



# Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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December 2023

By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

## **JULEBYEN'S 10<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY - HOW WE GOT HERE.**

By Paul von Goertz with comment from  
Nancy Von Riedel, Marcia Johnson, Carol Carlson and Nancy Ojard



Photo: David Schauer

Julebyen began as a community fundraiser in 2013. Its success can be attributed, in part, to what had been learned from previous fundraisers - what worked, what didn't, and what could have been done better.

So as we celebrate Julebyen's 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, let's recap a couple of its core building blocks, and in doing so preserve the history of Knife River (KR) fundraising.

### **The KR “Tour of Homes”:**

Fish cake dinners were the major source of funds for the Knife River Rec Council since it was founded in 1953. But KR people had big ideas for the community and so took a big step forward in 1989 when Nancy Von Riedel, who co-owned Dodges Log Lodges along with her husband, a building contractor, had the idea for a tour of homes.

The two had designed and built a unique home on the shore that maximized passive solar heat and lake views. It created a lot of attention and Nancy figured their home and others that featured innovative designs could all be part of a “Tour of Homes” during the holiday season. Nancy shared her vision with Carol Carlson, who immediately embraced it and offered to help.

The idea was to find three homes – at least one on the lake and one on the ridge above town. The homes didn’t have to be new, but all should display the homeowner’s creativity in holiday decorating, preferably reflecting their Scandinavian heritage. People got tickets at the rec building and were shuttled from home to home.

Here are some of the details of the tour from Nancy:

*“The first three homes were ours, Rich and Nancy Ojard’s, and John and Lois Geist’s. I asked KR women to make a great wild rice soup lunch to be sold in the rec building, along with locally made crafts. Anderson’s Greenhouse in Two Harbors (TH) graciously put a flower arrangement in each home and I arranged for vans donated by Sonju Motors, to transfer people to the homes driven by KR men with Santa hats!”*

*“Tickets were only \$5.00 at that time! Owners had their homes all decorated for Christmas! We had people come as far as the Cities to tour the homes! Waiting lines prompted one local fellow to go home to get his own van to drive more people! It was always so popular!”*

*“One year we tried a fall tour but decided to stick with holding it in December. I think I chaired the tour about 13 years, then Jacquie Sabastian as KRRC president took over. I really don’t think we ran out of homes, seems like there’s always a new or remodeled home in KR. It was FUN, I enjoyed it completely!! I think we made enough money to help build the tennis court.”*

Commentary: In retrospect, the audience for the Tour of Homes was too narrow, the event wasn’t family-oriented, and a little too dependent on shuttles.

### **The KR Haunted Hayride:**

The event was held the evening of Halloween. The idea was that of Vicky Ojard in 1994, who along with Susan Southard and Nancy Ojard, brought the idea to life. People bought a ticket to ride hay wagons pulled by pick-up trucks along a route from the rec building down Marina Road to a path on KRRC property full of tansy weeds, to a private road, then to American Dock Road and back to the rec building.

Along the way were about ten “stations” where a brief skit took place to frighten riders. These skits were very creative and involved sometimes elaborate props. The best one I can recall was Jim Courtney dressed as Frankenstein lying on a gurney. Nearby were three witches stirring a big black kettle. They would come to the gurney and touch two jumper cables together over Jim’s chest. Sparks

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would fly and Jim would slowly rise from the gurney, see the wagon riders, make some guttural noises and head for the wagon, which quickly departed.

Marcia (Courtney) Johnson lived along the path of the hay wagons and wrote this summary of the event:

*"I was on the rec council and got involved organizing it for a fundraiser in 1996. Community support and involvement was great. The stalled wagon on the train track...then the train horn & lights; a giant spider dropping on riders from above; witches at a cauldron looking for tasty children while distracting riders until the hot air balloon flame, with its intense heat and noise along with the devil created screams!"*

*"Roaming ghosts, screeching attacks by zombies or monkeys; graveyards and a headless horsewoman, Randy Ellestad and his creative activities, (Frankenstein, aliens) at his campground played a huge part for many years, too. In 1997 we filled hay wagons 13 times. In 2001 we estimated over 800 riders in one night. The last entry I found for the event was 2006 with an estimate of around 500 riders. By then, community involvement was slipping...so we stopped. Over the years we only skipped two years – the year Jim Courtney died and in 2005 for an unknown reason."*

Each wagon had a guide to keep people seated in the center of the wagon and to distract people by asking them to look to the left when a scary skit was on the right - and vice versa. I volunteered to be a guide which meant leaning against a rack at the back of the wagon. This was fun until splat! splat! I got hit by two eggs from out of the dark – payback from my own childhood Halloween days? "No good deed should go unpunished."

