



# Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

## “TREES, TRAINS, TRADITIONS” & SURPRISE!



Photo credit: David Schaurer.

All were awaiting the whistle that would announce the approach of the train from Duluth coming to the 3<sup>rd</sup> annual “Trees. Trains. Traditions” event at the KRHCC. The event takes place each year on the Saturday following Thanksgiving.

Finally, the whistle sounded but, wait - it was not the familiar diesel locomotive whistle but that of the 332 steam locomotive!

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Ken Buehler, Executive Director of the North Shore Scenic Railroad, had told me earlier that morning he had a surprise for the KRHCC and a **surprise it was!**

Said Ken: “The 332 had just come out of the shop where it been for 1½ years for scheduled maintenance. We wanted to give it a run to show the all-volunteer work crew that their hard work had paid off. So we made the run for them and all the Knife River (KR) volunteers who saved the depot and created a destination for our riders.”

Paul von Goertz as Depot Agent and Ken Buehler, NSSR Executive Director. The two have known each other through Duluth media circles for more than 40 years and now as partners for their respective non-profits.

Photo credit: Cynthia Betzler

Josh Miller, NSSR Director of Operations, said he believed the arrival of the 332 was the first time in recent memory that KR was the 332’s destination. Josh rode the train and said he had never seen so many people at road crossings hoping to get a glimpse of it. “We never advertised or even publicized the 332 was going to run today,” said Josh. “Credit social media for that.”



The 141 people riding the “Christmas Tree Train” were thrilled to learn they would be treated to a real steam locomotive ride. Those in KR came running once they heard the steam whistle call out the arrival of the train.



Many thanks to the NSSR for choosing KR for one of the few times during the year when the 332 leaves the Duluth train yard.

Trees, wreathes and garland are all available at the KRHCC tree lot through Northern Connections of Two Harbors.



Music for the Holiday season was provided by Dance Attic.

Thank you all.

Photo credits: Paul von Goertz

## **“TREES, TRAINS. TRADITIONS” IS TRUE TO ITS NAME**

In just three years “Trees. Trains. Traditions” is apparently becoming a Christmas tradition for many Northland families, judging by conversation I had with some of this year’s train riders. Each year, including this year’s train, has sold out. The inaugural 2021 train was capped at 60 tickets as a first-time learning experience. It has now more than doubled to 141.

The idea for the train was born by Josh Miller with the North Shore Scenic Railroad. Families take the train from Duluth to the KRHCC where they select a tree from a lot of locally grown trees. Trees are wrapped and placed on a flatcar for the return to Duluth. Folks can then drive up to the flatcar and load their tree.

The KRHCC loved the idea and expanded upon it to create the event “Trees. Trains. Traditions.” It’s a kick-off to the holiday season with music, food, and holiday greenery. The event is free to the public and takes place the Saturday following Thanksgiving. Locals may shop for trees once train riders make their selections, which is usually completed by 11:15.

Trees. Trains Traditions. is sponsored by Loving Lake County, the county’s marketing arm.



## **WHEN THINGS JUST GO RIGHT**

One of the regulars at Judy’s Café in Two Harbors (TH) told our son recently “The KRHCC gets things done,” and that’s why he donates to the KRHCC. This is the same man who told our son in December of 2016 “Your dad stole our boat”. The reference was to when the Lake County Historical Society offered to give CRUSADER II to the KR community. The offer was made to me under circumstances I will explain later. I accepted on the spot. I stick-handed the deal and two weeks later the boat was in KR.

Now that the depot and CRUSADER II have been restored, it occurred to me a power greater than we mortals must have wanted a heritage center in KR.

Consider the following:....

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## The Depot



Depot before.



Depot after (2021)

