



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz - KRHCC Board Member

THE COMMERCIAL SIDE OF SMELTING

Thanks to Mike Ojard for his recall on this little-known part of Knife River commercial fishing, and to Kay Wieme Struve for allowing use of family photos.

“Mention the words “smelt, smelters, or smelting” to anyone who has lived in Knife River (KR) from the late 1940s to the early 1980s, and you will get the expression of someone who just ran over a skunk. In the April 2020 issue of this newsletter, which is archived at krhcc.org under “Recent News,” you can read all about smelt and KR’s experience with smelt, smelters, and smelting.

Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve

There is a little-known aspect of commercial fishing on which KR fishermen were well equipped to capitalize. The spring smelt spawning run took place over about a three-week period in April that sometimes extended into the first week of May.

There was no limit to the amount of these 4” – 6” silvery fish that could be taken by individuals or commercial fishermen,



as smelt are not native to the Great Lakes and so are “exotics.” Their value is questionable as they provide forage for native fish but also eat their eggs. So, it was chaos for both those dip-netting in the Knife and commercial fisherman dip-netting out of a pond net near the mouth of the Sucker River in Sucker Bay, about three miles west of KR.



Cars and campers line Scenic 61 and the river in this photo shot from Marina Road sometime in the '70s during smelt run season.

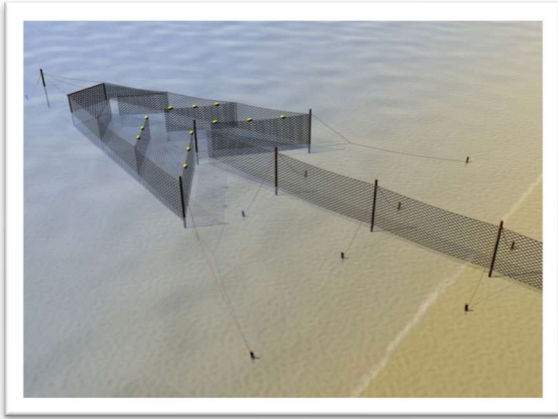
Photo credit: Randy Ellestad collection

Sucker Bay was an ideal location to place a pond net. The bay offered protection from the northeast and a soft bottom into which pond net poles could be driven.

NELS J. in Sucker Bay loaded with smelt boxes in her hold and stacked on cabin top. Note how low in the water she is. Behind her is the pond net. Photo: Kay Wieme Struve



Unlike a herring net which resembles a tennis net anchored to the lake bottom at each end, the pond net is for offshore fishing. It uses a long vertical wall of netting running at right angles to the shoreline to interrupt the natural swim of the fish, directing them into a net that can be lifted to remove the fish. See drawing of a more elaborate pond net.

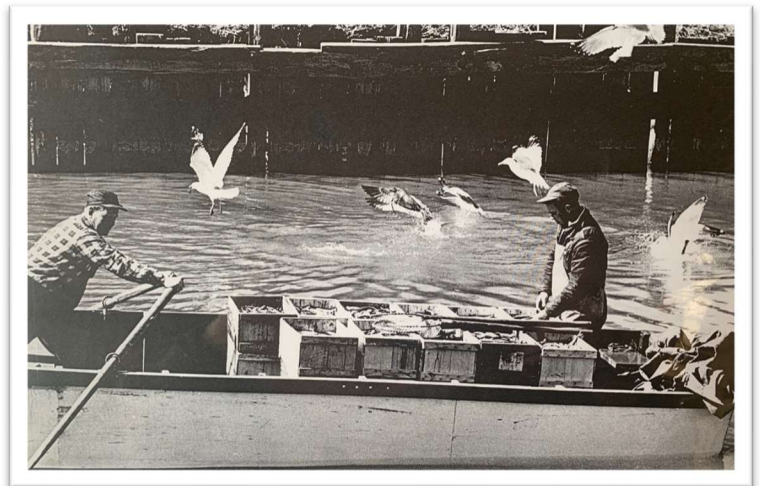


Pond nets use long poles driven into the lake bottom to anchor the net and give it shape.

