KNIFE RIVER HERITAGE & CULTURAL CENTER

September/October 2026

By Paul von Goertz
KRHCC BOARD MEMBER

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KRHCC proves a popular venue for community activities

A historic train depot with two equally historic boats in a heavily Scandinavian village next to Lake Superior, has shown to be a popular venue for the Knife River (KR) community and its neighbors.

This year the KRHCC has or will provide the setting for eight events that collectively appeal to all age groups.

In chronological order:

History Fest – March 27
Sponsors: The Cook County Historical Society, Historic Harbor Theater, the KRHCC, Lake County Historical Society, Noatun Community Wooden Boatworks, and Two Harbors (TH) Public Library presented "History Day on the Shore" as part of the 5th annual Twin Ports History Fest. The KRHCC opened its doors for this event. Bad weather impacted attendance with about 20 stopping to learn about KR history.

Legacy Tree Dedication – June 14
Sponsor: KRHCC
Dedication of the KRHCC's Legacy Trees that honor or memorialize loved ones. About 50 were in attendance on a beautiful spring day.



Photo right: Those who gave a Legacy Tree and those who were honored pose at the dedication, Sunday, June 14.
Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

"Toe Tapping Tuesday" – July 14

Sponsor: KRHCC

TTT was introduced last summer and proved to be a big hit. Temperatures in the 90s and humidity about the same hurt attendance. Nevertheless about 20 people attended.

Viking Ship shelter dedication – July 25

Sponsors: "Save Our Ship" (SOS) and the KRHCC

The Viking ship proved it still has many fans as more than 100 people attended. Those in government positions who helped fund the shelter, as well as the shelter designer/builder and SOS board members who never lost sight of their vision to find a home for the ship, were in attendance and enthusiastically thanked!



Photo right: Some of the Viking ship's many fans.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

"Toe Tapping Tuesday" Open Jam Session – August 18

Sponsor: KRHCC

The KRHCC extended an invitation to all musician wannabees to participate in a jam session under perfect weather. Eleven musicians took part drawing a crowd of about 40.

Area-wide Quilt Show – August 22

Sponsors: Lake Superior Modern Quilt Guild, Lovin' Lake County and the KRHCC

This was the first quilt show on the North Shore and the brainchild of Anne-Lù Hovis of Knife River, and a quilter herself. As one approached the KRHCC site, one might think this was a summer version of Julebyen – parking lots and nearby roads filled with cars. An estimated 350 – 400 people attended. We anticipate the quilt show will be the KRHCC's major summer event in years to come.





Photo left: Shelter framework helped to display quilts. Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

Photo right: Aeriel view of Quilt Show. Photo credit: Scott Shelerud

The Christmas Tree Train (part of the KRHCC's "Trees.Trains.Traditions." - ***November 28***

Sponsors: North Shore Scenic Railroad, the KRHCC, and Lovin' Lake County.

Now in its fourth year, the Christmas Tree Train is becoming a family tradition. Families ride a train from Duluth to the KRHCC where they select a tree and holiday greenery from a tree lot. The trees are then wrapped and placed on a flatcar for return to Duluth where families can load their tree directly on their car from the flatcar. The Christmas Tree Train is the focal point of the KRHCC'S "Trees. Trains. Traditions." event. Trees and food service are provided by Lake County businesses.

Julebyen Weekend – December 5 & 6

Sponsors: Knife River Rec Council (KRRC), KRHCC and Lovin' Lake County

Now in its's 13th year, Julebyen weekend attracts about 7,000 area and state-wide residents to this Scandinavian-themed celebration of Christmas featuring juried crafters, Scandinavian food, music and dance. The KRHCC handles all arrangements for weekend train service from Duluth and runs the four Troll Trains to Troll Canyon where riders can look for mischievous trolls reported in the area. About 400 festivalgoers ride the two round-trip trains from Duluth and 1,200 ride the troll trains.



Photo left: Visitors to Julebyen are greeted by KR carolers.

Photo credit: Marilyn Magnuson

Next year:

It's early to predict next year's events, but for sure we will have at least two Toe Tapping Tuesdays, the "Christmas Tree Train" and the Julebyen trains. The big event will be the 100th anniversary celebration of the Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON's arrival in Duluth. This event will take place on July 17, 2027.

It will be an international event as the ERIKSON may be more popular in Norway than here. That's because the ERIKSON took the same route to North America thought to be taken by Leif Erikson in the 1100s, thus becoming the first European to discover the Americas.



Photo above: The LEIF ERIKSON sails into the Duluth Harbor on June 23, 1927.

