



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

MARCH BREAK-OUT!

Commercial fishing out of Knife River (KR) was a barely sustainable living. To extend the season from March into December could help put a fishing family into the black, or some shade of grey.

Kay Wieme Struve, whose mother, Ethel, was part of the second generation of the Bugge fishing family, shared some really good photos with the KRHCC of her uncle Lawrence and George Torgersen trying to return to the KR harbor after breaking out in the 1950s.



“Yup, we’re struck.”

Fish tugs were not designed to break ice, but if the stem of the boat from the waterline down had a bit of a 45-degree slant to it, it could ride up on the ice and hope the weight of the boat would break it. This is how USCG icebreakers do it. At this point the technique is not working. Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve

Writer’s comment: As seen in this photo, the hulls of fish tugs from keel to above the water line were sheathed in sheet metal to protect them from “mirror ice” or “night ice.” The sharp edges of the thin ice could chew up a wood hull in no time.

“Wait, we’ll have to try Plan B.”

Being a commercial fisherman meant being resourceful. But there was something learned from the local mining industry that proved to be effective.

Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve



“This works!”



Dynamite was tied to a weighted stick (seen flying through the air) so it could be pushed under the ice and kept there. Undocumented reports claim that dynamite was available at the hardware store in Two Harbors until the mid-1960s. The dynamite was activated by a blasting cap. A rope was tied to the stick so it could be reused.

Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve

NAVIGATING THROUGH DRIFT ICE IS RISKY BUSINESS.

It was either 1973 or 74 that a fellow I believe from the UP (Upper Michigan), who I will refer to by first name only, showed up in the fall in a 35' fish tug called SHAMROCK. For some reason he decided to live on it in the water over the winter.

Living just a block from the harbor, I would sometimes visit Jerry over the winter and sit around his wood (or coal?) stove and have coffee. The stove was his only source of heat. I don't know what he did for water or toilet (Do I want to know?).

I was visiting Jerry on March 15th (I remember because it was the “Ides of March” – the date in 44 BC when Julius Caesar was assassinated), when Jerry noticed the harbor ice was starting to break up. “Let's go to Two Harbors,” he said, “We can break out of this.”

That sounded adventuresome. So, we fired up the hibernating engine and began to work our way between the open spaces in the ice and then finally into open water. It was rather exhilarating to be on the lake knowing at this early date we were probably the only boat moving on the western tip of the lake.

Once in Two Harbors (TH), we tied to the break wall and headed for the Legion where we were greeted as some kind of adventurers. Over a glass (or two?) of beer we entertained those around us with the details of our great accomplishment, which got more embellished by the moment.

It was soon late afternoon and we realized we should get back by dark. As we neared the harbor, to our great dismay (horror?), we could see that the wind had blocked the harbor entry with drift ice. There were no cell phones then, and to call for help on

Jerry's marine radio would be too hard on our pride, and besides the Coast Guard was still locked in the Duluth harbor.

Jerry had a long boat hook and so I walked the narrow deck to the bow and then pondered how to push the ice aside without pushing myself in the ice water. The prudent thing to do I concluded is to lay down on the deck and push blocks aside as Jerry worked SHAMROCK slowly around them.

And so we made it back and in the dark. The adventure had ended and all that remained was how to explain to my dear wife where I had been – and why.

This painting captures well our junket from KR to TH and return. Painting: Harvey Sandstrom. Paul von Goertz collection.



The dangers of allowing a boat to ice in.



Apparently, a violent winter storm sometime in the 1950s or 60s either broke up harbor ice or pushed drift ice in. The combination of waves and drift ice driven by high winds can place enormous stress on a wood hull.

Photo: Kenneth Ojard

SPECTACULAR WINDROWS.

These photos were taken east of the river before the KR harbor was built, and where most fisherman had their skids and fish/net houses.

While the location and island afforded some protection from the southwest, it was totally exposed to violent northeast storms that took place late winter and early spring when drift ice could be expected. These conditions would layer brash ice (small pieces of deteriorating drift ice) to form mountainous windrows.



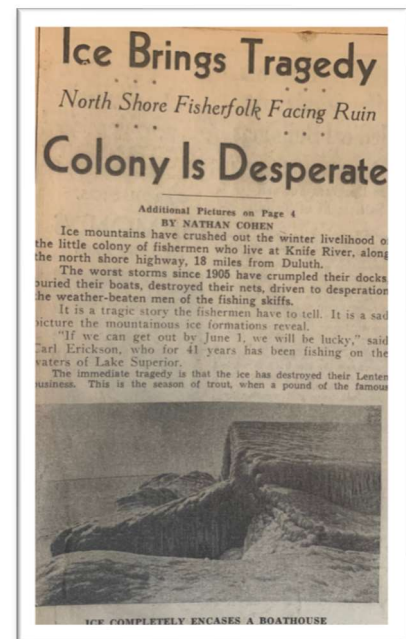
Photo: KRHCC archives

STORMS IN FEBRUARY OF 1931 AND AGAIN IN 1939 LEFT KR SHORELINE IN RUIN

In February of 1931 and again in 1939, waves and ice battered the KR shoreline.

The *Duluth News Tribune* carried stories of the 1931 storm with headlines like “Ice Brings Tragedy.” “Northshore Fisherfolk Facing Ruin.” “Colony is Desperate.” “Lakefront Docks, Fishing Equipment, Crushed by Ice Along North Shore.”

