

# KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



## & CULTURAL CENTER

March/April 2026

By Paul von Goertz

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### North Shore Spring Break (Out)

*Editor's Note: The following story appeared in the March, 2023 issue of this newsletter. I was inspired to reprint it when I rehung the framed painting seen below in our home. We have a special place where we hang seasonal paintings and to Mary and me who live on the lake, this painting so well represents March and April.*

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It was either 1973 or 1974 that a fellow I believe from the UP (Upper Michigan), who I will refer to by first name only, showed up in the Knife River (KR) harbor in the fall in a 35' fish tug called SHAMROCK. For some reason he decided to live on it in the water (ice?) over a North Shore winter.

Living just a block from the harbor, I would sometimes visit Jerry and sit around his wood (or coal?) stove and have coffee. The stove was his only source of heat. I don't know what he did for water or toilet. (Do I want to know?)

I was visiting Jerry on March 15<sup>th</sup> (I remember because it was the "Ides of March"—the date in 44 BC when Julius Caesar was assassinated—when Jerry noticed the harbor ice was starting to break up. "Let's go to Two Harbors," he said, "We can break out of this."

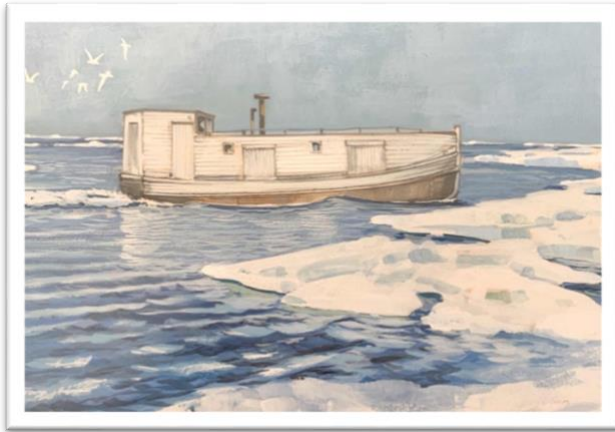
That sounded adventuresome. So, we fired up the hibernating engine and began to work our way among the fields of ice and finally into open water. It was rather exhilarating to be on the lake knowing at this early date we were probably the only boat moving on the western tip of the lake.

Once in Two Harbors (TH), we tied to the break wall and headed for the Legion where we were greeted as some kind of adventurers. Over a glass (or two?) of beer we entertained those around us with the details of our great accomplishment, which got more embellished by the moment.

It was soon late afternoon, and we realized we should get back by dark. As we neared the harbor, to our great dismay (horror?), we could see that the wind had blocked the harbor entry with drift ice. There were no cell phones then, and to call for help on Jerry's marine radio would be too hard on our pride—and besides, the Coast Guard was still locked in the Duluth harbor.

Jerry had a long boat hook and so I walked the narrow deck to the bow and then pondered how to push the ice aside without-following the hook into the ice water. The prudent thing to do I concluded, was to lay down on the deck and push blocks aside as Jerry worked SHAMROCK slowly around them.

And so, we made it back and in the late twilight. The adventure had ended and all that remained was how to explain to my dear wife where I had been—and why.



This painting (left) by Duluth watercolor artist, Harvey Sandstrom, could depict our junket from KR to TH and return. “Sandy” was a self-employed graphic artist. I knew him through my years in the advertising agency business. A gifted wildlife artist, Sandy won the Federal Duck Stamp competition in 1955.

Image credit: Painting part of Paul and Mary von Goertz collection of paintings by local area artists.

