

# KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE



## & CULTURAL CENTER

May/June 2026

By Paul von Goertz

KRHCC BOARD MEMBER

PO Box 240 • 180 Marina Road

Knife River, MN 55609

info@krhcc.org

### - Kristian Ronning - The North Shore Legend that should have been

*Editor's note:*

*Were it not for his inherent Norwegian humility and a bit of history slipping past so many who record the lore of Lake Superior, Kristian Ronning might very well be a local legend.*



*I came across a mention of Kristian Ronning in the book "A Good Boat Speaks for Itself" by Timothy Cochrane and Hawk Tolson. The book is a fascinating story of the now extinct Isle Royale fishing culture. Larry Ronning (photo left), KRHCC board member, is part of the Ronning gene pool of boat builders/restorers and contributed to this story. Larry was instrumental in the initial restoration of LEIF ERIKSON in the early 1990s and oversaw the rebuilding of CRUSADER II 2023-25. Larry's brother, Todd, also has the family genes which he displays as an artisan wood worker.*

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

*Content for this story came from the Cochrane and Tolson book, Larry Ronning and Roberta Sve writing in the summer 2016 issue of the "Tofte Historical Society newsletter".*

.....

**It could be argued that** Kristian ("Chris") Ronning was one of the most enterprising entrepreneurs, skilled boat designer and builder, and business-savvy immigrants to ever find their way to the North Shore including a work ethic few could match.

Chris was one of five brothers and sisters who immigrated from Eidsvaag, Norway, in 1909 to settle on the North Shore and fish. Some settled in Knife River (KR) and others near Beaver Bay. He was a cooper (barrel maker) in Norway and established a cooperage at Horn Bay south of Beaver Bay where Cove Point Resort now stands. Old barrel hoops have been found on site.



Photo right: Kristian Odin Ronning and wife, Anna.

Photo credit: Roberta Sve

### **An entrepreneur spirit:**

Chris saw a business opportunity that would bring him rewards. At the time, fishing communities and fishers that dotted the shore relied on packet boats like the steamer AMERICA and other freight/passenger boats to transport their fish to Duluth while receiving supplies, groceries, news and latest gossip. The large steel-hulled boats with their deep draft, did not dare venture too close to shore to rendezvous with fishers. Chris decided to build a smaller packet to reach this under-served market.



Photo credit: Roberta Sve

He had built a small boat in Norway and felt that he had enough training. In 1912, with no formal training in the art of boat design or building, he began planning the only large freight boat he would ever build. When asked about his ideas for her design and construction, he reported “They come to me as I am working”.

Photo left: DAGMAR at the Singer Resort in Washington Harbor, Isle Royale, c. 1925

### **The building of DAGMAR:**

A mile into the woods above Horn Bay he found a 60’ straight pine to serve as the boat’s keel. He hauled it to his place on a rocky shelf next to the water with a team of horses. He then hewed it to the shape he wanted. He used oak for the frames (“ribs”) and white pine for planking and decking, all from Duluth sawmills. The boat would have an overall length of 45’.

He launched DAGMAR in 1914 from Horn Bay using a series of winches and skids to move the boat from the rock shelf into the adjacent deep water. He then towed it to Beaver Bay where the engine had been delivered. It was a two-cylinder 24 hp Kahlenberg that started on gasoline and then ran on kerosene. An 18’ mast in conjunction with a cargo boom was installed. A small gas engine mounted on the deck powered the block and tackle.

It took Chris three or four months to build DAGMAR at a cost of about \$300 for lumber and \$900 for the Kahlenberg. DAGMAR could carry 80 tons of cargo fully loaded. Fish were placed in the hold and packaged freight on deck where it could be protected with drop down canvas.

To the delight of the smaller fishers that could not be efficiently served by the larger steel packets, DAGMAR was now ready for service as part of the North Shore's "Mosquito Fleet", so named because smaller boats like Dagmar could "buzz" in and out of small harbors and landings. Salt fish in kegs were hauled to Duluth where they could be loaded directly on rail cars as freight. Fresh fish was hauled to Two Harbors where it could be sent rail express overnight in refrigerated cars to buyers in Chicago and Minneapolis.

