that support our culture. In short, we have achieved our goals of restoring the depot and CRUSADER II and so to move on and put these accomplishments to good use for the benefit of the community.

To look into the 2026 crystal ball, we can envision:

- A celebration of Norwegian Independence Day, known as *Syttende Mai* or Constitution Day, on May 17 in conjunction with our SOS friends. The day commemorates the signing of the Norwegian Constitution in 1814, which marked Norway's first steps towards independence from Danish rule.
- A Memorial Day dedication of our 15 Legacy Trees that memorialize and honor loved ones from the Knife River (KR) area.
- “Toe Tapping Tuesday” events in both July and August that feature local musicians.  
Photo right: The KRHCC’s first “Toe Tapping Tuesday” on July 22, 2025 was a big success.  
Photo credit: Paul von Goertz
- A quilt show Saturday, August 22 – celebrating KR culture and heritage through quilts.
- Leif Erikson Day Friday, October 9. The day honors a Viking explorer Leif Erikson, believed to be the first recorded Nordic person to have visited North America in places such as Baffin Island and Labrador around 1000 CE.
- “Trees, Trains. Traditions.” which ties to the North Shore Scenic Railroad’s “Christmas Tree Train” on the Saturday following Thanksgiving.
- Julebyen festival trains that bring festivalgoers from Duluth over Julebyen weekend with side trips to Troll Canyon where riders can search for mischievous trolls!



More activities to be announced and/or confirmed as we head into the new year!

## Todd Lindahl retires from KRHCC board

Todd Lindahl, a founding board member of the KRHCC, has elected to retire from the board effective December 31, 2025, after serving since the KRHCC was founded as a non-profit in 2018. He has also been the KRHCC's historian and archaeologist. While acknowledging he intends "to pursue other interests," he has agreed to continue to submit historical articles related to KR for future KRHCC newsletters.

The KRHCC is very fortunate to have had Todd as "Czar of Historical Accuracy." Every item removed from the depot during its restoration that might have any historical significance was run past Todd. He has identified the jobs of just about all depot employees who wrote graffiti on depot walls and signed their words. Todd also was able to identify the approximate time period a whiskey bottle was emptied and dropped between wall studs (determined by state liquor control stamps)!

Todd is way too modest to talk about his credentials to be recognized as "Historical Accuracy Czar," but a little poking round reveals that he:

- Has been a student of historical archaeology, preservation and documentation starting as a 17-year-old teenager;
- Worked with the Lake County Highway Department survey crew and in that capacity learned to identify and document glacial features and earthen materials;
- For 46 years has engaged in historical preservation and restoration of railroad depots, historic rail cars and steam locomotives;
- Has given public historical presentations over 24 years, and for the last 14 has been averaging about one a month. Todd figures he has given more than 200 presentations, all free of charge;
- He has both lectured and provided in-field training for archaeology and anthropology students at UMD, UWS, St. Scholastica and Lake Superior College;
- Worked with the State of Minnesota's Archaeologist's office on a three-year archaeological excavation, which resulted in his book "The Rise & Fall of Whiskey Row".
- Contributed to many books written by others and has written articles for many magazines, newspapers, and society newsletters;
- He was the recipient of the 2022 Hill-Lewis Award, an honor bestowed on an avocational archaeologist by the Minnesota Archaeological Society in recognition of contributions to the archaeology of Minnesota.



We will miss Todd at the KRHCC board meetings, but good to know he has agreed to continue to submit stories of historical interest to the KRHCC newsletter – thank goodness!

Many, many thanks Todd, for all you've done to help preserve and present the history of the KR area.

Photo left: Todd on his "Velocipede," which I can only describe as sort of a one-person railroad pump car/bicycle. He found enough parts to cobble together this one. It was displayed during the summer of 2022 at the KR depot.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

# Blue Bird Landing Was A Visitor's Oasis Created by a Hardworking Family

Article photo credits: Karl Strom

A Sunday afternoon drive up the North Shore, maybe for a picnic, was something my family did several times during summer and fall as I was growing up at 26th Ave. East on London Road, in Duluth, where we lived next to my dad's veterinary clinic.

Living next to the lake, I was a boat nerd even at an early age. As we drove up the shore, I always looked for the fishing boats, particularly those at Blue Bird Landing just west of Stoney Point, and the fish tugs on skids along the shore east of the Knife River which could be seen from Scenic 61.

I decided to learn more about the Blue Bird Landing after I learned from Doug Hill that his family built a boat that became one of the Blue Bird Landings fleet of fishing boats. My first stop was to Duane Madison, longtime Duluth Township historian and genealogist. His recall was very helpful, and his comments can be found at the end of this story.