Commentary: The hayride required many volunteers to set up and dismantle stations and to staff them. This was a factor in diminished community support. An event can only be as successful as volunteers are willing to support it.

### **Enter Julebyen - an exciting concept builds on what was learned from earlier fundraisers:**

In June of 2012 KR experienced a record 4" of rain that overflowed the Knife River and flooded the ball field and rec building to about 13". As a result, there was no Tour of Homes the following December.



By chance, Chris and Anne Skadberg were visiting members of Chris's family in Egersund, in southern Norway, during the 2012 holiday season. They experienced Egersund's "Julebyen" which translates into "Christmas Village".

Photo: The Egersund, Norway Julebyen (from Egersund website)

Said Anne in a news story that ran in the Duluth News Tribune: *"The village was filled with lights, garland and homemade crafts and foods sold from individual huts. It*



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*was just charming. It was simple; it was classy. It was just a place where people got together and see the pretty things that people had made. It gave the message of Christmas. "I thought it was something people here should get to experience," said Anne. "I sent Carol some pictures thinking she could glean a couple of ideas. She took the whole concept and ran with it."*

The early organizational meetings began in the spring of 2013 and all was in motion by August. Marv Holt designed the signature huts. Scott Jaspersen and a small crew assembled ten of them and painted them in bright colors in Oden Alreck Field. The KR Garden Club decorated the huts with garland and made centerpieces for craft tables in the rec building. A home lighting contest was a part of the activities.

An official Julebyen was designed by Giant Voices Communications. The official Julebyen logo honors its founding fishing families and the church as "the heart of the community."



I recall the first Julebyen attracted an estimated 750 people with consideration that the temperature at 7:30 AM was 15 below. I remember calling Carol at that time and asking if we should cancel. Her response was something like "Heck no!"

The 2013 Julebyen did include a Tour of Homes component that lasted through 2016. It was felt that the Tour had a loyal following that should not be ignored. But the two audiences were not the same and Julebyen covered all demographics.

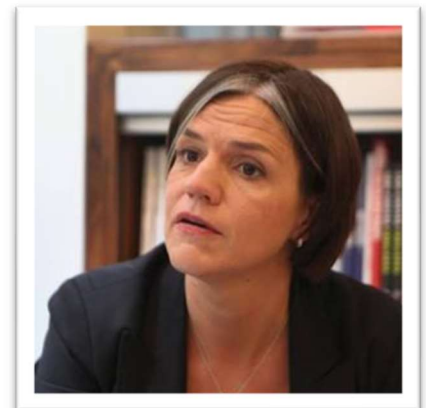
### Julebyen goes international:



Julebyen went international in 2015 when it was featured in a Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation documentary. Photo: Public domain

Tove Bjorgaas is a Norwegian television correspondent. According to Carol she was in northern Minnesota covering a story on a Norwegian Language camp. In a relaxed moment she saw an ad for John Anderson's realty business in Two Harbors which advertised properties on the "Norwegian Riviera on the North Shore." She was intrigued, called the number and after an interesting conversation with John, he referred her to Carol.

*"Tove (imaged right) visited our home," said Carol. "She interviewed me and took pictures of photos I had. One was of my great grandparents' home on Sorooya Island. We still have many relatives in Norway, some of whom recognized the photo when her documentary aired and emailed me - they were astonished to see the photo!"* Photo: Public domain



Tove and a videographer arrived a few days prior to Julebyen 2015 to shoot some footage of KR to get a feel for the village. They shot video throughout Julebyen weekend. The completed documentary aired twice in the station's 40-minute news blocks at 7 and 11 PM

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during the holiday season to an audience estimated of 3.5 million Norwegians. Local realtors received inquiries from Norwegians on the availability of property in KR.

Our brother-in-law, Erling Nervick, is a professional Norwegian with family in Norway. Shortly after the KR documentary aired, he received a Christmas card from his cousins Marit and Hans who live in Trøndelag, Norway.