DAGMAR operated with a crew of only two or three. Chris was captain and his brother, Olaf, was engineer. Occasionally they would carry a third as a deckhand, typically brother Inger. They operated year-round depending upon weather and ice conditions.

### **An amazing accomplishment:**

Business was so good for Chris that at one point he decided to increase the length of DAGMAR for added tonnage. He brought the boat to his fishery at Green Isle in Todd Harbor, Isle Royale, where under primitive conditions, he and his brother, Olaf, cut DAGMAR in half and added 10 feet!

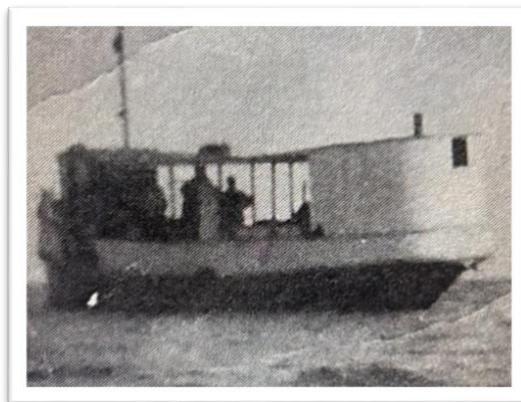
Now as a boat builder/restorer myself, I find this to be an amazing feat. How did they get the 45' boat out of the water, and back in again at a length now of 55'? How did they cut the boat in half, apparently using hand tools? How did they move the two halves apart? How did they build some structural integrity back into the boat once the keel was cut? Did the engine need to be relocated? How did the added displacement affect the boat's seaworthiness? Would the boat require ballasting when running light?

Besides hauling fish and freight, Chris fished Isle Royale from 1915-1918. In 1919 he was drafted for service during WW I. Upon discharge, he sold DAGMAR to Ed Mattson and worked for him for about a year.

Photo right: DAGMAR in open water. Rather than having an enclosed cabin, Chris chose to protect deck cargo with drop down tarps as shown here. The advantage was less windage and weight, all of which created greater stability in a seaway.

Photo credit: Roberta Sve

Mattson would sell DAGMAR to the Johnson Brothers of Isle Royale, Milford and Arnold, who ran it during the Civilian Conservation Corps days (CCC). They then sold it to Brazell Motor Freight Company.



On a run to Chippewa Harbor on Isle Royale in 1935 at night and in perhaps fog as well, and using only compass and stopwatch for navigation, they made the turn into the harbor about a quarter mile too soon and ran DAGMAR up on the rocks. She stayed afloat long enough for the crew to jump to shore, but by the time the crew returned to free the boat, DAGMAR slipped into deep water.

While the approximate location of the boat is well known, the vessel has never been located. Word among local fishers was that a contributing factor to the loss of DAGMAR may have been "a little alcohol involved there".

After Chris Ronning gave up fishing, he lived in French River and moved into the local work force. He continued woodworking in construction and making violins in his free time. Kristian Ronning lived until at least 1968 when he carved a model of DAGMAR and donated it to the Minnesota State Historical Society.

Kristian Ronning, a North Shore legend about whom few people knew.

# New Display Highlights CRUSADER's Interior

It took three years to complete the restoration of CRUSADER II and place a shelter over it. Now, as a finishing touch, the KRHCC has placed an interpretive display near the plexiglass-covered forward door into the tug to help people gain a better understanding of how a fish tug sets, picks and returns nets to the lake.

The KRHCC provided Pannier Graphics with text, photos and a suggested rough layout. Pannier Graphics is a family-owned business out of Gibsonia, PA, and has made all our ten interpretive displays. Their designers once again did a masterful job as you can see here.