### Featured Knife River historical story

*Editor's note: The “America” was a much-loved steamer that made regular round trips from Duluth to what is now Thunder Bay, Ontario, and to Isle Royale and back. As it traveled it delivered passengers, freight, news and gossip while visiting North Shore ports or laying offshore to pick up fish and deliver mail and supplies.*

*Knife River was one of those stops where the steamer rendezvoused with skiffs. KRHCC historian Todd Lindahl has written a very excellent history of the “America”, which I am pleased to offer to our readers.*

*In the May/June issue I will give you a firsthand look at the underwater world of the America as I experienced it in the early 1970s.*

### THE PASSENGER and PACKAGE FREIGHT STEAMER AMERICA

By Todd E. Lindahl, KRHCC Historian and Archeologist

The *America* was built by the Detroit Dry Dock Company and was launched on April 2, 1898. When it was built, it was 164 feet long with a beam of 31 feet. She had a triple expansion engine rated at 700 horsepower. The *America* had two hand-fired scotch boilers and carried a working pressure of 125 PSI. The hull was steel and the superstructure above the hull was of oak wood construction.



Image right: The AMERICA departing Duluth photographed before she was lengthened.  
Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

The *America* was brought up the lakes to Duluth by Captain Jacob F. Hector who had been the U.S. & Dominion Transportation (U.S.D.T.) captain on the *Hiram R. Dixon* up to that time. He became the *America's* first captain and served on her until retiring in 1910, due to poor health. He was a highly respected captain who was known as the "fog king". Captain John Waroe also served for a time as captain on the *America* and *Easton*. Captain Edward C. "Indian" Smith from Maple, Wisconsin, who was part Native American, served as the last captain from 1910 to 1928.

Captain John Waroe shared his recollections on June 26, 1959, when he retired after 50 years of sailing on the Great Lakes. He recalled delivering a total of 120 horses to Pork Bay near the Lake County and Cook County line for the Alger-Smith Lumber Company's logging operations along the Caribou River.

The Crowley Hotel was on the Two Harbors to Grand Marais stage road. It served as a stage stop during the winter, which was the only time of year the stage ran, and was where the horses were changed while travelers got a meal. The northbound stage met the south-bound stage here. One of the many other stops along the North Shore was at a trading post run by Mr. Pedersen on the shore at present day Silver Bay. The *America* would anchor offshore and Mr. Pedersen would row his skiff out to get his supplies.



Photo left: The Crowley "Hotel." Certainly not a "Five Star" lodge.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

In March 1902, the *America* was purchased by the A. Booth Fisheries Company and sent to the Minnesota North Shore to directly compete with Walter Singer's White Line Transportation Company's passenger boat *Iroquois*. These were two of the fastest boats on Lake Superior, both being capable of speeds of 18 MPH.

The *America* had a *minimum crew* of 30, which included:

- 1 Master (Captain)
- 1 licensed first-class pilot
- 5 able seamen
- 3 seamen
- 1 licensed Chief Engineer
- 1 licensed 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant Engineer
- 3 Oilers
- 3 Firemen
- 4 Watchmen
- 1 Cook
- 1 Steward
- 11 of the crew members had to be certified lifeboat men.

In 1908, the A. Booth Fisheries Company failed and went into receivership. During 1909, the company was reformed and the name was changed to the Booth Fisheries Company of Delaware.



Photo left: Advertisement for America sailings.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

In September 1908, the *America* evacuated roughly 300 people from Beaver Bay when the community was threatened by a forest fire.

There is an area of magnetic attraction in Lake Superior off Two Harbors that caused problems for ships in the days before navigational beams, radar, and GPS. Knife Island off Knife River is another one of these areas with magnetic attraction that will affect the compass needle as much as 22 degrees. These two areas caused many groundings and a few shipwrecks over the years.

On July 9, 1909, at 6:00 A.M. the *America* was headed into Two Harbors in heavy fog when she suddenly ran aground. The captain and crew were looking over the side trying to figure out where exactly they were and if there was any serious damage. Suddenly out of the fog came the bulk freighter *General O. M. Poe*, which also ran aground just a short distance off the *America's* starboard side. The *Poe* carried a cargo of

coal for the Duluth & Iron Range Ry and had to be lightered before she could be pulled off the rocks. The *America* received only slight damage and was easily released from the shore's rocky grip. The notorious magnetic attraction at Two Harbors had been the culprit.