Photo credits: Todd Lindahl

- Purchased from Randy Ellestad for \$1.
- 20-year renewable lease written with the Regional Railroad Authority for \$1 a year.
- KR resident offers a \$20,000 local money match. KRRC provides match – bingo \$40,000.
- Recently retired general contractor Larry Ronning agrees to direct rebuild of depot and serve as board member.
- David Grong, recently retired Marshall, MN, business owner and skilled woodworking hobbyist, agrees to direct restoration of depot interior - later becomes board member.
- Todd Lindahl, highly respected NE MN historian and recognized as “Minnesota Archeologist of the Year” in 2022, agrees to serve as KRHCC historian and board member.
- Mona Linden, with a career in financial services, agrees to serve as CFO and board member.
- Randy Ellestad, local historian and unofficial “Mayor of KR” agrees to serve on board.
- Bob Entzion, KR native and grandson of Carl Erickson, owner of CRUSADER II, agrees to serve on board.
- Duane Madison, recognized local genealogist, agrees to serve on board.
- 16 individuals agree to sponsor all 11 depot windows in whole or in part.
- Lake Superior Museum of Transportation donates order board pole; private party donates board operating components.
- Wieme family donates 30' flagpole, agrees to light it and ensure flags are replaced at first sign of wear.
- Depot accessories sponsored: coal stove, order board pulls, freight wagon, kiosk between depot and freight building, depot agent window (wrought iron).
- Co-op Light & Power of Lake County agrees to use boom truck to raise both order board and flagpole at no cost to the KHRCC.
- Two Harbors American Legion Post agrees to place a 3' x 4' x 12" granite memorial to Lake County veterans at the KRHCC site with KRHCC providing the footing.
- Private party agrees to light the veteran's memorial.

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- Lake County Historical Society agrees to relocate diorama of depot and surrounding property, which is on loan to the Society by Todd Lindahl, its creator.
- Two Harbors American Legion Post donates granite memorial to Lake County Veterans.

### CRUSADER II



CRUSADER II April, 2023



CRUSADER II October, 2023

Photo credits: Paul von Goertz

- Lake County Historical Society gifts CRUSADER II to KR community.
- KRRC agrees to using its nonprofit status to accept the boat until a nonprofit can be formed for CRUSADER II; also to pay on-land insurance. KRHCC later buys boat for \$1.
- KR native and boatwright Larry Ronning agrees to serve as project manager in the rebuild of the boat.
- KR Marina agrees to use of its hydraulic boat trailer to bring the boat to KR.
- City of Two Harbors donates front-end loader and prepares site for CRUSADER II's move from Lighthouse Point to KR.
- Ostman Trucking Excavating donates truck to bring CRUSADER II to KR.
- TH Police provide escort for CRUSADER II to city limits.
- Proximity to marina pays off big when KR marina brings CRUSADER II to KR and stores it for three years at no cost while volunteers save depot from collapsing.
- KR Marina provides two movements for CRUSADER II. One to bring boat to KRHCC site from storage at marina and second, two years later, to move boat to shelter slab.
- Lake Superior Marine Museum agrees to loan to the KRHCC a restored.
- 1920s vintage engine that once powered a KR fish tug.
- Nonprofit owners of Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON choose the KRHCC as site for the ship over stiff competition from Canal Park business owners.
- Doug Hill, grandson of Helmer Hill who built CRUSADER II along with his brother, Reuben, visits the KRHCC site during a family reunion. He offers to help restore the fish tug on a scale we could have never imagined. During the summer of 2023 he devotes more than 1,000 hours to restore the boat's exterior.
- Two Harbors sawmill donates the oak for the boat's structural components.

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- John Hill, Doug's cousin, offers his camper for Doug to live in on KRHCC site while Doug helps rebuild CRUSADER II.
- A local party who has witnessed the resolve of KR townspeople to restore/rebuild both train depot and CRUSADER II donates \$20,000 towards building a shelter over the fish tug.
- The owner of Kerrick Sod in Kerrick, MN, keeps his boat at the KR marina. While driving past the KRHCC he noticed our freshly graded site prepped for the drainage swale. He realized what a muddy mess that would be next spring, so he gave the KRHCC four pallets of sod (2,600 sq. ft.) to create a green perimeter around CRUSADER II as part of a contract to seed the site.

**Editor's note:** To further demonstrate that a greater power wanted the KRHCC to succeed, I offer this brief narrative.

*Early on when Larry Ronning, Randy Ellestad, Bob Entzion and I decided to create a heritage center around KR's two icons, we asked to speak at a Railroad Authority board meeting to explain our idea and ask the five-person board comprised of Lake and St. Louis County commissioners, if it would be possible to lease the depot property. The board asked the hard questions (as they should) and we all felt a bit intimidated.*

*Low point was when one commissioner asked, "Where did you guys come up with this idea anyway - over a beer at Carmody's?" Actually, he wasn't too far off. We had just met at Carmody's to discuss over a beer how we would approach the board. Larry piped up and told the board we were quite serious and had already raised \$40,000. What!!! News to me!*

*The board voted on our request and would entertain a five-year renewable lease at our suggested rate of \$1 a year. We got what we wanted.*

*As we left, I grabbed Larry and asked him how we got this \$40,000 he talked about. "We don't have it," he said, "they just got me POed".*

*Now, the weird part of this story is that within two weeks of the RRA meeting, a KR resident made a challenge through Randy that they would donate \$20,000 to our fledging heritage center if community members could match it. The KRRC had come off a few good Julebyen years. Bob and I approached the KRRC board for the match and after a close vote, we got it! Presto, \$40,000 just as Larry had told the RRA board. I never envisioned Larry as a clairvoyant, but apparently, he is. That \$40,000 paid for almost half the depot/freight building restorations.*

*When you read over all that went right for saving our iconic depot and fish tug, it's hard to pass it all off as coincidence or good luck. There was a powerful force behind it - and it would not be denied.*

### **FOR SOME, THE REBUILD OF CRUSADER II WAS PERSONAL**

It became apparent after we started the CRUSADER II rebuild in May of this year that four people had extraordinary passion for the project.

**Bob Entzion:** Bob's grandfather on his mother's side, Carl Erickson, contracted with Reuben and Helmer Hill to build the boat for him in 1938 and fished it into the mid-fifties. Bob remembers

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“helping grandpa” lift nets as a child. At one time while looking for a location to display the boat, Bob offered a site on the property he and Sheryl own at “Island View Cabins”.

**Doug Hill:** Doug’s grandfather, Helmer, along with brother, Reuben, built CRUSADER II. When Doug was 19, Helmer showed him how to build a skiff. About a year ago during a family reunion, Doug and his uncle Bob visited the KRHCC to see a surviving Hill boat. I told them about our rebuild plans for CRUSADER II. Doug, who lives in central Florida, is a retired and disabled firefighter, also a skilled woodworker and mechanic. He offered to help rebuild the boat, not just over a few vacation days, but the whole summer of this year. More than 1,000 volunteer hours. My sense is that Doug did this to honor his grandfather and the whole Hill family of boat-builders, and because he loves to work with his hands. During his time here he made many friends. Good news, he’ll be back next summer to help complete the boat interior, but within a shorter time frame.

**Larry Ronning:** Larry is a KR native and remembers riding the train to TH from KR for 25 cents. Larry is a third-generation north shore boat-builder and boatwright. He’s built many small boats and led the restoration of the Viking ship LEIF ERIKSON in 1994 and replaced all the deck wood on the steam tug EDNA G. in the late 1980s. In the 1990s there was an effort in TH to freshen up CRUSADER II that was now a tourist attraction on Lighthouse Point. They raised \$2,600 to pay Larry and purchase materials. This was far less than needed and forced Larry to compromise his standards to a “cosmetic restoration” such as painting over wood that should have been replaced. The restoration of CRUSADER in 2023 allowed Larry, as Project Manager, to use all his talents and serve as a personal source of pride.

**Ralph Jacobson:** In 1939, Ralph’s father, Isaac, was rescued by CRUSADER II with Carl Erickson at the wheel when Isaac was forced to tie his skiff to his net buoy to await his fate during a howling NW November gale. Carl was a skilled boat handler and was able to maneuver CRUSADER II next to Isaac’s skiff, chop him free of ice, haul him aboard and thaw him out next to CRUSADER II’s coal stove. Isaac would not be “lost at sea.”

**Paul von Goertz (that’s me):** I include myself with this passionate group as the rebuild of CRUSADER II allowed me to save face. You see, I was the one who accepted the donation of CRUSADER II from the Lake County Historical Society on behalf of the KR community and with no community input. In October of 2016 I was asked by the Beaver Bay Historical Society to speak on the restoration of the 20-foot gas boat STAR, which has been owned over time by five KR fishing families.

During my talk I credited the boat building talent that still exists in KR with helping me with the rebuild. That’s what caught the attention of Mel Sando, then the Executive Director of the County Historical Society. Following my talk, he asked me if KR would like CRUSADER II back. There was a catch to the offer, and that was if KR failed to restore the boat, we would have to give it back to the Society. Mel was aware the boat was experiencing neglect and needed a new a home. So, on behalf of KR, I accepted the boat on the spot!

I knew Larry Ronning, Randy Ellestad and Bob Entzion would want the boat back and we would succeed in restoring and displaying the boat. The completion of the rebuild is a huge credit to all the KR volunteers and donations that made it possible - and for me to save face.



## HOW CRUSADER II WAS REBUILT IN SEVEN MONTHS

By Larry Ronning, Project Manager

In 2021 I was contracted by the Cook County Historical Society to assess and create a plan to restore the NEE-GEE, a fish tug like CRUSADER II that was on display in Grand Marais, MN. Unlike CRUSADER II it wasn't restorable with the resources available, which included a seasoned boat restoration specialist. Our reasoned consensus was to allow the boat to settle into its retirement with grace!



Enter CRUSADER II, a virtual flawless hull with minimal needs of restoration. With Doug Hill from the Hill family of boat-builders arriving in May, we along with Dave Grong began with Monday morning work details, making and carrying out the weekly projects.

Sounding the stem, (front) and keel, (bottom timber) revealed the most apparent needs for replacement. The stem needed the most attention as well as steam to allow for bending into place. Green timber was sawn out and donated at a local sawmill facilitating a successful outcome. Inwales, gunnels, decks and ribs were also sawn and donated.

Left: Larry Ronning preparing to make a steam bend.  
Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

Nearly imperceptible cracks appeared in ten or so ribs requiring more steam bending, this time using honey oak. We managed to restore the hard spots on the hull created by the cracked ribs by successfully using long thread bars and oak shims. All these steps allowed us to pull the boat back together using large straps. We could then install heavy oak studs to strengthen the cabin and connect it to the hull.

Doug spent much time removing rotting rib tops and cabin joists, necessary for strength and longevity of the boat. Over time the hull spread out about 4" and separated from the cabin. Large straps were used to bring the hull and cabin together again (Image right). Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

Dave Grong was instrumental in replacing windows and residing the cabin. Jim Allert, Lee Cohen, Kris Olson, Norbert Norman and Paul von Goertz brought out the beauty of the boat with hours of sanding and painting. A donation of eight gallons of paint from TH Lumber was much appreciated. The generous donations of time and material allowed us to restore CRUSADER II at minimal cost, the savings of which will be applied to a shelter over the boat next spring, providing we meet our funding goals.





## DEPOT PREPARES TO BOARD AND DEBOARD UP TO 2,000+ TRAIN RIDERS OVER JULEBYEN WEEKEND, DEC. 2 & 3

Early stats indicate a record number of Julebyen visitors this year and so we can assume train riders may set a record. Last year we had 400 Julebyen Express riders from Duluth and just under 1,000 Troll Train riders, and that was with an early close on Sunday because of weather. We can use a few more volunteers to help with crowd control. If you can help, contact me at [vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com](mailto:vongoertzpaul@yahoo.com)



Image left: 2,000+ train riders may pass through the depot during Julebyen 2023

Photo: Paul von Goertz

For complete info on this year's festival visit [Julebyen.org](http://Julebyen.org)

## PLEASE CONSIDER THE KRHCC IN YOUR YEAR-END GIVING

CRUSADER II has been exposed to sun, rain, snow, ice and seagulls since it was built in 1938-39. Our friends at the Lake County Historical Society tried for years to fund a shelter over it when the fish tug was displayed at Lighthouse Point in TH. The tug is now owned by the KRHCC and so it's our turn to fund a shelter. Now is the time with the boat's exterior restored to new. We'd like to keep it looking that way.

We have budgeted \$60,000 for the open-sided shelter which will include interior and security lighting. We are eligible for a \$30,000 challenge grant from the IRRRB. That means the KRHCC needs to raise the match. We have raised half that match (\$15,000). We now need to raise the other \$15,000, by the start of the 2024 building season. Three donations of \$5,000? Fifteen donations of \$1,000? Thirty donations of \$500?

Any amount helps. The KRHCC is a 501(c)3 so all donations are tax deductible. Send to KRHCC, POB 240, Knife River, MN 55609. Thank you!

## DONATIONS, HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS

### Donations:

- Deb and Jim Allert -Paint for CRUSADER II
- Doug and Becky Pruitt to general fund

### Sponsorship:

- Loving Lake County – "Trees. Trains. Traditions" sponsor

**MERRY CHRISTMAS AND BEST WISHES  
FOR A SAFE AND JOYFUL NEW YEAR!**



Photo credit: Ed Lee

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