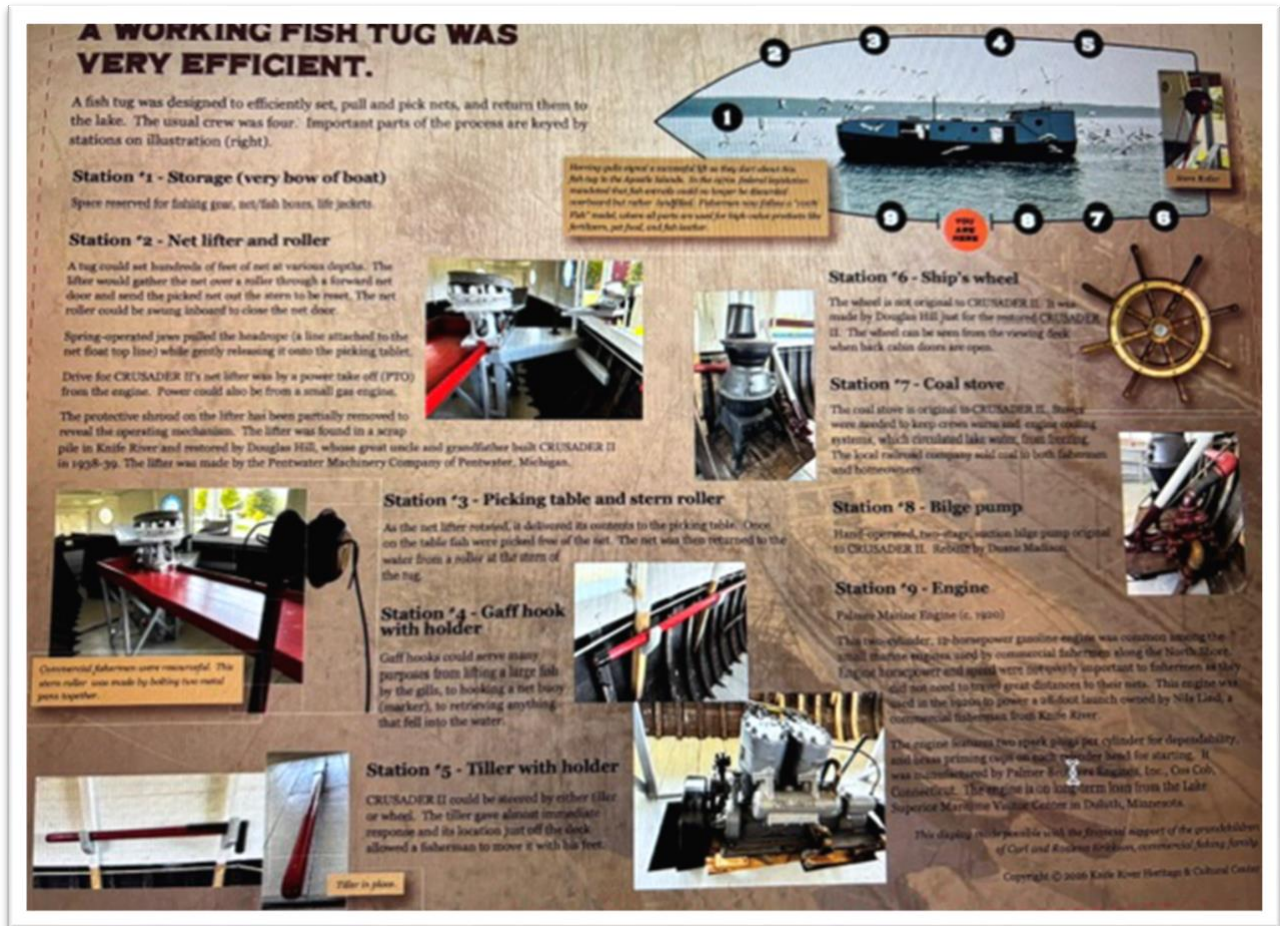


Photo above: The display depicts the working components of a commercial fish tug.  
Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

# Diving on the Wreck of the *Steamer AMERICA*

By Paul von Goertz

*Editor's note:*

*This is a follow up story to Todd Lindahl's history of the Steamer AMERICA that appeared in the March/April newsletter.*

*In June of 1963 I was asked by a favorite teacher of mine at East High School in Duluth to join him and couple of other graduating seniors to venture to Isle Royale for a week of camping. I eagerly accepted out of my love for the lake.*

