

Newsletter



Knife River Heritage & Cultural Center

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By Paul von Goertz, KRHCC Board Member

KRHCC IN RACE AGAINST OLD MAN WINTER!

As the brisk NW winds begin to blow, the KRHCC is racing old man winter to complete some tasks, while at the same time volunteers celebrate what has been accomplished, given COVID-19 restrictions and unavailability of contractors who are busy with homeowners bored with their homes.

Key accomplishments:

- Completed depot exterior details and installed remaining windows
- Completed interior carpentry and painting (some details remain)
- Completed exterior lighting depot and freight buildings
- Installed windows and door in freight building
- Began replacing and painting freight building siding
- Installed power in freight building
- Removed broken and heaved depot apron
- Poured footings for both order board and flag poles
- Mounted remaining building exterior signage

On “to do” list for balance of year, weather permitting:

- Complete restoration of order board pole
- Lift and place order board and flag pole in mountings
- Set forms and pour five of 15 depot apron sections
- Complete installation and painting of freight building siding
- Flash chimney

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We had about a dozen volunteers who accomplished all to date. I will not attempt to name them out of fear of forgetting someone. However, I will thank those who gave us their power tools for the building season: Larry Ronning: router and router table; Frank Burnhardt: compound miter saw; Randy Ellestad: table saw and Bobcat; Bruce Wright: compressor.



The skilled backhoe operators from Ostman Trucking & Excavating made quick work of carefully removing old depot apron. The space left was filled with Class 5. Photo: Paul von Goertz

Randy Ellestad and Larry Ronning supervise the concrete pour into the order board hole. Bedrock was found at about 4 ½ feet – a good base for the pole. The flagpole hole went 6 ½ feet and filled with ground water at the 5-½ foot mark. Photo: Paul von Goertz



“NOTHING HAPPENS UNTIL SOMETHING IS SOLD!”

During my 45-year career in business, I had the rewarding experience of having a client who took his father-in-law’s business with sales of \$60,000 a year, to a multi-national with sales in excess of \$150 million.

He had a fabulous outlook on life and I learned many things from him. One I learned that comes back to me as I watch the KRHCC grow, is that “Nothing happens until something is sold.”

Now, my client saw a lot happen as his sales grew and nearly 500 employed in five plants around the world. I see this from a different perspective from what he witnessed when I see more and more people becoming “sold” on the mission of the KRHCC. I judge this by the number of volunteer hours and dollars of local donations invested. As a result, a lot has happened in just two years of KRHCC existence.

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There is yet another level to which we can view “Nothing happens until something is sold.” We are rapidly approaching a major capital campaign to fund our planned picnic/event and boat shelters. Combined, we are looking at well over \$100,000 and for this we will need considerable outside support.

Grantors place a high value on local commitment to a project and here the KRHCC shines with hundreds of volunteer hours and local donations that far exceed the total value of grants received to date. Our ability to meet the “local share” requirement of grantors goes a long way to “sell” them on the worthiness of our project. And that’s what they want—worthy projects with strong local support.

So all volunteers and donors, a big high-five for enthusiastically embracing the KRHCC’s “product” and proving again that “Nothing happens until something is sold.”

REMEMBERING OUR VETERANS THIS VETERAN’S DAY NOV. 11 Roy Mattson – a hero among us

I want to devote space in this month’s newsletter to members of our armed forces. I would like to honor one veteran in particular because I was so impressed by his patriotism and courage he displayed in completing the required 35 missions a B-24 Liberator bomber crew was expected to make over Germany in WWII.

I knew Roy Mattson through the Knife River Lutheran Church where Mary and I and Roy and Helen attended. Roy and Helen lived on Homestead Road just north of the Expressway.

I have been a Civil War and WWII history buff since childhood and over the years I slowly was able to learn from Roy his WWII combat experience. We became friends and I was deeply honored to speak at his funeral service at our church on February 20, 2019.



Here are my words and as you read them, put yourself in the place of a 22-year old who admittedly was scared half to death nearly every minute of a mission. Yet, remarkably, as you will read, he completed all 37 missions.

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While much could be said about Roy's 99 years in this world, I have chosen to talk about his service to our nation from 1942-1945 as I believe these years' best reveal his character and defines him.