In it they write: *"Thank you for your mail and with Norwegian TV from Minnesota. In fact we saw this on the local TV for some days ago. And we recognize the place Knife River. That's great!!"*

The documentary helped KR establish a sister-city relationship with Egersund, Norway, from which the KR Julebyen is patterned.

*Said Carol, "I wish we still had the video of Tove's train ride from Duluth to KR and all the activities of Julebyen. It was amazing."*

Surprise - Carol! A little digging into my Julebyen files and I found the link still active:

<http://www.nrk.no/urix/norsk-jul-med-sildekakerogkapteinsabeltann1.12702512>

### **We partner with the North Shore Scenic Railroad:**

In 2014 Carol had the idea that we should involve the North Shore Scenic Railroad to bring folks to Julebyen. I said I would talk to Ken Buehler, NSSR Executive Director, about the idea. I've known Ken for years, but he was rather cool to the idea of tying up two locomotives (front and back of train) and crew for a day given Julebyen was pretty much still a concept. I reported back to Carol and she was not thrilled. This was about mid-October.



Ten days before Julebyen I got a call from Carol that went something like this: "I talked to Ken Buehler and we got the train! You have ten days to fill 300 seats – hah!" Then she hung up. Carol had put me in charge of marketing which included branding an event with a name people could not pronounce or spell or even know what it was - and now this?!

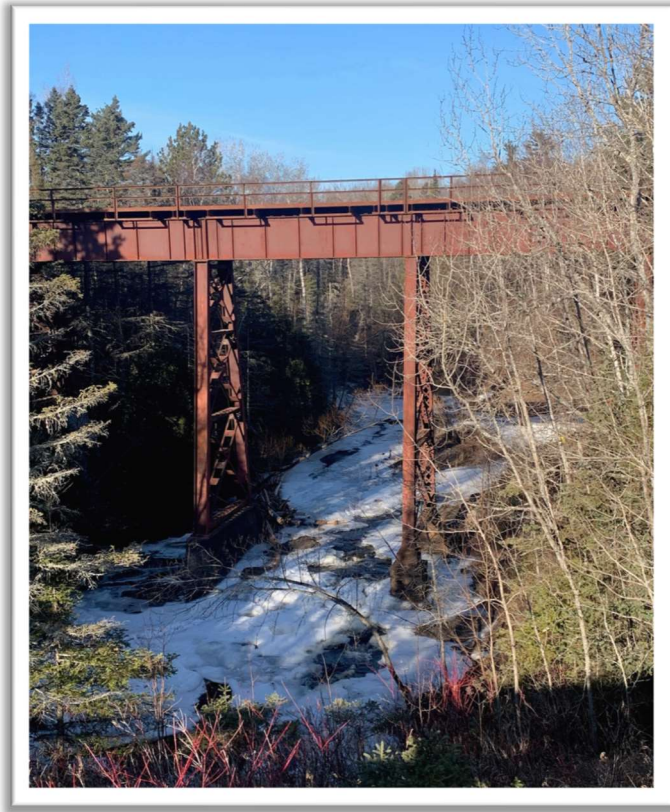
We had no money for advertising, but Ken said he would run some newspaper and radio ads. As I pondered the situation, I came up with a win/win solution. We would fill the train with as many members of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Duluth and Superior as we could.

My thought was that I personally would raise the money to cover kids' train fares and lunches. For the next ten days I called friends that I felt would embrace the idea of treating under-privileged kids. For how all this worked out, see "Julebyen's Outreach to Under- Privileged Children" elsewhere in this newsletter.

What would be the inaugural "Julebyen Express" carried 91 passengers – 61 festivalgoers and 30 Boys & Girls Club members with all expenses paid by generous KRers. Total visitors to Julebyen in 2014 was estimated at 1,400 – 1,600.

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In 2016 the “Troll Train to Troll Canyon” was initiated. Ken Buehler called me and suggested we offer short train rides while the Julebyen Express sat idling for its return to Duluth – about a three-hour window. We agreed it should not be longer than 20 minutes each way, total about 40 minutes round trip. A train going east offered very little in scenery. In fact, there weren’t many views of the lake. A train going west offered panoramic views of the river canyons formed by both the Little and Big Sucker rivers.



My dad was born in Bergen, Norway (of German descent) and told me and my sisters many stories from Norwegian mythology. Trolls were big and ugly and for the most part lived under bridges where they would be out of the sun. Sunlight would turn a troll to stone.