Getting the fish from the pond net back to KR took some logistical organization. Both a fish tug and a pond boat(s) were needed. The pond boat had a flat bottom for added displacement and one or more were towed to and from Sucker Bay by the fish tug.

Pond boats had flat bottoms for added displacement. At the oars in the old KR harbor is Melford Johnson. Adolph Ojard, right, built this pond boat. Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve

Once the pond net was lifted, dip nets were used to scoop fish from it and into fish boxes. (See top photo first page) The boxes were then off-loaded to the fish tug. Fish brought back to KR were immediately sent



undressed to a Park Point wholesaler, Sivertson Bros. and Lake Superior Fish being the main ones.

Adolph Ojard brings smelt boxes to a truck that will bring them to a Duluth wholesaler. Photo credit: Kay Wieme Struve



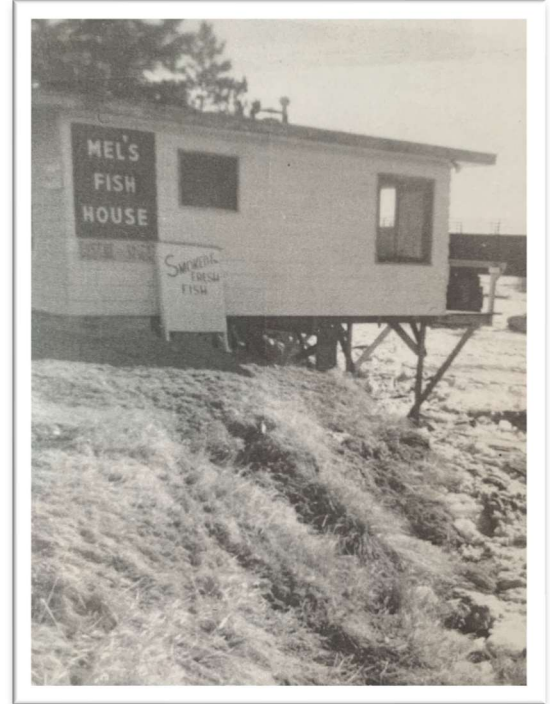
At one time there was a rough wood dock face built by locals on the east side of the mouth of the Little Sucker. Pond boats could off-load boxes there into a pickup that traveled up a makeshift road to bring the fish up to Highway 61 - and from there to a Duluth wholesaler. The area described is all privately owned; please respect as such.

The smelt run inspired entrepreneurship.

Even though the “smelt run” could last up to three weeks it could be sporadic. If someone had traveled 200 miles intending to fill a cattle watering trough with unlimited “free fish,” and their timing was wrong - which could be by the hour - they could count on teenage entrepreneurs like Steve Carlson and others to sell them a five-gallon bucket of undressed smelt caught earlier in the day for \$5.00. The teens also sold smelt dip-netted from the Knife to commercial fishermen for two cents a pound to supplement the fishermen’s catch.

One thing locals could look forward to during the smelt run was Mel and Sophie Bugge’s smelt-fry. Photo: Kay Wieme Struve

Smelt were battered in a secret recipe (I’m sure), seasoned and deep-fried. Usually, one meal of fried smelt during the smelt run was enough for Mary and me, but with Sophie’s recipe it was often seconds.



TITANIC DISASTER FORETOLD 14 YEARS EARLIER AND IN SURPRISING DETAIL.



TITANIC departs to take her place among maritime disasters.

Photo credit: Public Domain

I’ve been sitting on this story until I could make it relevant to KR, other than the TITANIC sank in the month of April and this is the April newsletter.