The paper reported “The ice rises from 10-50 feet above the shoreline. From the highway (Scenic 61) there is an illusion of ice-coated rocks but get down to shore and the size of the ice is tremendous. The solid mass goes down to the bottom of the lake and extends out in many instances as far as 300 feet from the boat houses.” The paper quoted Carl Erickson, KR fisherman for 41 years at the time, “If we can get out of here by June 1, we’ll be lucky. Photo: KRHCC archives



Besides significant damage to docks, skids and fish/net houses, the fisherman expressed great concern for flooding from the Knife River in the spring. The windrows had dammed the river mouth.

“The way it looks,” Carl Erickson said, “about six homes and a lot of tourist cabins will go in the spring flood. The water must get to the lake someday and it will probably find a new course to the east of the river outlet.” The paper reported that potential “flood water will strike at the lineup of fisherman’s homes, the dock sites and tourist cabins. It may back up and flood the north shore highway which is about 150 feet from the lakefront.” The paper said the only option to prevent flooding was for the state to dynamite the entire lower section of the lakefront.

Ironically, the June 2012 rainstorm that dumped 6-10” of rain on KR in just a few hours, overwhelmed and partially dammed the Knife River. The rain caused flooding over Scenic 61 and into the Oden Alrick Ballfield, and water to 17” in the rec building. It was much like the flood the fishermen had feared in 1931.

DEER ARE HAVING A HARD TIME WITH NEAR RECORD SNOW

By Bill Berg

Writer’s comment: There are 5-7 deer that call the forested area around the marina “home.” They visit us almost every day. I was watching one chow down on a red pine branch and thought that rather strange. I emailed “Nayabirr” Bill Berg, retired MN DNR Wildlife Research Biologist, to ask how the deer may be faring in a year of near record snowfall. Here is his response that I share with his permission:

No question that deer, especially last year's fawns, are having a tough time. Fawns are plowing snow with their chests, but usually walk behind their mom.

Deer, in heavy balsam and spruce areas, are coping with far less snow but have little to eat. Deer near the new logging job west of Knife River might be doing quite well, eating tops of left-over twigs and branches. Conifers other than white cedar (like spruce and red pine needles) are considered "starvation foods."

The Winter Severity Index (WSI):

The MN DNR has had an estimate of the severity of winters beginning in about 1968, with a few changes in technique along the way. The present WSI is calculated by adding one point for each night below zero degrees F, plus another point for each night the snow depth exceeds 15". Anything more than 120 points is classed as a "severe" winter. The current WSI along the North Shore is around 150 and is expected to rise a bit higher before the snow settles and melts.

Anyone can reference the historic and present WSI by checking the DNR's web site and looking for "Deer" or "Winter Severity Index."

With the WSI our area has this winter we will lose lots of fawns, and very likely adult does will give birth to weak or still born fawns, thus adversely affecting parts of two age classes.

Feeding deer?

A few folks feed deer. Those feeding just corn are doing more harm than good, as corn bloats the deer stomach. But those feeding actual deer feed, which is a blend of some pretty good stuff, and available at the Superior, WI, feed store and Anderson's Floral, might be doing a tiny bit of good.

**MANY COMMENTS RECEIVED ON FEBRUARY ISSUE
"WELCOME TO MOOKOMAANI-ZIIBI, MN 55609"**

For the almost four years I have been writing this newsletter, I have never received as many positive comments as on the story "The Indigenous Presence in Knife River" written by Todd Lindahl. Comments received were "I didn't know any of that history," "So interesting and so well presented," "Very interesting," "It was apparent Todd did a lot of research," and "Good newsletter issue on Native people."

When Todd gave me his story last fall which was supported by archeology, it was such an awakening for me that I suggested to the KRHCC board we dedicate one of the five planned commercial fishing exhibit displays to the Indigenous presence in KR. They were the first to fish the waters of KR and establish a summer village here.

I would not attempt to capture the history of the Indigenous presence in a display with a maximum of 200 words without involving the Ojibwe Bands in the area. After talking to an elder of the Grand Portage Band and the Fond du Lac Tribal Historic Preservation office, I became even more interested in the Ojibwe presence and their way of life. We will have more of their presence in KR in future newsletters.

It is very satisfying that readers of the KRHCC newsletter have shown such interest in a very important part of KR's history that heretofore has not been widely known.

FIRST DAY OF SPRING IN KNIFE RIVER CANDY STORE OPENS APRIL 22

I write this on the first day of spring, March 21, but with 32" of snow on the ground, I suggest that we in KR move this day to April 22, the day the Great! Lakes Candy Kitchen starts its 17th season in KR.



Patricia Canelake says all the favorites will be back; turtles, bear tracks, hot air truffles and all their favorite handmade kettle cooked candies and chocolates. They will also be announcing new candies!

As they start another new season, the KRHCC wants to thank the Canelake family for their generous support of the KR community, and in particular children's events sponsored by the KRRC.

Several inches of snow stacked up on the West side of Candy Kitchen after mid-March blizzard. Photo credit: Patricia Canelake

APOLOGIES TO ALL WHO TRIED TO READ THE FEBURARY NEWSLETTER ON THEIR CELL PHONE

At times when documents are sent back and forth via email some parts of it may become 'corrupt' or change from its intended layout. Unfortunately, it happened last month with the February issue. The images in the PDF moved from its original layout. It appeared fine on desktop or tables however if you read the newsletter on a cell phone all the photo placements were out of sync (corrupt). If this happens again by chance, read the newsletter on some device other than your cell. Sorry!

NEWSLETTER

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