The real "Eureka Moment" came when I found a history of Blue Bird Landing while conducting an online search. The story was written by Alvera Pierson and Evelyn Lukkonen and appeared in the Duluth Township publication, "Landmarks", December 1971 issue. Evelyn and her husband, Tim, created Blue Bird Landing and lived nearby. Alvera was a neighbor and good friend. The story was placed online by Helen Hendrickson. She lived in French River and was very involved with both French River and Duluth Township activities. She had the great foresight to place the history online.

Many thanks go to Duane Madison for finding the photos that support the Blue Bird Landing story and for ferreting out sources of information.

Photo right: Blue Bird Landing as seen from what is now Scenic 61.



Here is what the women wrote, with some edits by me;

*There are many sites along the shore which have a place in the area's past and in the memories of many residents. The years when Blue Bird Landing was a well-known spot do not go back very far, yet all that remains today is a dock which is hardly noticed when going along North Shore Drive only a little east of (what was) the Shorecrest Motel and Restaurant. Tim and Evelyn Lukkonen based their commercial fishing and charter boat service at Blue Bird Landing for about 15 years.*

*I will attempt to recall some of the highlights of our operation of Blue Bird Landing. We started on a "shoestring" in the spring of 1940 with \$1,000 of borrowed money. In the early days we operated the "Anna S." and "Evvy", a Norwegian sailing boat with a set of sails for fun, and a Briggs & Stratton motor for trolling. The following year we built "Uno", "Duo" (to join) "Tres",*

and "Skel," which we rented out when the owner didn't plan to use them and our other boats were out. We added a speedboat "Corona" and the "Lark" built in Larsmont by Rueben Hill.

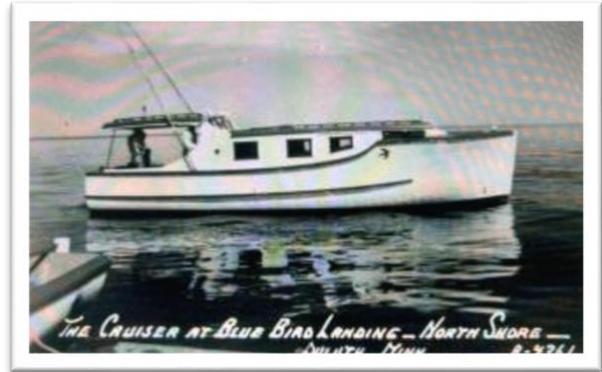


Photo left: Blue Bird Landing boats on skids next to dock. One can image the work involved with building the dock and skids. Shoreline docks required wood cribs filled with rocks and then capped with concrete. Launching and hauling charter boats required a lot of physical work, made even more difficult with winds from the SW. Stoney Point offered some protection from the NE.

Then as business expanded, we felt the need for larger boats. During the mid-forties, we started to build "Blue Bird", which was a major project. With the help of Adolph Reiersen, John Sandberg and Tim, Rueben Hill built the 35-foot boat during the period of about two years.

Photo right: The 35' Blue Bird built by the Hill family of Larsmont boat builders.

We launched her late in June with much hope and pride. She served well, furnishing many good times to our parties. Tom Strom, Alvie Anderson, and Merle Norgren, who still lived in the community (in 1971) took parties out from the landing. Business and fishing continued to be good, and we felt we could use another large boat, so Tim and John Sandberg went to Marinette and picked up the "Blue Jay" to augment the sport fishing fleet and to use for commercial fishing in the off-season.



**Editor's note: See more on "Blue Jay" in story elsewhere in this newsletter.**

They rode her back up through Lake Michigan and locked through the Sault into Lake Superior and had a rather stormy trip up the lakes. We were kept rather busy for the next few years as more people felt the urge to try for trout. Sport fishing on Lake Superior reached its height in the late forties and early fifties and then became less and less each year. Everyone kept talking about the lamprey that had invaded the Great Lakes on the bottom of ocean-going ships, with the opening of the St. Lawrence Seaway; but no one had any idea just how soon the lamprey would deplete the trout.

**Editor's correction, the sea lamprey is native to the Atlantic Ocean. Their advancement into the Upper Great Lakes was hindered by the impassable Niagara Falls. However, when shipping routes that bypassed the falls were built, sea lamprey gained access to the entire Great Lakes system.**

Many lake trout caught during this period would either have a lamprey attached or it would have the lamprey scar showing that it had survived the attack of the predator.

A few "diehards" kept trying for the non-existent trout, but for the most part, the fishing boats languished along the shore for want of clients. Those were difficult years for the fishermen and it is gratifying to know that the Coho Salmon being planted in the lakes are taking hold and sports fishermen are again trying for trout on the big lake.



Photos above: "Flagship" diner (left) and galley (right).