Few people may know the big steamship lines made their money on the sheer volume of third-class immigrants. The

TITANIC passenger list showed that most were headed for the Upper Midwest, and many were from Scandinavian countries. There were seven with Duluth-area ties:

Lost:

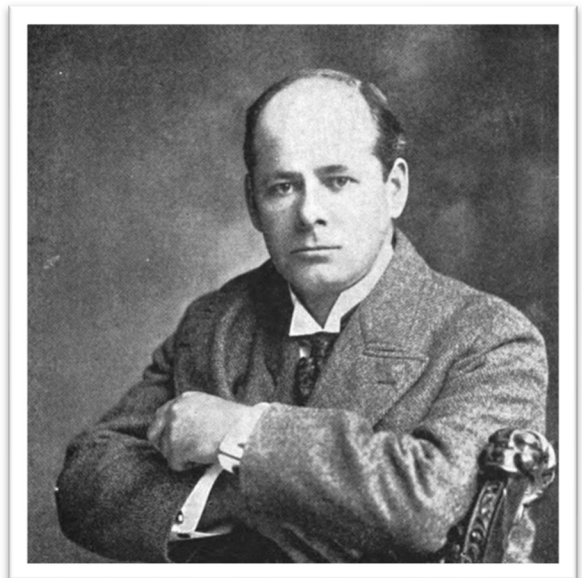
Karl Johan Johnson, age 31, 3rd Class to Duluth
William Baird Silvey, age 50, 1st Class to Duluth

Survived:

Anna Salkkjelsvik, from Alesund, Norway to Proctor, age 23, 3rd Class
Mrs. William Baird Silvey, age 39, 1st Class to Duluth
Juho Stranden, Kides, Finland to Duluth, age 31, 3rd Class
Hedvig Turkula, Finland to Hibbing, age 65, 3rd Class
Constance Willard to Duluth, age 20, 1st Class

In 1912 NE Minnesota was booming with jobs in mining, railroading, logging, commercial fishing, and shipping. It was a mecca for immigrants, many of whom were from Scandinavia, having been recruited by Lake Superior fish wholesalers. Had those intending to travel on the TITANIC read the book *Futility*, by American author Morgan Robertson (image right), they would have chosen another ship.

Photo credit: Public domain



Robertson wrote *Futility* in 1898, fourteen years **before** the TITANIC disaster and nine years before the ship was even conceived. It was a vivid description of an April crossing of an immense ocean liner and subsequent loss through a collision with an iceberg.

Somewhat of a psychic, Robertson claimed to be inspired by what he called his “astral writing partner.” In his later years his inspiration departed him, and he could write no more.

At this point you could say what Robertson had written could be described as simply coincidence. But whether you are a follower of one of the world’s great religions, believe in astrology, or consider yourself an agnostic or atheist, chew on this:

Item	Robertson's <i>Futility</i>	Actual
Ship's name	TITAN	TITANIC
Registry	British	British
Month of sail	April	April
Displacement Length	70,000 tons 800 feet	66,000 tons 882.5 feet
Number of propellers	Three	Three
Top Speed	24-25 knots	24-25 knots
Capacity passengers & crew	3000	3000
Passengers on board	2000	2230
# of lifeboats	24	20
Capacity of lifeboats	500	960
# of watertight bulkheads	19	15
Engines with turbine	Triple expansion	Triple expansion
Side of ship hitting iceberg	Starboard	Starboard

Robertson never profited from the similarity of his book to the actual event, even though his book was serialized throughout the United States. Apparently, the horror of the actual event made reading a fictionalized version uninteresting – even though the fictionalized version was written fourteen years earlier. Robertson died in 1915, never gaining full recognition for his glimpse into the future with the help of his astral writing partner.

Although TITANIC was a super ship and largest moving object created by man, she perhaps was not greater than a superpower, and her destiny was not to be altered by any man.

Consider this:

Had TITANIC approached the iceberg 15 seconds sooner or 15 seconds later, it would not have sunk. Fifteen seconds sooner it would have been more of a head-on collision that would have flooded two or even three watertight compartments. She could handle that.

Had she approach 15 seconds later she would have missed the iceberg altogether.

As it was, she just glanced off the iceberg, but that allowed the iceberg to act as a can opener ripping open five compartments. It was a fatal wound. She could not float with five of her 15 compartments flooded.