Do you believe God has a sense of humor? I do. Let me explain.

Roy and Helen and Mary and I have been long time members of Knife River Lutheran Church. Early on, I remember knowing Roy and Helen only as members of our church family.

One day Mary sent me to get something at church and as I walked in the Ladies Aid, as it was called then, was meeting around several tables. And there among them was Roy, sitting next to Helen. A man attending Ladies Aid? Now, I did not know this at the time that Roy drove Helen everywhere and they always did things together.

I found Roy attending Ladies Aid to be rather – "curious."

Now today, I am here to honor this man, the most-manly man and bravest man, I have ever met. And I think God, who set this whole scenario up, thinks this is all pretty funny.

Roy worked for Lockheed in Burbank, CA, building P-38s. In 1942 he was drafted into the Army and assigned to the Army Air Corp. He was trained as a radio operator for the B-24 Liberator. He and his flight crew flew bombing runs out of England and North Africa over Germany, initially at night. Crews were required to fly 35 missions.

These assignments were frightening, especially when the Allies went to daylight bombing for greater accuracy. Daylight bombing had a 19% death rate; if shot down a 17% chance of being a POW. Being shot out of the air, at maybe 30,000 feet carrying 3,800 gallons of gasoline and five tons of bombs, gave little hope for survival.

Roy told me he would pray he would awaken to the sound of rain on the metal Quonset hut roof. Rain and or fog would mean there would be no flying that day. As recent as several years ago, Roy told me he still had nightmares where he is awoken and told he must fly that morning.

When I asked Roy to speak about his WWII experiences at one of our winter Knife River Community Interest programs, he declined, saying it was too painful. But, he said, he would arrange for me to have a DVD recording of a talk he gave at the Bong Memorial

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in Superior on Armed Forces Day 2007. Much what I tell you came from Roy's own words.

In November of 1942, at age 22 – which was the average age of an airman - he began his 27th mission, a daylight mission deep into Germany.

Roy noticed the flak from German guns was very accurate that day. He also noticed two B-24s about 1,000 yards from his squadron and out of formation - which he thought was a little unusual. He later learned the Germans had cobbled enough pieces of downed B-24s to make flyable B-24s. Flying alongside the Liberators, the German crews were able to relay the speed, elevation and exact location of a squadron to anti-aircraft guns below. Roy's plane was soon hit, on fire and losing control. He and the navigator got out, but he was the only survivor.

He landed safely and in the snow, but with a twisted ankle.

He hobbled along a French farm road until he met a Frenchman who he felt he could trust would not turn him over to the regular German army who were known to treat aviators humanely, or the dreaded "Schutzstaffel" or SS. The SS was a paramilitary organization comprised of sadistic bullies who maintained control over occupied populations through terror.

He was connected with French partisans and began working his way west to neutral Spain, traveling only by night. One partisan was just an 11-year-old girl, who went by the name Lisa. She seemed to understand how the Underground worked. He learned her parents had been partisans and both killed by the SS.

One day in a small French town, he saw two SS officers talking to the town priest. The priest pointed in the direction of the house in which Roy and two other aviators were hiding. They were immediately arrested.

The SS officers rounded up several whom they thought were implicated in helping the aviators escape and shot them. They apparently knew of Lisa and made an example of her in the town square by publicly torturing her, and then shooting her. From Roy's description of what took place, he apparently witnessed this. He had grown to love this brave little 11 year old who had risked – and then gave - her life for him.

The SS took Roy and the others in a German version of a Jeep to what Roy assumed would be Gestapo headquarters for interrogation. Along the way, a British bomber flew

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overhead and one of the SS took out his pistol and foolishly shot at it. The shots alerted partisans to their location and so they ambushed them, killing both SS, freeing Roy and his two comrades, and dumping the dead SS and their "Jeep" into a river.

With the help of partisans, Roy continued working his way to Spain, being pursued by SS, French Nazi collaborators and bloodhounds, traveling at night. One day he awoke, and there in a distance, he saw an American flag.

I want to pause here to talk about Roy's love for flag and country – perhaps inspired by the flag he saw that day.

Every Memorial Day – or perhaps it was flag day – Roy would stand in front of our church with his arm around the flag, ramrod straight, eyes straight ahead and repeat word-for-word a poem about our flag called "A Tribute To Our Flag."