The diner, "The Flagship", was a streetcar purchased from the City of Duluth in the early forties. A galley was added to one end, and a counter and booths for seating 16 were installed. Blue and white carried out the nautical theme and Arlene Strom (Sandberg then) painted sailboats on the menus and on the curtains. Ev's delicious home-made pies brought "The Flagship" much publicity. Tourists from as far as New York are known to have stopped in on the recommendation of their friends.



Photo left: Aerial view of Blue Bird Landing showing clockwise from dock, skids, bathrooms/storage building, gas building and diner "The Flagship."

The Landing was the hub of summer activity for many years, and many area teenagers worked there as waitstaff, cooks, boat hands and boat drivers. Now all that is left of Blue Bird Landing beside memories, is the sturdy dock which has withstood many years of pounding storms. It too is showing signs of deterioration and if not repaired soon, will be lost to the relentless northeasters. If that happens, the North Shore will lose the only dock for small craft between Duluth and Knife River; and Blue Bird Landing will only be a beach again.

***(Editor's note: Since this writing, the final remnants of the Blue Bird dock have been claimed by the big lake in the last few years. However, McQuade Harbor of refuge has been built and offers lake access.)***

Blue Bird Landing was a destination and oasis for many North Shore visitors, offering sport fishing, fuel and home-cooked food. It was testimony to the entrepreneurial spirit of the Lukkonen family and their hard work to bring a memorable Lake Superior experience to so many.

Photo right: A busy day at Blue Bird Landing as visitors (far right) begin to board charter boats.



## **Duane Madison, Duluth Township Historian and Genealogist, Remembers Blue Bird Landing**

When I was 10 years old, I rode my bike off the end of the Blue Bird Landing dock to impress “Skipper” (Mary Ann Lukkonen). She grew up there and still lives at the home site.

Her dad Tim (Toivo) Lukkonen was born at Jasski, Finland, and within a year came to America with his mother, where I think he grew up on the Coolidge Road in Knife River, eventually marrying Evelyn Sandberg. Their children were Mary Ann and young Tim.

I don't have a date for the start-up of the landing. I'm sure there is a story there. Merle Norgren lived next door to the landing and did a lot of captaining for charter fishing.

From a few times hanging out at the landing, I recall the boats were all white with blue trim and a small flying bluebird by the registration number. The main house was still unfinished with tar paper on the outside, but Mary Ann's playhouse outside was finished. It had a small table and a couple chairs where she would serve me tea and cookies. She recalled later that the tea and cookies may have come from a nearby mud puddle.

I don't remember Tim Sr., but mom Evelyn was always mothering me, which was a blessing because there wasn't much at home (for me). Looking back, I can see that Mary Ann and young Tim were well loved. It was a special family. I think that Tim Sr.'s death at a young age was hard on the whole community.

I know there was always a lot of help from family and friends with the landing but I'm not sure about details of the demise of the landing after Tim Sr. died.

### **Long-Forgotten Little Sucker River Harbor was a refuge for Stoney Point Fishermen**

Few people know that there was once a viable harbor within the basin at the mouth of the Little Sucker River on the east side of Stoney Point.

I first remember seeing it about 75 years ago when our family picnicked nearby. My mother told me later that as a four or five-year-old, I suddenly disappeared and after a frantic search they found me sitting on the edge of the harbor dock face, and feet dangling over the edge. I have always been attracted to boats and harbors and continue to be as a boat nerd.

The next time I saw the harbor was in the late 50s when my father checked it out as a “harbor of refuge” in case we had to get our nearly 40' Matthews cruiser off the lake in a hurry. He decided it offered protection from the lake, but there was no security should we have to leave the boat there. Point is, there was room in the river basin for a boat this size.



Photo left: My father's 38' 11" Matthews was named MARCY after my mother, Marcella. It was

built in 1928 and was powered by an inline 8-cylinder Kermath engine. I sure would like to know whatever happened to it. Word from 60 years ago was it was a “party boat” on the St. Croix River at Bayport, MN. Photo credit: Marcella von Goertz

Over the years I’ve often wondered who recognized the basin could serve as harbor and took the effort to dredge the ever-shifting bottom of the basin and drive the dockface pilings. For an answer I again asked Town of Duluth historian and genealogist Duane Madison. Duane poked around and learned a few names of some commercial fishermen who may have been involved, but nothing definite.

Duane was able to find a photo of the steel fish tug *Blue Jay*, a commercial fish tug of the Lukkonen fleet of Blue Bird Landing boats. The caption read “*Blue Jay* moored at Kyto’s Landing at Little Sucker Bay.” So the next question was “Who was Kyto?” Once again, I went to Duane to see what he could find.