*At the time, Sivertson Brothers Fisheries provided transportation to and from the island aboard the 53' Hiawatha. Our teacher knew Stan Sivertson, who was the captain and one of the owners of Sivertson Brothers. He soon invited us to the pilothouse where, in time, Stan told us about the wreck of the AMERICA and how his parents had been on board and rescued. Stan took the Hiawatha up next to the bow of the AMERICA, which rests only a few feet beneath the surface, while the stern sits 93' below. I recall vividly seeing the bow descending into the blue/black frigid waters of the lake. I was transfixed and vowed to myself I would someday explore it. This I did over several dives between 1970 and '76, and happy to share them with you.*



Photo left: The bow of *America* descending into the depths.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

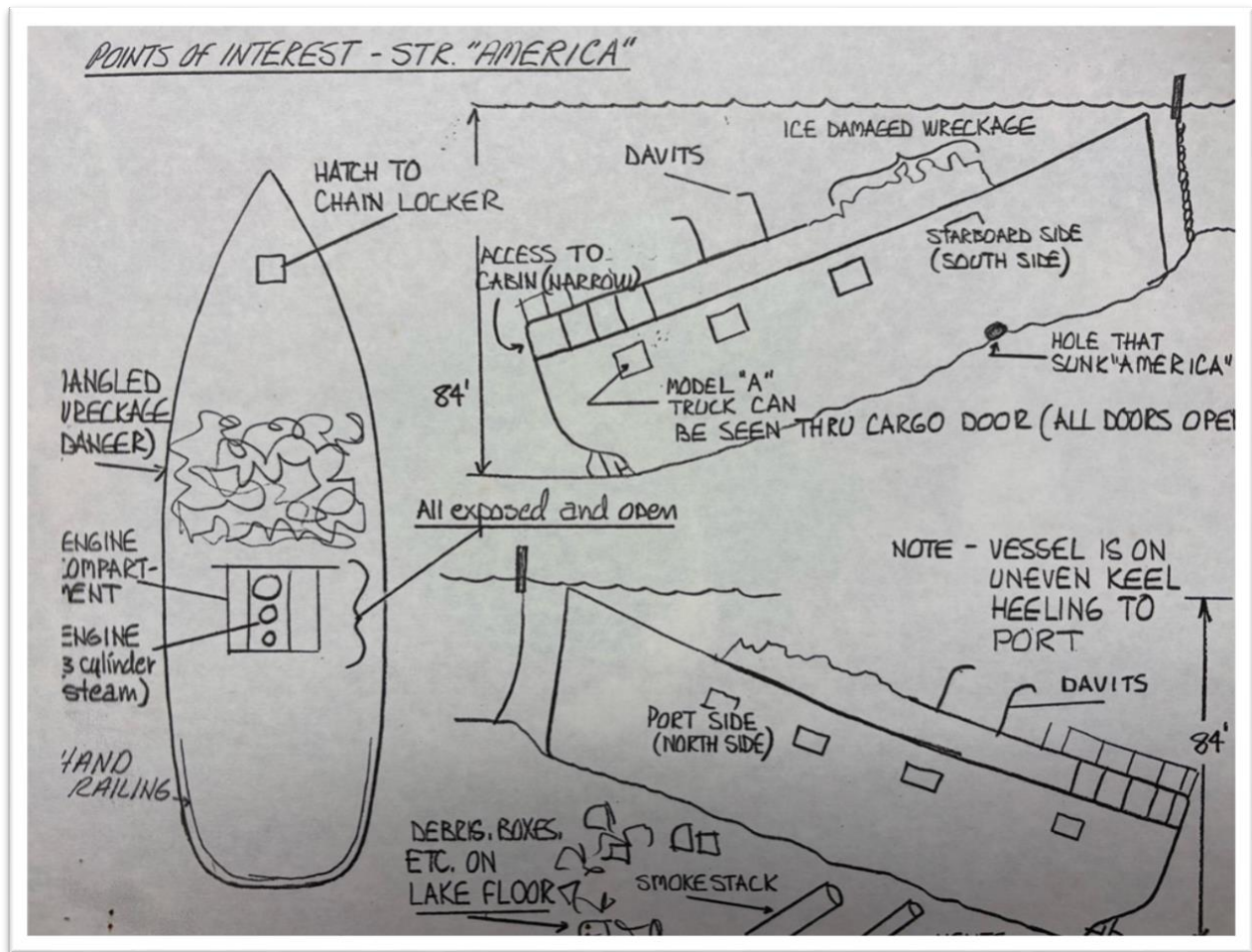
In the early '70s three of my friends and I decided to become certified Scuba divers so we could explore some of the North Shore's shipwrecks. We were all good swimmers and sailors. We viewed diving as another way to experience Lake Superior and learn some North Shore maritime history.