Five years later in May 1914, the *America* was approaching Two Harbors in a thick fog and once again she ran hard aground. This time there was considerable damage when she hit the rocks. Suddenly out of the fog came the *General O. M. Poe* once again and slid up on the rocks just off the *America's* starboard side. Both ships were almost in the same place they had been back in in 1909. The timing, circumstances, and the events were a carbon copy of the previous accident.

In 1910, a wireless radio set was installed in the *America*. Before this, passenger boats each carried homing pigeons to deliver important messages to Duluth headquarters. The unknown factor of course was if there were any hungry hawks or falcons between the distressed boat and Duluth.

In 1911, the *America* was lengthened by adding 18 feet to the center section making her a total new total length of 182.6 feet. Two freight doors were added to the existing six. This lengthening increased the freight capacity by an additional 100 tons. There were 51 staterooms of which 43 were for passengers only. Lifeboat capacity was increased to 232. Previously lifeboat capacity had been 108 with an allowed passenger complement of 450, but the Booth Line advertised they could accommodate 1,200 on a day excursion. Even this number was exceeded a few times by up to about 1,500 passengers.

*Photo right: America* photographed at Isle Royale after being lengthened to 182.6 feet.

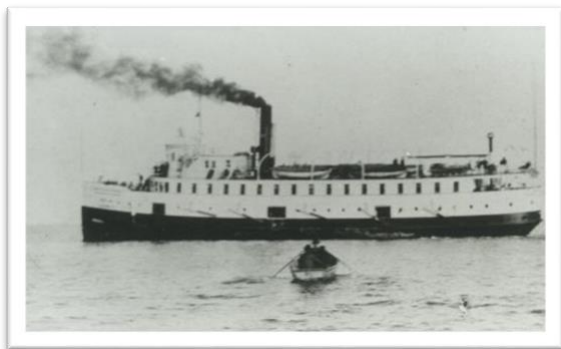
Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

In the early days safety was too often “barely”. These dangerous practices would be exposed in 1912, with the *Titanic* disaster on the open ocean and the *Eastland* catastrophe in 1915, on Lake Michigan. By 1921, only 176, including the crew, were recommended per trip.



The last four years the *America* operated, it was involved in five serious accidents. In 1925, she ran aground on Scott’s Point nine miles northeast of Grand Marais, doing some damage to the rudder and stern section. While at the dry dock her duties were taken over by the small U. S. & D. T. steamer *Bruce*.

One of the *Bruce’s* tasks was to deliver workers, equipment, and supplies for the Highway 1 (now HWY 61) construction project. This new road competed directly with the *America* by cutting deeply into the passenger, freight, mail, and commercial fishing segments of the business. The only part not affected was the tourist, mail, freight, and fish trade to and from Isle Royale.



*Photo left: The America* lies off the North Shore to exchange fish or passengers for supplies.

Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

In September 1926, the *America* nearly hit the giant passenger steamer *Huronic* head-on in the fog. The two ships glanced off each other narrowly, escaping what could have been a very serious disaster.

July 1927, the *America* rammed and sank the Canadian tug *Violet G.* at the U. S. & D. T. dock in Port Arthur, Ontario, and then careened off and hit a second tug almost rolling it over.

On June 7, 1928, the *America* was departing Isle Royale after a scheduled stop at Walter Singer’s hotel on the western end of the island. As it passed through the North Gap for Thunder Bay, it struck a rock and began taking water. Captain Smith tried to beach the boat on a mud bank by turning it around. The bank was merely a rock ledge supporting just the bow. The boat would eventually slide off into deep water.

Captain Cornelius Flynn was awarded a contract to salvage the *America* with a low bid of \$30,000 in 1928. The permission to start work, however, was extremely slow and was not forthcoming until well into 1929. Ice action during the winter of 1928-1929, had crushed the wooden superstructure causing excessive damage. Vandals had made off with as much hardware as they could strip off from the portion remaining above the waterline.