I walked the railroad track from Homestead Road west over the Big Sucker railroad bridge. The view into the canyon was spectacular. But I was a bit dismayed. How could we safely get trolls to appear from under the bridge? Ken said whatever we did could not be on the railroad right-of-way, which included the bridge. I walked a bit past the bridge and there was the answer – a small pond! That pond, frozen by Julebyen has been the stage for troll skits ever since.

Photo above: The Big Sucker River canyon is the perfect “Troll Canyon.” Troll Train riders may surprise lounging trolls on a frozen pond about 100 yards west (left) of the canyon.

Photo: Paul von Goertz

In 2017 Julebyen nearly doubled its footprint by adding Troll Village at the KRHCC site. It consisted of a 35’ x 40’ tent from which books on the North Shore and Norwegian mythology were sold among other subjects. Additionally, there were four 10’ x 10’ vendor tents. Three Troll Trains on Saturday departed and returned from Troll Village. The site looked terrible with the depot falling down and grounds a mess. The depot would not be available to board and deboard train riders until the rebuild was completed in 2019. That was the first time the depot had welcomed passengers to KR since 1956.

Troll Train riders set a record in 2023 with an estimated 1,400 riders over five trips to the Big Sucker River canyon during the weekend. Many thanks to the NSSR for making their locomotives available for troll trains at no cost to the KRHCC.

### **Julebyen history briefs:**

In 2016 it was decided to hold a catered dinner under a tent at Julebyen Village (Oden Alreck Field) to allow volunteers to relax and celebrate all that had been done to prepare for Julebyen. A silent auction was a component. The dinner was supposed to be a time to relax, but it actually created more work and so was dropped in 2019.

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Also dropped in 2019 was “A Celebration of Music” that capped Julebyen weekend. It was held at the church late Sunday. It was a wonderful hour of holiday music by local musicians followed by tables of holiday desserts. It was a great idea of Carol’s, but by late Sunday of Julebyen weekend volunteers were near exhaustion.

A live nativity was a big part of Julebyen initiated in one of the early Julebyens, and then dropped in 2020 when Julebyen was suspended because of COVID 19. It returned in 2023 and was a highlight of Julebyen weekend for many with horses, goats and an “angel dog.”

In 2020 with pretty much of the country locked down, it was decided to create a “virtual Julebyen.” We invited crafters to place their items on the Julebyen website and many did. It was the best we could do to support crafters who had been loyal to Julebyen and to continue the Julebyen momentum.

Julebyen received a great promotional boost in 2021 when it applied for and received a grant from Lovin’ Lake County (LLC), the county’s tourism marketing arm. LLC receives 3% of lodging tax dollars to promote events that bring people to Lake County. Funds received help Julebyen cover overhead and insurance costs, allowing more money for the KRRC to create and maintain recreational opportunities for our community and visitors alike. LLC now recognizes Julebyen as Lake County’s largest off-season attraction, according to Michelle Peterson who administers LLC grants.



## OPINION

**Julebyen has been blessed by four people touched by the “magic” of Julebyen and who have worked tirelessly to share it. They need to be recognized.**

- Anne Skadberg – first experienced a Julebyen in Egersund, Norway, in 2010 and dared to believe it could be replicated in KR.
- Carol Carlson – grasped Anne’s vision and carried it out. Chaired Julebyen during its fragile formative years through 2020.
- Scott Jasperson – Scott took on the job of Julebyen “village planner,” overseeing the building and arranging of huts, getting electrical service, attending to visitor safety and performing all aspects of a groundskeeper. He did this for several years until we were organized enough to divide his work among others.
- Helene Hedlund – an amazing organizer and detailed administrator who sends emails at 2:47 AM. Chair from 2021 to present.

Julebyen relies on more than 200 volunteers who share the magic of Julebyen!



### Why is Julebyen enjoyed by so many?

It's because people are identifying with, or rediscovering the Christmas values Julebyen embraces: family and holiday traditions, a more simple and meaningful Christmas with music and food of the season, creativity represented in crafts, and the fantasy world within Norwegian mythology.

Volunteers are supportive because they are encouraged to help in activities they enjoy and find personally rewarding. Best of all – Julebyen is fun over all age groups! And, of course, Julebyen is FREE!