Over the next four years we dived the THOMAS WILSON, sunk off Leif Erikson Park, the ELY just off the inside of the Two Harbors west breakwall, the MADEIRA near Splitrock and the most memorable, the 183' AMERICA sunk off the North Gap of Isle Royale's Washington Harbor.

I made three trips to Isle Royale to dive the wreck, making a total of maybe six dives. Since it is relatively sheltered, it can often be dived when the lake is too rough to dive other sites.

I made this drawing (see below) of how the wreck looked in the '70s. A lot of debris surrounds the wreck. Much of the wood cabin was carried away by ice. A half-hearted attempt to raise the wreck in the early '60s resulted in more damage as the would-be salvagers cut off the stack and vents to help seal the deck prior to pumping air into it.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



As I look at recent photos of the wreck, some shown here, I noticed the degree of deterioration from what I saw more than 50 years ago. Fortunately, the non-profit Great Lakes Shipwreck Preservation Society has made a significant effort to stabilize areas of the wreck and repair much of the damage.

Photo right; A painting of the Stars and Stripes on the engine is barely visible. When I first saw it the white of the engine and colors of the flag were much more vivid. Marine growth has diminished the vibrancy. Photo credit: Public domain





The hull is mostly intact, save for about a 2-3' gash below the waterline on its starboard quarter from the rock that sank the ship. The below deck cabins, amidships and stern are intact. Cabins are recognizable as are the crew quarters, boiler room, engine room, galley, dining room, social salon, and open afterdeck.

I was able to swim up through the afterdeck (shown here left), galley, over the engine room and finally stairway to the deck. Passing through the galley I came across a tablecloth or other piece of linen that was stamped "Duluth Laundry." Photo: Public domain.

The bow of AMERICA is only about 3-4 feet underwater. The open hatch seen here (photo right) was inviting to Rich Ojard and me when we dived the wreck in the

summer of 1976. We swam down through it and into the crew's quarters where we saw bunks and a sink. At one point we were aware that we were in a large air bubble, probably left by excess air from previous divers. We were able to take out our regulators, take a few breaths and say something like "cool!" Photo credit: Public domain



The propeller rests on the sandy bottom in approximately 93'. To see the propeller gave me bragging rights to have swam the length of the ship. The depth was the deepest I ever descended into the lake. While on the bottom, an adult lamprey swam up to me and stopped. I despise lampreys for what they have done to lake trout populations. Wreck divers carry knives attached to their calves as one can expect wrecks to snare stray dive marker rope,

fishing line and nets. I took out my knife and cut the eel in two. Justice served!  
Photo: Public domain

## More on fish tug SHAMROCK

In the March/April issue of this newsletter, I reprinted a story I had written on the spring break-out from the Knife River harbor of the fish tug SHAMROCK, on which I happened to be.

In the story I that I said the tug was 35'. That was not correct, it was 40'. Thanks to Randy Ellestad and Mike Ojard for calling attention to my error. Fish tugs on the Minnesota side of the lake were limited to 35', or if larger, they needed a different and more expensive commercial fishing permit. Not so on the Wisconsin side. Randy also provided some additional information on SHAMROCK. It was built at Cornucopia, WI in 1945 by Thomas H. Jones, Sr. and named SUSAN M. Thomas Sr. had several sons who fished and built boats. The

fish tug was equipped with a Model DCMR468 Buda diesel and owned by Michael and George Stark of Cornucopia.