Photo credit: Jim Storms

The events hosted by the KRHCC this year were part of the vision the organizers of the KRHCC had in 2018 when it received its non-profit status. The vision was a heritage center built around KR's historic and iconic train depot and fish tug CRUSADER II. The center was seen as a site for the KR community to gather for a variety of events for people of all ages. Vision accomplished!

Interested in holding an event at the KRHCC?

The KRHCC is available for rent for events the KRHCC's Board of Directors feel appropriate for a family-centered history and educational facility and complies with the Center's Conditional Use Permit (CUP) issued through Lake County Planning & Zoning. Interested parties should be aware the center offers minimal services (no water or flush toilets, no garbage collection), no alcohol is permitted on-site, and a security deposit is required 30 days prior to the event. The complete KRHCC site is ADA-compliant, offers on-site parking and handicapped drop-off.

For more information: info@krhcc.org.

Thought for the midterm election:

"We are not all in the same boat, but we are all in the same storm."

2026 Julebyen poster captures what Julebyen is all about



Each year Julebyen creates an attractive and attention-compelling poster that generates excitement and gives pertinent information on the festival. I thought this year's poster was extremely well done and so asked Helene Hedlund, Julebyen chair, who created it – Briana ("Bri") O'Toole.

I spent my whole 50-year career in the advertising industry and worked with many commercial artists, so feel I know good commercial art when I see it. I wanted to praise Bri for her work, which she volunteered, so I "interviewed" her by e-mail.

Bri most recently lived in the Metro but now lives in Two Harbors. As far as her work for Julebyen, she wrote: "I got to know the residents of Knife River and worked as a vendor at Julebyen last year. So, I witnessed everything and understood the essence and spirit of the event, which prepared me for when I was asked to help with marketing this year.

"I created each piece of the poster individually and then assembled it, slightly utilizing AI at the end. I also researched heavily on Nordic winter events and focused on the elements that I hear people talk about around town regarding Julebyen."

Bri just recently opened her own marketing firm in Two Harbors focusing on "Marketing • Events • Creative Growth." Her website is https://www.superiorcreativeflow.com/ The KRHCC always tries to support both new and existing Lake County businesses.

SMOKEY KENDALL'S SOLD TO KNIFE RIVER NATIVE

The iconic Smokey Kendall's smoke house and bar has been sold to Knife River native, Erik Furo. He completed the purchase at the end of June. The building had been for sale by the children of the Lowell ("Smokey") and Betty Kendall family for the past two years.



Photo right: Smokey Kendall's photographed in March of 2022.
Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



Erik Furo (photo left), age 54, said he has memories of Smokey's growing up in Knife River where he said it was a community gathering place, and he would like to see it returned as such.

"I remember going to Smokey's in the afternoon and shooting pool with friends and having a pop. But our parents told us we had to be out by 4 PM as that's when the adults started arriving."

"Over the next year or so, I'll give the property a lot of thought and develop a business plan centered on a showroom gallery and workshop where crafters and artists can practice their talents—whether in fine art, woodworking, pottery, metal, or other media. There will be some kind of food and beverage service with both indoor and outdoor seating. I figure the building will have about a 60' frontage on Scenic 61 and probably be two levels. I plan on involving my children in the business plan and have them be part of what we do.

"The building is on posts which have deteriorated to where the only option is to remove it. The bar and walls still have a lot of memorabilia from the period when Smokey's was a hopping place, from the late '40s into the sixties, which I plan to use as building décor."

Furo said he has been a builder all his life starting with a tree fort as a child. He has built and/or remodeled several homes in the Knife River area including a two-story building in Segog that currently serves as an "entrepreneurial incubator."

Furo said he has already done some landscaping starting with clearing the area around the building and planting 12 trees: four red maple, four red oak and four weeping willows.

This newsletter will report on the development of the Smokey Kendall site as plans are released.

Some history on Smokey Kendall'

In the March 2022 issue of this newsletter, I wrote a brief history on Smokey Kendall's with help from Lowell Kendall family members, which I reprint in part:

Martin Checklin – KR'S Master Carpenter of Whimsy

Ever since making KR our home nearly 54 years ago, I have been curious about the architectural detail of certain buildings that resemble something from a fairyland. In short, I'd call it "whimsical." There are at least three samples of which I am writing, all designed and built by a somewhat reclusive drifter named Martin Checklin. The spelling of "Checklin" may not be correct

One building is most evident and that is Martin Checklin's distinctive architectural embellishments that can be seen at Smokey Kendall's on Scenic 61.