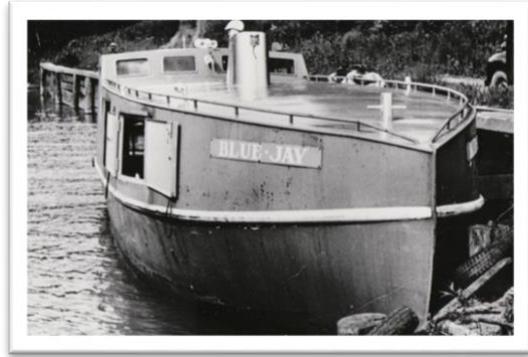


Photo right: Fish tug “*Blue Jay*” tied at Kyto Landing. Photo credit: Karl Strom

*“I didn’t have anything in my North Shore Tree for Kyto,” reported Duane, “but I did an Ancestry Search for the Kyto name for Duluth and found the Urpo Kyto family. He came from Finland as a baby about 1910 (and) by 1930 he appears to be in business with a couple enterprises including a beer distributorship across from the Duluth Depot where the library is now. He married Mary Pavela and had a daughter. Haven’t found yet if he is associated with that property, but I still have some resources to pursue.”*

It would make sense that the Lukkonen family would have an interest in the Little Sucker River harbor as the steel *Blue Jay* would be too big and heavy to haul at Blue Bird Landing. The *Blue Jay* could also be the source of fresh fish as it can be expected the “Flagship” diner served fresh trout to visitors.

We do know the harbor was operational into at least the early 50s. Fishermen from KR netted smelt from fish traps secured by poles in the mud in Sucker Bay. They unloaded fish into trucks that drove up to Scenic 61 along to a makeshift road that followed the east side of the river. From there the smelt were taken to wholesalers in Duluth to be processed.

Mary and I tried to find the road that led to the harbor in the fall of 2024, but could not find it, although I remember seeing it from Scenic 61 maybe 20 years ago. Access from Scenic 61 may have been removed to protect the privacy of property owners on either side of the river.

Anyway, Google maps gave us some insight into what may have prompted fishermen to go through the effort to create a harbor on the Little Sucker when the KR harbor was less than four miles away.

The map shows what appears to be a narrow rock formation that stretches inward from the beach to maybe 25 - 30 feet into the lake. It forms a natural breakwall to the northeast and perhaps helps keep the mouth of the river open. Another natural advantage to the river location is that the 1.6-mile river slows as it nears the lake creating a natural basin such as what the Knife River has done. I am surmising a lot of what I write here that could be verified

by walking the shoreline, but either side of the river is all private property, and the earlier side road from 61 is thickly wooded.

I am hoping this is not the end of the story about the Little Sucker harbor and that others, may be inspired to add more to its history - or confirm the existence of the natural “breakwall,” perhaps best from a small boat. Warning, water in and around Little Sucker Bay is very shallow and rocky in places.



Image left: View of the harbor basin that shows what may be a natural “breakwall” on the left of the river exit. Image right: Aerial view of the Little Sucker River basin.

Image credits: Google Maps

## **KRHCC newsletter will publish bi-monthly in 2026**

The KRHCC newsletter, published monthly since May of 2019, will begin publishing bi-monthly (every other month) beginning with this January/February 2026 issue. This is a decision made by me, Paul von Goertz, writer/publisher, with approval of the KRHCC’s board of directors.

The reason for this change is that the newsletter has had a dual purpose; (1) to bring the history and culture of KR to readers, and (2) to report the progress being made to create a heritage center for the KR area. Tied to (2) was encouraging donations to cover costs to create a heritage center, including the daunting tasks of restoring KR’s two icons – the train depot and fish tug CRUSADER II.

It can now be safe to acknowledge the physical creation of the KRHCC has been achieved, and the fund-raising push has shifted from “building” to “maintaining” our properties.

Our fixed overhead is about \$9,000, mostly insurance mandated by the property owner, the St. Louis and Lake County Railroad Authority. So far, we have been able to cover this with help from county recreation funds, Julebyen Troll Train sales and our corn sale. We also receive event promotional support from “Lovin’ Lake County”.

The Center has been operational since 2023 and already needs some paint. It is prudent to create a dedicated reserve fund now for future maintenance and historical acquisitions that help tell KR’s history. So, donations continue to be needed. Please remember the KRHCC is a recognized IRS 501(c)(3) non-profit, so all donations are tax deductible.

Between newsletter issues, you will be notified by email of any timely special events taking place at the KRHCC.

## DECEMBER DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

### Honorarium:

- Erling and Kathleen Nervick to general fund in honor of Paul von Goertz's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

### Donations:

- David and Jo-Ann Rossetter to general fund.

**Please remember the KRHCC if you plan to gift in tax year 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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