

Moving up: Fishtown shanties flee rising waters in Leland

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Leland — David Kareck threw quite a cheese party.

On the menu shared with customers and friends: the contents of his cheese shop from historic Fishtown at the western tip of the Lower Peninsula.

The Village Cheese Shanty has been plagued by rising water levels from the Leland River and water pushed from the near-record water levels of Lake Michigan. So faced with the inevitable temporary move away from the river, Kareck hosted a soiree for about 50 people in the fall.

“We had to do something with the food, which I usually would store, so we threw a party,” he said.

With all the Swiss amiss, the brie free and the goat cheese gone, Kareck's shanty was lifted off its foundation Friday and placed in the nearby marina parking lot as part of an effort to preserve the shanties.

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Record-high water levels in the Leland River in Leland, Michigan have caused flooding and damage to fishing shanties along the river's banks. The Morris Shanty, center with red banner, is scheduled to be lifted off its unstable foundation and saved this winter. (Photo: John L. Russell, Special to The Detroit News)

“The small building's foundation is soggy and rotting,” said Amanda Holmes, executive director of the Fishtown Preservation Society.

The society is charged with saving Fishtown and the shanties that make it one of Michigan's most unique northern destinations. It has raised \$950,000 of an estimated \$2.5 million that will be used to begin the work to preserve the structures. Its initial plans include rehabbing the Village Cheese Shanty and the Morris Shanty this winter and then Carlson's Fishery.

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"The unexpected damage from the near-record water levels made it imperative that work had to be done to preserve the buildings," she said. "This (cheese) building was the last shanty built in Fishtown over 60 years ago and is historic."

Holmes said the shanty was so low on its footings "we don't even know how many times the building has been flooded by the river."

"Every time we had rain or wind, the water would just pour into the building from all sides," she said. "... Fishtown is a small area with head-scratching complexity. We are preserving this special place."

Kareck, who has been operating in the shanty for 22 years, said he's been closely monitoring the water levels since April, saying: "I bet the river is up 3 feet since then."

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Amanda Holmes, executive director of the Fishtown Preservation Society, watches as the Village Cheese shanty in Leland's Fishtown is lifted off its foundation on Friday, Jan. 10, 2020 and placed in the nearby marina parking lot. (Photo: John L. Russell, Special to The Detroit News)

Concerns about flooding and its effect on local businesses and tourism began to surface in May. That month, nearby Traverse City had its sixth-wettest May in history, with 4.67 inches of rain, 1.67 inches above normal, according to the National Weather Service.

So this month, crews from two Leelanau County businesses worked to stabilize the Village Cheese Shanty, and the 585-square-foot building was moved off its pilings Friday. Its future includes a new steel foundation and a concrete floor that will be 16 inches higher than the old pilings. And a bonus, it will be level.

Kasson Contracting of Maple City and Biggs Construction of Lake Leelanau placed steel beams under the building last week, and large planks were placed crisscross in the interior to prevent the building from shifting. A crane from Team Elmer's in Traverse City was set up in the adjacent marina parking lot.

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David Kareck, owner of the Village Cheese shanty, takes video of the shanty being lifted by crane off Leland's Fishtown docks and placed in the nearby marina parking lot. The waterlogged and rotting foundation will be replaced and the shanty will return to its site by April. (Photo: John L. Russell, Special to The Detroit News)

After the move was on hold for two days awaiting a drop in the wind off Lake Michigan, the building was gently lifted by a 185-ton crane and swung 180 degrees to the parking lot just north of the site. It took just a few minutes to complete the move. A crowd of curious bystanders watched the lifting or recorded the event with cameras and cellphones.

"This is quite the project," said Tim Newman of Kasson Contracting. "I've moved buildings before; every one is different."

The cheese shanty is expected to be returned to its location within a month. Next up, the Morris Shanty on the south riverbank will be raised and moved. The storage building, which is more than 60 years old, has lost flooring and part of the pier washed downriver.

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A 1959-built cheese shanty in Leland's Fishtown was reinforced with wood and steel beams prior to it being lifted off its waterlogged and rotting foundation. (Photo: John L. Russell, Special to The Detroit News)

Work on the 1926 Carlson's Fishery building will eventually begin, along with landscaping, stormwater runoff diversion and dock replacement with improved handicap accessibility. Portions of the work will be done as money becomes available.

Fishtown is a century-old group of wood buildings on nine acres nestled along the Leland River, which flows through the village of Leland and empties Lake Leelanau into Lake Michigan. Fishtown was designated a Michigan Historic Site in 1973 and joined the National Registry of Historic Places in 1975.

John L. Russell is a writer and photojournalist from Traverse City.

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