Photo right: Salvage tug *Whitney* assesses what a salvage operation would involve.  
Photo credit: Todd Lindahl Collection

The final setback was the start of the Great Depression, which ended any consideration of salvage for quite a while. Cornelius Flynn had been the captain on the Duluth & Iron Range Railroad's first tug *Ella G. Stone* in 1883. He was also the captain of the *R.G. Stewart*, a former North Shore passenger boat, when it burned and sank on the south shore in 1899 with the loss of one life. Born in 1855, he died in 1936, at the age of 81.



On September 7, 2005, I delivered a presentation at the Duluth Township Town Hall on the passenger boats of Minnesota's north shore. Former *Edna G.* tug captain Iver Johnson's sister was there. She said her father was a commercial fisherman and they lived on Isle Royale during the summer season. Her brother Iver was a crew member on the *America* and her mother worked as a cook for a while on it. He was a wheelsman and she used to go to the pilothouse where he sat on a stool behind the huge wheel. She still has a dresser that came from the *America*. After the *America* sank, he became a crew member on the DM&IR tug *Edna G.* and later was promoted to captain.

On February 21, 2008, I gave a presentation in Duluth on the passenger boats of the North Shore. There was an elderly man there who told me he knew the wheelsman who was on the *America* when it sank on Isle Royale in June 1928. One of the first scuba diving groups to ever go down on the shipwreck came to him to ask questions about the ship before they went. Along with the information he provided for them, he made a special request. He said he had left his wallet and his gold watch on top of a cabinet in his stateroom the night the *America* sank. There had been no time to retrieve them before abandoning the ship. He asked if they could find them if possible. Not too long afterward, one of the divers came to his house and returned the wallet and gold watch. Unfortunately, the wheelsman passed away some time prior to 2008.

Laws that protect shipwrecks have come about more recently. Before this, anyone could take whatever they wanted off a shipwreck often without regard to salvage rights or historical considerations. This was a commonplace and widespread practice for the time.

The "Frigid Frogs" was perhaps the first local dive group that formed after the introduction of the scuba diving system. One of these divers was Ron Thureen who dove on the *America* in 1956, entering the boat through one of the freight doors. He found one door inside of the ship that had never been opened. After a while he got it open and found that it was a bathroom. In it was a small sink with a spring-action hot water faucet that would snap shut when you let go of the handle. The cold-water side had a lever to pump to make the water flow. There was also a toilet bowl up next to the bow, which seemed to him to be sort of odd.

Diver Kurt Anderson said his dive group got the safe open in the Purser's office. It only contained U. S. & D. T. company-related papers. One of the divers from an eastern state still

has these papers today. In the cargo hold was a crate that was full of dinner plates, cups, and other china consigned to a hotel in Port Arthur, Ontario.

The ship's wheel from the *America* was displayed for many years in a restaurant in Grand Marais. It is now at the Cook County Historical Museum in Grand Marais.

The spiral stairway from the aft end of the *America* was installed in a house in Grand Marais for many years. It was displayed in the DeWitt-Seitz Building for a while and is now at the Duluth Great Lakes Aquarium. The bell from the *America* and the bell from the *Winyah* are at the commercial fishing museum in Tofte. They were donated by the late Betty Lessard of Betty's Pies fame. Her father was Alec Christensen, captain and part owner of the *Winyah*.

The steam-powered *Winyah* took over much of the *America's* duties after the disaster in 1928. The boat's owners also took over the former Booth Fisheries office and building on Lake Avenue in Duluth. Eventually the *Winyah* was replaced by the diesel-powered *Detroit* in 1944. Operating the *Winyah* took a crew of thirty and the *Detroit* required only two. Even so, by 1952, the *Detroit* cost more to operate than the revenue it received and was sold back to the original owner, the Arnold Transportation Company in March 1953.