### JULEBYEN'S OUTREACH TO UNDER-PRIVELEDGED CHILDREN

In the front page story I wrote about how we were able to bring 30 children ages 8 – 12 from the Boys and Girls Clubs of Duluth and Superior to Julebyen in 2014. A stipulation was that we needed a chaperone for every five children. For those whom I asked to pay the kids' expenses, this was such a heart-warming experience they wanted it to continue. So the Knife River Outreach was formed. It was a very rewarding and huge learning experience for me.

The first year Mary and I handed out candy canes to the children, which were quickly devoured. I told Mary they must have really liked them. Mary, who had spent her career teaching and later with children and families at risk, said "They were probably hungry." She explained that many under-privileged children do not receive a proper breakfast. This should not be.



Image left: This young man took to Mary right away and sat with her whenever the opportunity arose. Photo: Paul von Goetz.

I approached Lake View Hospital dietary, explained the situation and asked if they could prepare healthy snack bags for the kids for their ride to Julebyen – and we would pay them. Lake View agreed - then donated the snack bags. They made this donation every year the Outreach existed.

During one of the earlier Outreach years a little girl approached Gale Safstrom, who has been the indoor marketplace cashier forever. She wanted to buy a gift for her mother and asked Gail if she could work with her at \$1.00 an hour to pay for the gift she had found.

When Gale and Barb Eaton, who was working with Gail told me about this incident, we came up with the idea whereby children could earn "Christmas Kroner" to spend at Julebyen. For every hour a child spent in community service we would pay \$5 in Christmas Kroner, max five hours. The kids could then spend the Kroner at Julebyen. In turn we told Juebyen vendors that at the end of Julebyen weekend they could exchange the Kroner for real dollars. The Boys and Girls club staff would decide what constituted community service: cleaning the meeting centers, reading to children, walking an elderly person's dog, picking up trash in public areas, etc. Over the years several children learned that with work comes rewards.



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Image right: Christmas Kroner was given to deserving children by a Julebyen gnome on steroids before the Julebyen Express left for Knife River. This was one of the best tasks I, Paul von Goertz, will ever have. One year three kids who had previously earned Christmas Kroner, gave me a group hug. Priceless. Photo: Josh Miller



One year we had an early winter and so had a nice skating rink. Local kids were skating on it while club members had only boots. Polly Sannes said all kids should have skates so went to a skate exchange and came back with at least eight pairs in various sizes - and I believe at no cost. (Polly is good at negotiating.) The skates Polly bought have been multiplied by those others who have outgrown their skates. So now we have skates in sizes for just about every child.



The Outreach was generously funded by about six men all of whom helped children experience the values Julebyen embraces, as well as the generosity and compassion of Knife River people.

Photo left: Mike Ojard with Boys and Girls Club kids just arrived from Duluth. Mike, who was raised in a motherless home, paid the total cost for the first Outreach in 2014. He continued to support the Outreach every year it was offered.

Photo: Paul von Goertz

The Outreach lasted from 2014 until 2021 when the Boys and Girls Club acknowledged they could not provide the required chaperones for every five children. This was disheartening. I polled our contributors to the Outreach and we decided we would take the balance of our account and give it to the clubs for their annual Christmas party.

Now to plan the next Outreach!

## SHELEWEATHER HAS A NEW ADDRESS

Earlier this year Scott Shelerud placed a weather station on his lakefront property by the river mouth that will give you real-time local weather conditions, and the 10-day forecast. How great is this for folks who leave the metro with what the metro forecasts say is a perfect KR boating day, only to be welcomed by a honkin' northeast and 47-degree temps.

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For various reasons Scott has a new web address it is <https://tempestwx.com/station/125534>

Thank you, Scott, for this service!

**OMMISIONS AND CORRECTIONS**

In the November issue I listed all that went right for the KRHCC over the last seven years and neglected to mention "The Best Ever Corn Sale." This was an idea of Jim and Lee Bujold to raise money for the KRHCC. They handled all aspects of the event including driving 240 miles to get the corn as it came off the field the day of the event. Started in 2021, the event has raised more than \$3,000 for the KRHCC. Thank you, Jim and Lee!

Also, in the November issue I spelled Dave Schauer's name incorrectly in a photo credit. My apologies Dave.

**DECEMBER DONATIONS, MEMORIALS,  
HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS**

**Donations:**

- Jean Brobst in response to Odyssey Resorts \$5,000 challenge match to KRHCC general fund.

**Memorials**

- Bill Berg in memory of Terry Berg
- Anne & Scott Jaspersen in memory of Reid Carson

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