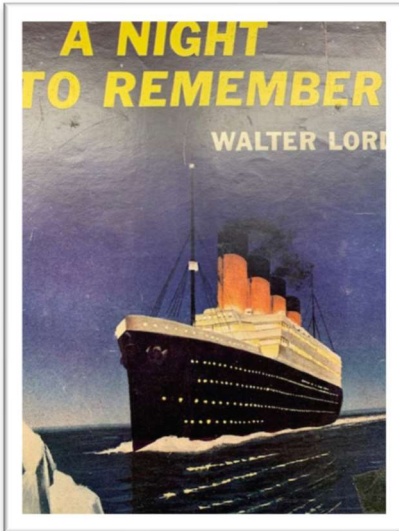
Writer's note:

I have been a student of the TITANIC disaster ever since I learned about it in Cub Scouts in the mid-1950s.

In the early 1990s, Mary and I toured the Canadian Maritime provinces with a stop at the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to click off a "bucket list" item.

Halifax was the deep-water port closest to where TITANIC sank and where its dead are buried in three cemeteries: non-denominational, Roman Catholic and Jewish.

While the exhibit on the TITANIC was very well done and educational, it was at the non-denominational cemetery where the horror of the disaster became vivid by the epitaphs written on grave markers. One was just a simple marker for 3rd Class passenger Alma Paulson, age 29, and her four children, ages two through eight. I later read the family was from Sweden enroute to Chicago to join their dad, Nils, who had immigrated in 1910.



The fact all five bodies were recovered confirms they were all wearing life jackets. The two-year-old may have been held in their mother's arms. Alma had done all she could to save her children. All were lost to human arrogance.

As 3rd Class, we can assume the Paulsons were common people, perhaps much like our own family members who shared the dream of a better life in America.

The best book on the TITANIC sinking, in my opinion, is "A Night To Remember," written by Walter Lord in 1955.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz

At the time the book was written, many of TITANIC's survivors were still alive. Lord interviewed as many as he could find who were willing to recall painful memories. His book is a compilation of their memories combined with historical fact.

About 20 years ago I presented a slide show to the Rotary Club of Duluth that exposed the arrogance and blunders that led to the sinking of the Titanic based on reading "A

Night to Remember” several times, as well as other books recommended by the curators of the Halifax exhibit.

What I have written for this newsletter was taken from my Rotary presentation. When I wrote this Robertson’s book was available at the Duluth library. But, checking online it doesn’t come up in the library’s online card catalog.

On the other hand, amazon.com does seem to offer multiple versions:

https://www.amazon.com/s?k=morgan+robertson+futility&crd=3RB8DK3LHPXSI&sprefix=Morgan+Robertson%2Caps%2C191&ref=nb_sb_ss_ts-doa-p_3_16

MEANING NO DISRESPECT TO OUR COMMUNITY FLAG

Sometime during one of those early April blizzards with wind gusts to 50+ MPH, I got an email from Bill Berg saying that our community flag was hanging by one shackle and flying straight out from the pole. I figured one of the stainless-steel shackles had given way (later proven to be true).

I knew I could not lower and replace the flag because our pole has internal halyards (ropes that raise and lower the flag). We ordered the pole with internal halyards to avoid annoying “halyard slap” in heavy wind. Problem is when the flag is raised, 30 feet of halyard drops to the bottom of the hollow pole which is five feet below grade. It fills with water and during the winter the halyard freezes in place. Dave Grong and I were able to break the halyard free on April 12 and soon thereafter replaced the flag.

This is a good time to remind people that the flagpole and 24/7 lighting were a gift to the KR community from the Wieme family in memory of loved ones. Krista Sannes Mosby has pledged to replace the flag as needed. Thank you, Wieme family members!

MEASURE TWICE, BUILD ONCE.

The KRHCC is in the process of hiring an engineering firm to provide engineering services and bid-ready specs for our fishing exhibit shelter that will include CRUSADER II and be completed this building season.

It is the KRHCC's job to give engineering firms that may wish to bid the work the boat specs, which includes a viewing deck. Slab overall is 48'x 23.'

Dave Grong (in photo) is stick-handling the bid process. In case you're wondering, the height of CRUSADER II off the slab including 8" x 8" cradle timbers, to the top of the circular cabin vent and running light is about 13 1/2 feet.

Photo credit: Paul von Goertz



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Donations:

From Melanie McMillion in memory of John McMillion.

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