Some may remember the first few lines:

"I am the American Flag! I was born on June 14th, 1777. I am more than just a piece of cloth shaped into a design. I am the emblem of the mightiest sovereign nation on the face of the earth. I am the inspiration for which American patriots sacrificed their lives, their fortunes --- and their sacred honor."

The poem goes on for more than three minutes to describe where our flag flew throughout our nation's darkest days, and for what it stands - all memorized by Roy.

Roy would work his way back to England with a final hop on a Canadian bomber out of Spain.

He was told he had the option to go home and not complete his 35 missions. While contemplating this option, he had the opportunity to meet Jimmy Stewart, now Commanding Officer of the 703rd Bomb Squad in charge of B-24s. Roy was greatly impressed by Stewart and acknowledged Jimmy helped him reach a decision to stay and complete his missions. Jimmy was well aware of the danger of the missions and would fly 20 himself.

One of Roy's remaining eight missions was bombing the Normandy beaches in preparation for D-Day. Then, very near the end of the war, he was shot down a second time. Members of what Hitler called the Home Guard, mostly teenagers and older men,

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met him. They were more afraid of Roy than Roy of them, they really did not know what to do with Roy and so let him go.

Roy once again worked his way back to England ... returned home on leave and met his son, Donald, for the first time, now two years old.

With Germany out of the war in May of 1945, Roy was assigned to train for aircrew on B-29 bombers for the war in the Pacific. But the war ended before he was deployed, and Roy would soon be discharged.



During those dark days of 1942, Roy could not have imaged he would live to be almost 100. But he did ... years well lived... and now resting in the arms of his Lord ... and under the flag of a grateful nation.

Roy in the pilot seat of a B-24 Liberator bomber. Roy was the radioman among the crew. Photo: Roy Mattson

TWO HARBORS AMERICAN LEGION FULFILLS ITS COMMITMENT FOR A MEMORIAL TOLAKE COUNTY VETERANS

For more than a year the Two Harbors American Legion Anderson-Claffy Post 109 has been committed to creating a memorial to all Lake County Veterans and at the KRHCC site. The fund raising was completed this summer and the memorial can now be ordered with delivery next spring. This will be the Post's official memorial - and the only one - in Lake County. The KRHCC is deeply honored to be the site.

The memorial will be near the KRHCC's 30' flagpole that was paid for in its entirety by a Knife River family in honor of two brothers who served. The tablet portion is 4' tall by 2' 6" wide by 8" deep. The base is 4' long by 1' 4" front to back and 8" top to bottom. Both components are made from Minnesota granite.

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The goal is to have the pole in place by Veteran's day and the flag raised for the first time approximately at noon with a brief ceremony. The pole will be formally dedicated to the memory of the brothers on Memorial Day, 2021. The decision to wait until Memorial Day was made with the hope that family members of the men being memorialized living elsewhere in the country can travel to KR with less fear of COVID-19.

The image shows the memorial as ordered. Many thanks to Alex Cavallin from Cavallin Funeral Home for assisting the Post with the creation of the monument. The inscription reads:

“Dedicated to the Veterans of Lake County who served in the Armed Forces of the United States, with recognition to descendants of Scandinavian seafarers who served in the U. S. Merchant Marine and built the wood boats to help win the Battle of the North Atlantic during WWII.”

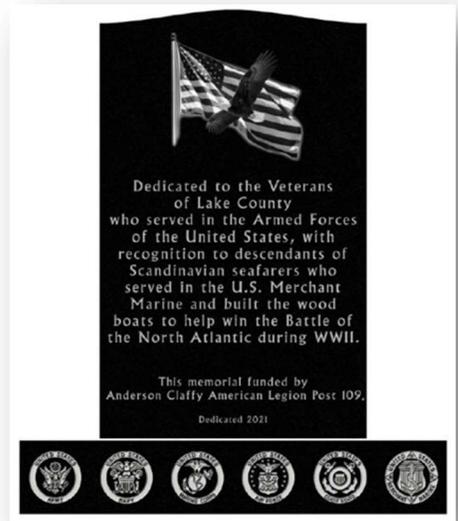
“This memorial made possible with the support of Anderson Claffy American Legion Post 109. Dedicated 2021.”

