

Minnesota Now (MPR) | Lake Superior Railroad Museum named 'Best Transportation Museum in America'
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CATHY WURZER: Where do you suppose the best transportation museum in America might be? According to "USA Today," it's in our own backyard, the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in downtown Duluth. The museum housed in the historic Union Depot is home to all manner of locomotives, cabooses, and freight cars. Plus, it has a nifty collection of dining car China and all kinds of railroading memorabilia.

Thanks to the videos starring the museum's executive director Ken Buehler, interest in the museum is growing and so is its membership base. The YouTube videos are getting thousands of views, and they range from Ken's favorite item in the museum to a tour of her private rail car. The budding YouTube star is on the line right now, live from Duluth. Hey, Ken. How are you?

KEN BUEHLER: Cathy, it's good to talk to you again. I'm fine, and thanks for having us on the show today.

CATHY WURZER: I'm glad you're here. I'm not surprised the videos are popular. You know what you're doing in front of a camera and a microphone. Was it fun?

KEN BUEHLER: It was a lot of fun, but it was a horrible mistake. I had started 2020 with the resolution that we would do one or two of these a month. And I'm very fortunate and that our station manager is Josh Miller. And Josh graduated from St. Cloud State with a degree in photojournalism and television production.

And I met him when I was still doing [AUDIO OUT] on a regular basis here in Duluth. He was my director. And just turned out, he liked trains more than TV. So he came over to work for us here. And I went into his office, and I said, we're going to do one of these a month. I'll write them and produce them, and we'll do real well.

Well, then, of course, along came March, this pandemic thing. And they announced that we were going to be shut down. And of course, you know how many of these are done between the start of the year and March, right? None.

CATHY WURZER: Right.

KEN BUEHLER:

So I went into Josh's office when they said they were going to shut us down two weeks. And I just [AUDIO OUT] pandemic can't possibly last longer than two week. I said, maybe, they put another week on it, maybe that's as long as they can possibly go. It's got to be over by then.

I said, let's go on our YouTube channel, which we had already set up. And let's go on our YouTube channel right now and say we're going to do one of these behind-the-scenes video tours every single day that the museum is closed. It can't possibly go past 21 of these. 148 later, and--

CATHY WURZER: There you go.

KEN BUEHLER:

--1 and 1/2 million views, that's--

CATHY WURZER: It's a good story. And it worked out really well. I mean, the results are probably better than you ever even imagine they could be.

KEN BUEHLER: It's unbelievable. Like I say, 1 million and 1/2 views. Our membership went from about 800 members when we started the pandemic to over 1,500 today. We've almost doubled our membership in the museum. It's the largest it's ever been in the history of our organization.

Our 1,000th member, by the way, came from Sweden. It used to be our membership was pretty much regional here in the Midwest, around Superior and the area around Minnesota and Wisconsin. But right now, our membership is across the country, and indeed, around the world.

CATHY WURZER: Why do you think these videos are so popular? I mean, obviously, you do a good job. Yes, you're a former pro broadcaster, and you're engaging. But there is something about-- I think it's the stories. Would you agree?

KEN BUEHLER: We try to do a story, not just "this engine was built in 1923 and has 4,000 pounds of tractive effort, and it's got 48-inch drive wheels, and it's a 480." We try to stay away from [AUDIO OUT] stories about the men and women who built the railroads that have built our great country. And once in a while, if you work it hard enough, it all comes back to the railroad.

CATHY WURZER: A long time ago, you told me you're not exactly a railroad guy. But here you are, the head of the Railroad Museum. But you are a history guy, though.

KEN BUEHLER: Yes, Cathy, I've always enjoyed history. I, kind of, share that, I think, with a lot of people here. The difference is that I do like railroads, but I'm more of an interest in history in general. And the way I look back is there were two different Americas. There was the agrarian society, where you were born, lived, and died within a 25-mile radius in most cases.

And then, there's today's modern America, industrial, a worldwide power. And the transition between those two Americas was pretty much the railroads that cross the country with the first transcontinental railway. It allows [AUDIO OUT] products and, more importantly, ideas to be shared over long distances. And that, I think, united America, made America strong was the transition between the different Americas, the one today and the one we grew with railroads.

CATHY WURZER: We're having some problems with your phone line here, Ken, just for your information. I'm kind of curious, when you look at-- the museum is a lovely, lovely museum. I mean, it looks like, kind of, a small town, for folks have not been in it. You've got it really well laid out. What's the most popular display at the museum, do you think?

KEN BUEHLER: I think it all depends what you're most interested in. A lot of our exhibits are open to the public, which means you can climb up and sit in the engineer's seat. You can get up in the cupola of a caboose and get behind the controls of the rotary snowplow. And for kids, we have a museum a jungle gym. For parents, I think, they like the history of the artifacts. If you're into fine dining, certainly, golden age of railroading, you've got in the dining cars of the railroads and China cars you mentioned in the beginning of your introduction here. It has a great collection of some very real China and silver pieces from the golden age of railroading dining cars.

This is the Yellowstone, the world's most powerful locomotive built, 6,000 horsepower steam engine, almost as [AUDIO OUT] invented. Or the Union Pacific Big Boy, I think, has a great place. And we've just redone our back [AUDIO OUT]. We [AUDIO OUT] behind the trench it had that was dirty, dank, and dangerous.

And with the last two years relaying all the bricks and new lighting and doing some different displays back there, almost doubling the size of what you can see now to visit the lakes and museum in Duluth.

CATHY WURZER: Well, I'll tell you what, my friend, I'm waiting for a video tour of a bar car. Is that coming?

KEN BUEHLER: [LAUGHS] Well, we have several very nice first class cars on our North Shore Scenic Railroad. For people who come here, the museum is the best part of the experience, because this is a place where you can see other things and ride the train.

In our North Shore Scenic Railroad, passengers from downtown Duluth at the Historic Union Depot where the museum is. You step in the back door, and you get on our North Shore Scenic Railroad. And you go through downtown Duluth, go through [AUDIO OUT], ground zero for tourists, and of course, along the shore of Lake Superior with just the Lakewalk [INAUDIBLE] you from the banks of the greatest of the Great Lakes, Lake Superior.

And then up along the North Shore through the majestic Duluth and different trips to the side and back for our short run or ride the train in the evening, about two and a half-hour ride. And then our full day, all the way up to Two Harbors, where you end up in that beautiful little community nestled on the shore that is right along Highway 61 [AUDIO OUT].

CATHY That's right. That's right, exactly. And our friends in Knife River appreciate you coming through with that train.

WURZER: Say, Ken, thank you so much. I wish you all the best.

KEN BUEHLER: Well, thank you very much, Cathy. It's great [AUDIO OUT]. Thank you for the opportunity. And we certainly invite everybody to come to the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth. Visit us, ride our trains, have a wonderful experience. And then whatever you do, tell your friends and neighbors just what a great time you had.

CATHY We will. Thanks again. Ken Buehler with the Lake Superior Railroad Museum in Duluth.

WURZER: