



# Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

## **HILL FAMILY MEMBERS DROP IN ON THE KRHCC; FILL IN BLANKS ON CRUSADER II HISTORY – AND MUCH MORE.**

In mid-September of 2022, I got a call from a Hill family member (can't remember first name) who said that two out-of-town family members were in Larsmont, MN, for a reunion and would like to see CRUSADER II. The two were related to Reuben and Helmer Hill who had built CRUSADER II. Naturally, I gave him an enthusiastic "Of course!"

The two Hill descendants (photo right) were Bob (age 92), Helmer's oldest son, and Douglas (age 56), son of Helmer's youngest son Lowell. I met Bob and Doug at the KRHCC the next day and after introductions and an understanding of the Hill family tree, I peppered them with questions about the construction of CRUSADER II, other boats built by the Hills, and what role the Hill brothers may have had in building wooden "subchasers" during WW II.



Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

### **A refresher on the Hill family.**

By way of background for more recent readers of this newsletter, Charles Hill and two of his five sons, Helmer and Reuben, were legendary North Shore boat builders, living and working in Larsmont. The brothers were taught their craft by their father who

immigrated from Vasa, Finland, in 1895 at the age of 22. He came from a family with boat building skills.

The Hills were a three-generation boat building family when one counts Bob as the third. During the summer of 1948 he built five 14' flat-bottomed plywood utility boats to pay for his first year of college. He would later earn a degree in physics and math at UMD and another in theology at Bethel Seminary, St. Paul, MN.

From the early 1900s to the late 1980s the Hills built more than 200 boats, all from original designs. They made a lot of their own tools from salvaged scrap, from old wood files to parts from a Model T Ford engine.

Over the years they turned out both open and enclosed round-bottomed fishing boats to 35', larger motorized passenger and freight hauling boats to 64', smaller flat-bottomed pleasure boats, and numerous sailboats. CRUSADER II, built by Reuben in 1939, was the last of the round-hulled, fully enclosed, inboard power boats.

Boats were built inside Charles' fairly large shop, and later in Reuben's smaller 24' x 32' shop. Even the 50' double-ended power boat built for the Park Service on Isle Royale was built inside Charles' shop. Only the lengthening of THOR to 64' was done outdoors, and that primarily because the boat already existed. Even hardy Scandinavians must deal with Minnesota winters. Boats were brought by flatbed truck to either Two Harbors or Knife River for launching.

### More on CRUSADER II.



For the most part, CRUSADER II was built as reported in past newsletters. Imaged is the CRUSADER II nearing completion at the Hill boatyard. Photo credit: Randy Ellestad collection

What I learned from Bob and Doug related mostly to CRUSADER II's building materials, rather than methods.

Legend has it that CRUSADER II's longevity can be attributed, in part, to being planked with cypress. "Not so," said Bob and Doug. They explained it is planked with local white

pine, which has fair rot resistance if it is kept painted and allowed to thoroughly dry when wet.

The Hills did use cypress when they could take advantage of the natural curvature of its roots to create a graceful and strong stem, or curved keel at the bow. Hill boats used white oak (red oak is unsuited for boat building) for boat ribs and the keel.

Bob remembers working on boats as a nine-year-old. Being small he could work in confined areas, mostly clinching nails that were driven from the outside through the planking and ribs. His job was to bend over the nail as it protruded through the rib for a tight and secure fit. They called this “bucking” the nails, and used a specially designed, homemade “bucking iron.”

One thing Bob and Doug pointed out was the absence of a metallic bearing or seal on the propeller shaft where it emerges from the hull. The Hill boats used a type of wood known as *lignum vitae* (literally “wood of life”), but more commonly called “Brazilian ironwood,” for the propeller shaft bearing and seal. In addition to being harder and stronger than many metals, it is oily enough to be self-lubricating. Knowledge of details like this is typical of the skills possessed by families of craftsmen passed on through many generations.

### **Subchasers built in Duluth.**

I also learned that a few 110’ wooden-hulled boats called “subchasers” were built in Duluth during WWII. I questioned how boats of this length, and with a narrow beam, could serve as subchasers in the rough North Atlantic. If not escorting convoys across the Atlantic, then what was their use? And finally, can these boats be credited for helping win “The Battle of the North Atlantic”?

In a past issue of this newsletter, I commented on how Scandinavian men from the North Shore were recruited by Inland Waterways of Duluth to build wooden subchasers and mine sweepers during WWII. Other shipyards on both Lakes Superior and Michigan built subchasers too, using local craftsmen. Inland Waterways may have had the edge in skilled craftsmen with a work force of many Scandinavian men using boat building skills passed through generations. Soon Duluth became part of larger community of Great Lakes wood boat builders.

Two men who responded to Inland Waterways search for skilled wood workers were Reuben and Helmer Hill.

Reuben served as general foreman and Helmer as working foreman. Initially, they were given working drawings for the subchasers that had been developed by the US Coast Guard. According to Doug, the brothers recommended some changes, and suggested that one ship be built with the Coast Guard design and another incorporating the Hill's modifications. Sea trials confirmed the benefits of the Hill design.



Four subchasers were built at Inland Waterways, all launched during 1942. Bob was present when the last of these, SC 103, was launched. The Inland Waterways subchaser had its sea trials on Lake Superior (see photo). Photo credit: "World War II Shipbuilding in Duluth and Superior" by Gerald Sandvick

They were small but seaworthy enough to cross the Atlantic and on one occasion the Pacific. The ships were known as "wet ships." Clothing and bedding were always wet, except when hung aloft to dry in port.

The Germans mined the waters off the major East Coast ports from their U-Boats ("U" for "Undersea"). The mines had an anchor cable that held them near the sea floor. They used magnetic sensors to trigger a quick release of a buoyant mine when a metal hull was detected above it. The mines were very effective until the Allies salvaged one in 1942 that failed to explode and found a way to circumvent the sensor. This was done by wrapping an insulated cable around the metal hull and running an electrical current through the cable to cancel the disturbance of the earth's magnetic field created by the metal hull.

Besides sinking Allied shipping, the mines served as hiding places for U-Boats. Using charts that showed where mines had been placed, U-Boat commanders could hide among them. Any metal-hulled Allied ship in pursuit of a U-Boat had to run a gauntlet of unseen mines. Wood boats were needed to move safely about a minefield and destroy the U-Boats.

To do this, they carried "depth charge" launchers. These were little more than guide rails for tossing barrels filled with explosives off the stern of the boat. When they sank

to a predetermined depth, they would explode. To finish off the occasional U-Boat that was forced to surface, they carried a 3" (75mm) cannon.

*(For a full account of these unique boats, see "Splinter Fleet: The Wooden Subchasers of WW II," Theodore Trendwell, Pub. Naval Institute Press, 2000.)*

Once the technology was developed to render the magnetic mine ineffective, Inland Waterways closed forever just before Christmas, 1942, Bob Hill remembers. No more wooden-hulled boats needed. End of an era. Reuben went to work for Butler Shipyards in Duluth, Helmer returned to the DM&IR railroad as a carpenter.

Now back to my earlier question: "Yes" - wooden subchasers built by immigrant craftsmen at small shipyards all around Lakes Superior and Michigan, during those critical early months of WWII, did help win the "Battle of the North Atlantic," relying on their generational boat building and woodworking skills.

The KRHCC is very pleased to have members of the Hill family assist the KRHCC in preserving the history of the Knife River/Larsmont area.

### **HOW CLOSE DID WE COME TO LOSING OUR HISTORY?**

I'd say "pretty darn close."

The KRHCC came into existence quite by accident. There was no local initiative to create a history center until 2016 when the Lake County Historical Society gifted CRUSADER II to the Knife River (KR) community. Then, when the depot became available in 2018, either Larry Ronning or Randy Ellestad suggested KR create a "Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center" built around KR's two icons - CRUSADER II and the depot.

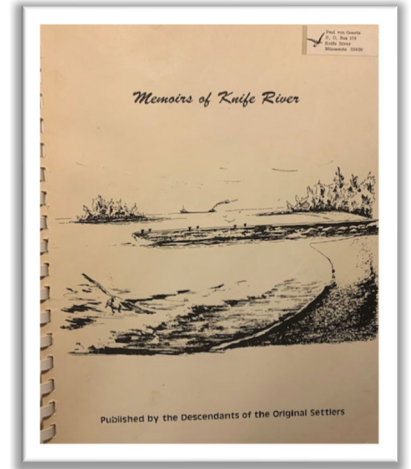
KR's history was scattered about town in peoples' memories and in a few written pieces; how to get our arms around it?

To the best of my knowledge, there are only three sources of KR history written by local people. Only a few copies were ever printed, and I am fortunate to have copies of all three.

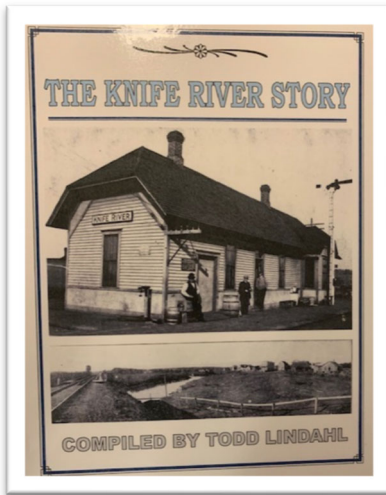
The first history was given to Mary and me by our neighbors, Lyman and Serona (Kendall) Slotness. Serona loved telling us about "old Knife River." She gave Mary a



spiral-bound history of KR called “Memories of Knife River” which was “Published by the Descendants of Original Settlers,” written by Dan Minahan. Researchers listed include familiar names like Slotness, Entzion, Floathe, Lusk, Carter, Anderson (Ralph), Carlson (Audrey), Bugge, Ojard, Martin (Rodney and Shirley).

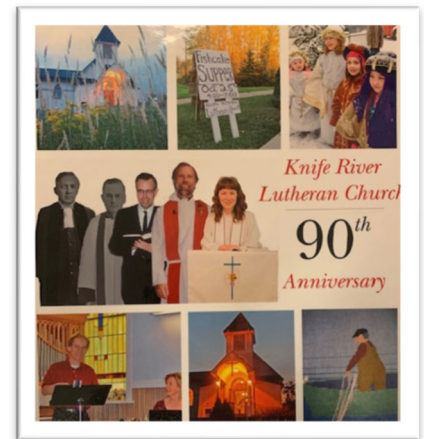


It is a fun read and mixes in a lot of KR history with the lives of early KR families. I have quoted from “Memories” several times in this newsletter.



The second and most in-depth and credible history of KR is “The Knife River Story” compiled by KRHCC historian, Todd Lindahl. He “Dedicated (it) to P. J. Rosso (longtime KR Depot Agent) and the people of Knife River.” I greatly value his “Story” as I am one of few to whom Todd has personally handed it. Much of what I share of KR history in the KRHCC newsletter is taken from Todd’s spiral-bound history.

Lutheran Church 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary” published by the Knife River Lutheran Church in 2018. The book is extremely well done and covers in detail the history of the church and its church family through generations. I quote from it too in the KRHCC newsletter.



**KR’s “elders” share their memories.**

Since I began writing this newsletter in May of 2019, I have had the opportunity to visit with several KR elders who are second-generation KRers. We talked about whatever they wanted to recall from family and community history. Some stories were downright hilarious!

They were also happy to share photos for the use of the KRHCC, which is a copyright protected publication. A few who agreed to speak to me were experiencing memory

loss. When the frustration to recall became too great, I just let them talk about whatever they wanted.

### **KR's history now available to the world.**

Thanks to the KRHCC newsletter that is also available online through our website [krhcc.org](http://krhcc.org), anyone with an interest in KR and its history can read about it. No longer is it in just a few hard copies and in private hands. In addition, nine outdoor interpretive displays will present KR's history as part of a self-guided KR history tour at the KRHCC.

### **Now a scary thought - What would have happened if the KRHCC never came into existence?**

Depot, freight house, and CRUSADER allowed to rot away • no awareness of KR's Native presence • a much-compromised Troll Train experience • no recognition for KR's commercial fishing families who provided fresh fish to the Upper Midwest • no awareness for KR's special contributions to the WWII war effort • no Viking ship • and worst of all, no sense among KRers of community or place.

### **DAVID OLIN, DM&IR'S LEAD ENGINEER IN THE DESIGN OF THE TH SHIP LOADER AND PROLIFIC SAILOR, DIES AT 94.**

The KR community and the mining industry lost a great friend and gifted engineer with the passing of David Olin on December 20, 2022. At the time of his death, he was living at Barross Cottage in Two Harbors (TH).

Dave was born in Grand Rapids, MN, and served in the US Navy. He later earned a master's degree in structural engineering from Purdue University. Dave had a 38-year career with US Steel/DM&IR, retiring as Manager of Engineering Services. He was instrumental in the design of the TH ship loader, which was awarded "One of the Ten Outstanding Engineering Achievements in the US in 1978" by the National Society of Professional Engineers. While living at Barross Cottage, he was able to see the ship loader operating daily as an integral part of a working port.

With his first wife, Jane Ott Olin, in 1976 he began exploring Lake Superior in their first sailboat, the 21' *Allegro*. Following Jane's early death, in 1981 he married Mary Hamerston Mitchell and together they designed and built their KR home, where they quickly became part of the community.

Dave became a prolific sailor. He bought the 30' sailboat *Catalyst* and, working out of the KR Marina, Dave and Mary circumnavigated the Lake in 1996. When he sold the boat, their log showed that over 37 years of ownership, it had traveled 18,500 miles for an average of 500 miles a year!



Dave was given a purpose in life and he fulfilled it in many different ways. Dave is survived by his wife, Mary, and his three daughters, Susan, Julie, and Sara, and their families.

In this photo is David Olin with two of his loves; sailing and grandchildren (grandson Nick in photo).

Photo source: Susan Olin

### **HOWARD “BUD” SIVERTSON, GIFTED ARTIST AND WRITER, WAS COMMITTED TO A HARBOR FOR KR COMMERCIAL FISHERMEN.**

Howard “Bud” Sivertson died peacefully January 12, 2022, in Grand Marais, MN, at age 92.

Photo credit: Sivertson Art of the North, Grand Marais

Bud was a gifted painter and writer who captured the life of Isle Royale fishing families in several illustrated books. His style of painting earned him the distinction to some of being “The Norman Rockwell of the North Shore”.



From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, Bud and family lived in KR and were very much part of the community.

Bud came from a commercial fishing family and so joined with KR fishing families to secure Economic Development Administration (EDA) funding to rebuild the KR harbor. The original harbor, for the most part, had been built by the fishermen themselves in the early 1950s. Bud played an important role by helping secure additional land to get the needed acreage to qualify for EDA funds, which included a marina as part of the package.



## NEWSLETTER

The EDA eventually did fund the harbor, but by the time the harbor with marina opened in 1973, commercial fishing had dramatically declined and many of the fisherman who had fought for it had either retired or passed away. Thankfully, commercial fishing continues out of KR, but on a small scale.

Mary and I owe our existence in KR to Bud. I knew Bud through Duluth advertising circles. As well as a gifted fine artist, Bud worked in commercial art as an illustrator and cartoonist.

When Mary and I married, we owned a one-bedroom home on a tiny 35' wide lot on Park Point. If ever we would have children, we needed more space.

I was fortunate to live next to Lake Superior all my life and wanted to continue to do so, but Duluth Lake frontage was way beyond our means. Knife River appealed to me as during the 1950s my dad would fish out of KR from his 40' powerboat that he kept in Duluth.

I called Bud to see if he knew of any land that might be for sale in KR and he said he might. He had a lot that had been surveyed by the previous landowner to sell to a family from the Metro. At the last minute he changed his mind. Given the land had already been surveyed, Bud said he would sell it to us on a Contract for Deed. And so the Sivertsons and the von Goertzs became neighbors.



Having this slice of Lake Superior and being part of the KR community has been one of Mary and my greatest blessings. Thank you, Bud.

For many years the Sivertsons and we were the only residents on Old Harbor Road. As an independent and resourceful Norwegian, Bud bought this 1930s-something Lake County beast of a snowplow he called "Effie," to plow our road. It was started by honking the horn. The fact Bud is holding a shovel tells me we're stuck!

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

**JANUARY DONATIONS, MEMORIALS,  
HONORARIUMS AND SPONSORSHIPS**

**Donations:**

- Barbara Eckel - to use as match money to fund shelter over CRUSADER II.
- Joe and Diane Friebe to general fund.
- Doug and Becky Pruitt to general fund.

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