MORE ON LAST MONTH'S TRIBUTE TO KR NAMESAKE JOHN GEIST

The same day the September KRHCC newsletter was emailed, I received the following email from Brandon Erickson, who grew up next to the Geists:

“The article on the Geists absolutely made my day! What great neighbors, and the impact John had on us as a tennis instructor is immeasurable! I think about him periodically in daily life especially as I coach all of my kids' sports teams. I didn't realize how much I learned from him until I started coaching. This write-up brought tears to my eyes.”

Mary and I have known Brandon almost all his life. For more than 40 years now he has been a close friend of our son, Paul. Brandon is a fine young man and I can't help think what impact John may have had on his life in terms of John's values as an educator and coach.



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Brandon attended UMD and graduated with a degree in Chemical Engineering. He then earned an MBA from the University of Minnesota. Currently, he is a Division Quality Director at Boston Scientific in Maple Grove, MN, where he leads a global team responsible for providing quality support to medical device customers and field sales.



Brandon lives with his wife, Bridget, son, Austin, and daughter, Emme, in Maple Grove. He coaches both the hockey and baseball teams in which his children participate.

Photo: Brandon and Emme

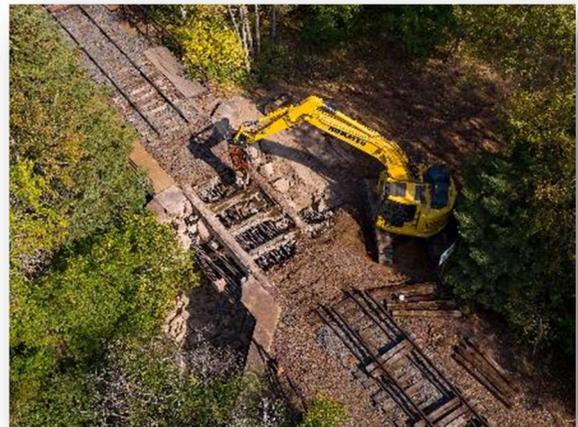
WHY THIS PART OF KR'S HISTORY NEEDS TO BE BURIED

As reported in the July newsletter, the Alger-Smith Railroad underpass under the mainline that allowed trains to safely access the coal dock, was determined to be no longer structurally sound and needed to be filled in.

Demolishing the underpass and filling it in was completed late September, and so this piece of KR history dating back to 1914 is now buried and NSSR trains can safely pass over where it once was.

Thanks to Ken Buehler, Executive Director of the North Shore Scenic Railroad, and Todd Lindahl, KRHCC historian, for contributing information to our July newsletter and this update.

Drone photo courtesy of Dave Schauer.



HAPPY 90TH BIRTHDAY WINNIE NISSWANDT!

Winnie (Winnifae) Nisswandt is a dear to all who know her and always cheerful – a delightful person to know. She is also a mom to seven and with husband, Al, introduced them all to camping starting when some were still in diapers. The family

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settled on Granite Point in 1972 and built about as close to Lake Superior as anyone would want to me.

See the April issue of this newsletter for how the Nisswandt family both beautified and protected the Agate Beach from erosion by planting hundreds of trees in the 1980s. A wonderful gift from them to all who enjoy the beach.



Winnie turned 90 on September 21 and enjoys good health with many visits by children and 30-plus grandchildren and many, many friends.

Happy Birthday Winnie from all who love and admire you!

Winnie and Albert. Al passed away in 2013 of heart related issues.

MEMORIALS AND HONORARIUMS RECEIVED THIS MONTH

Memorial in memory of John Safstrom

John died unexpectedly in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, in February where he and Gail were wintering. John and Gail have been residents of KR since 1989. A structural engineer by training, John was active in all three Knife River non-profits and loved working on the depot.

Donation received worth noting

A sizeable undesignated donation was received along with a nice letter which acknowledged that *“the effort of the KRHCC is remarkable”* and that *“an eyesore and attractive nuisance is now a focal point of the community”* - and with *“thank(s) to all the volunteers who are working on this project.”*

Your comments and suggestions for this monthly emailed newsletter are always welcome. Email to: info@krhcc.org If you have family or friends who may enjoy receiving it, please forward to them, or send their email addresses to same email address and they will receive their own copy.

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