The other structures are barely visible. One is the little house across from Kendall's Fish at the left entrance to Kendall Road, and the other the remnants of what appears to be a replica of a lighthouse with an octagonal top where the light would be. It is on private property and can only be seen from the water along the KR shoreline.

I talked to several of KR's older residents about these buildings. Lifelong KR resident, Audrey Carlson, said in 2022 (she passed away in 2024 at age 100) that she remembered Martin built and lived in the small house across from Kendall's. She remembered it as she walked past it on her way to the KR school. "I don't remember much about him," said Audrey. "He worked at Kendall's mostly outside and as a handy-person. He was old back then and had a long white beard. He stayed pretty much to himself."

From what I understand, Martin was a skilled carpenter and used only hand tools. My guess he was also a creative guy and perhaps a Romantic, judging by building embellishments right out of some fairytale book.

Lowell and Betty Kendall's children remember that Martin, along with their dad, had collaborated on the design and construction of "Smokey Kendall's" sometime during the late 1940s or early 50s, using only hand tools.

2026 Corn sale raises $1,941 - $9,622 over past six years!

By Lee Bujold



The results of the 2026 Corn Sale are in:
2026: $1,941
2025: $1,396
2024: 1,772
2023: $1,295
2022: $1,237
2021: $1,981
Total: $9,622 raised for the KRHCC over six years!

Everyone was most generous; the corn pick-up date is a very social event and it's a lot of fun with "just corn." Special thanks to all who bought corn from Mary Shaw (photo below, credit to Lee Bujold) the "Corn Princess," to the expert "Betzler Baggers" (Steve and Cindy Betzler).



"Bob the Corn Man" also expressed that Knife Riverites are a rich blessing to his family's business. Same time next year!

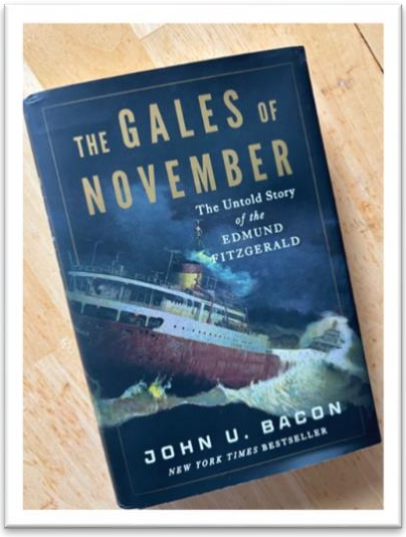
Sincerely,

Lee and Jim Bujold (the Corn People and their Corn Dogs)

PS: Next year we have an offer from Steve and pat Berger to coordinate a corn boil so donors can enjoy a fresh-picked cob or two!

Editor's note: The KRHCC is most thankful for this fund-raiser that is totally stick-handed by the Bujolds, including driving south of Ashland, WI, to pick up the corn early in the day of corn distribution.

My first book review – a must read!



My sister gave me a book to read that she said she could not put down. The book is "*The Gales of November. The untold story of the EDMUND FITZGERALD,"* by John U. Bacon. I figured it was just another person's speculation on what caused the boat to be lost. But it was billed as a *New York Times* "best seller," which aroused my curiosity as the book apparently had appeal beyond those living in the Great Lakes region.

Far from dwelling on what may have led to the sinking, the book was a study on what compels a man to be a "laker" and accept the separation from family for four months out of the year. The author profiles the lives of several of the crew and their plans following the completion of the 1975 shipping season. He also gives us slices of captain Ernest Mc Sorley's competitive and perhaps overachiever personality that became a factor in the sialthough he was one of the Great Lake's most experienced and respected captains.

I had the opportunity to have breakfast with Dudley "Packy" Paquettte, captain of the WILFRED SYKES, that was on the lake the same day of the FITZGERALD and heard all the conversation between the FITZ and the ARTHUR M. ANDERSON, which was a few miles behind the FITZ.

Packy was very candid with his comments, but what he said collaborated with what Bacon wrote in his book.

Some of the take-a-ways were:

- McSorely accepted the forecast of the National Weather Service as to the direction and intensity of the storm. Packy made his own forecast which took the SYKES to the lee of the more protected north shore.
- McSorley took the shortest and most time-saving route to the Soo, even though it gave the FITZ greater exposure to the hurricane-force wind and waves.
- McSorley chose not to throttle back until too lake, thereby driving the FITZ into the mountainous seas, perhaps contributing to hull fatigue.