## **Shifting weather patterns impact the North Shore**

**Winter along Minnesota's Lake Superior shoreline brings familiar scenes – the last ships of the season, sea smoke on cold mornings, ice forming and reforming in bays and river mouths, fishing shelters appearing on winter ice, and the quiet chime of shifting shore ice. As the weeks pass, shore ice thickens and breaks apart, storms move through and daylight slowly increases. These patterns shape the winter landscape that coastal communities and managers navigate each season.**

Across the Lake Superior basin, winters have trended warmer with more variable snowfall and reduced ice cover, conditions that influence shoreline processes, storm energy, and the timing of spring runoff for Minnesota's coastal communities

Recent Great Lakes climate summaries for December 2024 through February 2025 describe a winter marked by wide temperature swings, near-average precipitation across much of the basin, and a slow start to lake-ice formation. Great Lakes ice coverage during this period remained below the long-term average, continuing a multi-year pattern of reduced winter ice. These conditions shape how coastal communities prepare for erosion, manage infrastructure, and anticipate spring flows in North Shore streams.

Coastal managers have observed later ice formation in some bays and river mouths, along with more frequent freeze–thaw cycles along the shoreline. These conditions affect winter access, shoreline stability, and the timing of certain maintenance activities. Community members may also contribute observations that help improve understanding of winter conditions across the region.

Duluth's long-term temperature and snowfall records show how winter conditions have changed over time: Duluth now has more snowfall and warmer winter temperatures than it did several decades ago. Snowfall increased from about 83 to 90 inches, and average winter temperatures (December–February) warmed by about 1.4°F. Overnight lows warmed by about 2.0°F, increasing the chances of melt between storms.

Seasonal patterns have shifted as well: January used to be the snowiest month, and December now sees the most snowfall. April also shows slightly cooler temperatures and higher snowfall totals in the more recent multi-decade averages.

Source: Minnesota DNR

## **Website sponsorship opportunity**

Over the winter I gave myself the task of completely rethinking and rebuilding the KRHCC website which was launched back in 2022 and a whole lot has happened since then. Start point was "What are site goals?". Certainly, pertinent information that anyone interested in visiting the KRHCC site as a North Shore attraction would want to know, as well as our activities and events, and enough history to make people want more.

The website is rich in content to compensate for our depot not being open daily; ten interpretive displays enable self-guided tours. I wrote the website text and established the page framework. Eric Fransen, a Knife River native, and founder and CEO of Klik Marketing designed and built the website. He did a marvelous job!

The site will launch in early May and we are offering the opportunity for someone/family/organization to be recognized as the major sponsor. Credit will be given with a tag on the last page that states "This website was made possible with the financial support of \_\_\_\_\_." The major sponsorship is \$1,500 and is good until the site goes through another major update. Please remember the KRHCC is an IRS-recognized 501(c) (3) so the sponsorship is totally tax-deductible. Thank you for your consideration!

## **Help with understanding political ideologies - you may hear this fall**

As a service to newsletter readers, I feel compelled to help clarify some political ideologies you may hear this fall as political parties try to link them to their opponents.

Here goes:

- Socialism – You have two cows and give one to your neighbor.
- Communism – You have two cows; the government takes them both and gives you the milk.
- Fascism – You have two cows; the government takes both and sells you the milk.
- Nazism – You have two cows; the government takes both and shoots you.
- Bureaucracy – You have two cows; the government takes both, shoots one of them, milks the other and pours the milk down the drain.
- Capitalism – You have two cows; you sell one and buy a bull.

The above definitions appeared in the British newspaper, the *Financial Times* sometime in the 80s. I happened to come across a reprint of it and thought worth sharing.

JANUARY/FEBRUARY DONATIONS, MEMORIALS,  
HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

**Sponsorship:**

- Bob and Sheryl Entzion\* sponsorship of interpretive display that explains the innerworkings of a commercial fish tug.
- Bob and Sheryl Entzion\* sponsorship of name "CRUSADER II" placed on stern of boat.

\*Bob is the grandson of Carl Erickson, original owner of CRUSADER II.

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