In the early 1960s Martin Johnson of Bayfield, WI, acquired the boat and fished it for several years. When he sold the boat, it eventually ended up at Hancock, MI, renamed SHAMROCK and the cabin given a coat of white paint with green trim. After various uses it was fished for a short time and then abandoned.



Photo right: SUSAN M., later SHAMROCK, in Cornucopia, WI. Photo credit: Public Domain

## Kendall's Smokehouse featured in *Duluth News Tribune*



Kendall's Smokehouse was featured in the April 4, 2026 edition of the *Duluth News Tribune* under its *Northlandia* feature column, written by Jay Gabler, the paper's Arts & Entertainment reporter and photo by Clint Austin.

The story was well written and was continued from the front page to inside pages. To many throughout the state, Kendall's and Knife River are synonymous. Anyone who lives in Knife River, visits our town, or

enjoys KR history and culture, should read the story. It can be found at the following link which will be available indefinitely. Minimum subscriber fee may be required.

<https://www.duluthnewstribune.com/news/local/northlandia-russ-kendalls-smokehouse-is-a-highway-61-institution>

Many thanks to Jay Gabler for recognizing Kendall's as a "Highway 61 institution" and providing the link.

## KRHCC Receives LaBounty Family Fund grant

On April 16, the KRHCC was notified that its grant request of \$5,000 to the LaBounty Family Fund for financial assistance in funding a landscape plan, had been approved. Yes!

Kursula Harris, Senior Community Impact Associate for Boreal Waters, who manages the LaBounty Fund, wrote:

*“Thank you for your recent application to the Boreal Waters Community Foundation for Site Landscaping in Preparation for International Event through the LaBounty Family Fund - Spring 2026.*

*We appreciate all that you and Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center do to serve your community. Your application received thorough review and thoughtful consideration by the Two Harbors Area Community Fund Advisory Board. As you know, this is a highly competitive process, and available funding does not fully meet the many opportunities and needs across our communities. We are grateful for the opportunity to partner with you and your organization.*

*Congratulations! The Site Landscaping in Preparation for International Event request to the LaBounty Family Fund - Spring 2026 has been approved for \$5,000.00”.*

Through grants and private donations, the KRHCC and SOS intend to implement a landscape plan for the KRHCC in advance of gala celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON to Duluth. The event will be summer of 2027.

## **Upcoming events**

**July 14:** "Toe Tapping Tuesday featuring Sir Ben's Celtic Night jamming group. 7 PM at the KR depot. No admission. Bring a chair. Depot opens at 6 PM. See the new exhibits.

**July 25:** “Grand Opening” of Viking Ship LEIF ERIKSON pavilion and exhibits. Help celebrate the first time in a hundred years that the Viking ship has had a protective shelter!

**August 4:** "Toe Tapping Tuesday featuring Sir Ben's Celtic Night jamming group. 7 PM at the KR depot. No admission. Bring a chair. Depot opens at 6 PM. See the new exhibits

**August 22:** Quilt Show – Celebrating Knife River and North Shore culture and heritage through quilts 10am to 4pm (Rain Day date 23 August 23). Free event, donations to the maintenance and general upkeep of KRHCC will be welcomed. More information will be sent before the event.

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

### **Donations:**

- Cash donations to the KRHCC general fund from visitors attending Julebyen 2025 weekend and North Shore History Fest March 27.
- Bill Berg in memory of Terry Berg to general fund.

### **Sponsorships:**

- Sponsorship of rebuilt KRHCC website by “two nice guys”.

**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!**

.....

*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](mailto:info@krhcc.org)*

*If you have family or friends who may enjoy reading this newsletter, they can access the current and all past issues on the "Current News" page of our website at: [krhcc.org](http://krhcc.org)*

*Newsletter published and copyrighted by Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center. Editor/Writer: Paul von Goertz; Historians/Researchers: Todd Lindahl, Randy Ellestad and Paul von Goertz; Graphic Design and Production: Anne-Lù Hovis.*

*No portion of this newsletter may be reproduced without written permission from the KRHCC. Contact: [info@krhcc.org](mailto:info@krhcc.org)*

© KRHCC 2026