Two "Greatest Generation" veterans honored with gifts to the KRHCC

Joe and Barbara Russell of Knife River wanted to honor their fathers for their service during WWII by donating something to the KRHCC that would reflect their father's patriotism - and serve those who visit our center as well.

Two items seemed to fit the Russells goals and for which the KRHCC profusely thanks the Russells.



Item #1: The existing flagpole base was plain structural concrete which we faced with a mortar that soon cracked and became unsightly. The KRHCC worked with Joe and his favored mason, Jared Foley (JF Masonry of Clover Valley) to create a base faced with brick and capped with polished granite into which a compass rose was engraved. The base is as much artistry as it is functional as it also serves as a place to sit and rest.

Photo left: New flagpole base.
Photo right: ADA ramp and sidewalk into the freight building.
Photo credits: Paul von Goertz



Item #2: The KRHCC has always prided itself as being ADA-compliant and barrier-free. The freight building was originally expected to just store stuff for the KRHCC. But then, Todd Lindahl, former KRHCC board member and historian, converted half the building into a restored depot agent's office. It now was a KRHCC exhibit and the stairs into the building as an intended for storage, needed to be replaced with an accessible ramp. The Russells donated both the ramp and the concrete sidewalk from the depot to the freight building. Alex Happ of NorShor Construction (Knife River) built the ramp.

As a WWII history buff since childhood, I found the service of Joe's and Barbara's fathers, which they shared with me, to be very representative of "The Greatest Generation." So as Veterans Day approaches (November 11), I honor all veterans with the Russell's fathers' stories.

Joseph Thorald Russell (Joe Russell's father)



April 13, 1921 – March 10, 2023 - He was a decorated World War II veteran and B-24 "Liberator" co-pilot. He lived a remarkably long life, passing away in Minneapolis at the age of 101. In 1942, while studying Industrial Engineering at the University of Minnesota, he decided to join the U.S. Army Air Corps ROTC. He earned his commission as a Second Lieutenant in February 1943 after training as a military co-pilot. In October 1944, he was sent to the European Theater of Operations, stationed out of Venosa, Italy. He served with the 15th Air Force 485th Bomb Group, 828th Squadron, and flew the heavy B-24 Liberator bomber on 18 dangerous combat missions.

Photo credit: Joe Russell Jr.

Vernon Neal Nielsen (Barbara Russell's father)



October 21, 1923 – March 16, 2009 – Vern's family came to Minneapolis from northern IA where, during the depression years, they lived for some time in a tent with a dirt floor. They, and many other families from Northern IA, relocated to Minneapolis in the 1930s to work at a company that made military equipment. Vern honorably served as a member of the 1st Special Service Force (FSSF), an elite joint American Canadian commando unit. During the Italian campaign of World War II, the Force was attached to 1st Airborne Task Force for the campaign in southern France. The Force served in the Aleutian Islands, fought in Italy and southern France. For his military service and sacrifices, he was awarded the Purple Heart.

Photo credit: Barbara Russell

Plan your holiday train trips now!

The North Shore Scenic Railroad (NSSR) in partnership with the KRHCC will be offering three holiday train experiences sure to give families lasting Christmas memories or even start a tradition. Seats are limited so get your tickets early!

"Christmas Tree Train": (Ties to the KRHCC's "Trees. Trains. Traditions." event)
This train has limited seating. Order tickets at www.DuluthTrains.com

Julebyen Express:
Trains to and from Knife River daily over Julebyen weekend. For Express times, fares and tickets go to www.DuluthTrains.com

Troll Train to Troll Canyon:
For those inspired to search for mischievous trolls. Two trains each day of Julebyen. Troll Train times, fares and 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 where trolls have been sighted during the holiday season. It is suggested that persons intending to ride a Troll Train purchase tickets early in the day. Seating is limited.

Dome car seating is available at an additional charge. No ATM on site. Cookies and cocoa for sale in the Knife River depot.

DONATIONS, MEMORIALS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

Donations:

- Anne-Lù and Steve Hovis donation of a Core 13' x 13' center push canopy shelter.
- Lee Cohen to the general fund.
- Marcia and David Lothner to the general fund.
- Bob and Sheryl Enztion interpretive display of the interior of CRUSADER II; name applied to stern of CRUSADER II.
- Leslie Hughes to the general fund.

Honorarium:

- Joe and Barbara Russell - ADA-compliant sidewalk and ramp from depot apron to freight building; replace flagpole concrete collar with decorative stone in honor of Joe's father, Joseph Thorald Russell, and Barbara's father, Vernon Neal Nielsen.

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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