SISU HERITAGE NEWSLETTER
• November 2026 •

# This Old Housebarn by Jodi Summit

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The restoration of the Seitaniemi Housebarn in Waasa Township, built over 100 years ago by Finnish immigrant Alex Seitaniemi, is nearly 90-percent complete. And the work done this year has brought the old log structure back to life in a way few imagined.

Barn red walls with bright white trim, adorning the new pine siding installed last year over the tamarack log walls, shone brightly in the sun on a warm fall afternoon, as Sisu Heritage member Paul Knuti gave a late-October tour of the progress made this year. Knuti has been involved with and managed the restoration project for many years. "Dairy barns are always painted red," said Knuti, who has a family farm not far away, where he raises cattle. While researching the history of the structure, Sisu found some 1940s colored photos showing the red exterior, and although not sure of the exact shade, the historical architects on the project were confident that this red was a close match. There are still a few things to be completed this fall, Knuti said, including wooden ramps into the ground-level doors of the building. The single structure, over 90 ft-long, holds a house, horse barn, hayloft and cow barn. While the wooden ramp entrances won't match the original wooden porch or stone steps, they will provide safer access to the building, and were approved as part of the restoration. The building will have metal gutters installed, also not original, but something that will help preserve the building well into the future. A new dormer will also be built over the root cellar, which is under the house end.

The housebarn, located about three miles from central Embarrass, is the only remaining housebarn in the United States built by someone of Finnish ancestry. The structure is an extremely rare and important cultural resource built by Alex Seitaniemi, who immigrated to the area in 1902 and purchased the land a few years later. Construction started in 1907 and was completed between 1915 and 1922. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1990, and Sisu Heritage started the long process of restoring the aging log building in 2010. The first step was preparing a historic structure report, with assistance from the Minnesota Historic Preservation Board, which did a detailed inventory, down to each log and board. "That is how we know so much about the building," said Knuti.

The housebarn was built in pieces. First built was the small two-story house, then the horse barn and hayloft, and finally the cow barn. The structure showcases four different types of log construction and finishing and jointing work. The cow barn, completed last, used round logs, while the rest were squared logs. Some architects who have worked on the building suspect the cow barn might have been constructed elsewhere and then moved to the site and attached to the existing structure, but no one is sure. The questions come from the different style of log work used in that part of the building, along with a slight difference in the cow barn's width, a bit larger than the rest of the barn. Most of the logs used were tamarack, known for their durability. Knuti said the vast majority of the logs did not need any repair during the earlier part of the renovation. Damaged or rotten logs, joists, and rafters were replaced with tamarack, which is harder to find nowadays, but some trees on Knuti's farm were big enough to harvest.

No one is sure why Alex decided to build a housebarn. He came from the northern part of Finland, where such structures were not at all common. "He just had a passion to build something very well

done," said Knuti. "This was a show-off place." The quality of the construction is probably why the log building survived, he speculated. The logs were so tightly fitted together that hardly any caulking was needed. The barn's stone foundation, set simply onto the ground, was also expertly built and required very few repairs.

The renovations have been funded mostly with grants from the Minnesota Historical Society and a special bonding appropriation from the state of Minnesota. Work has cost about $500,000 so far and includes restoration of the stone foundation, log replacement, root cellar reconstruction, rebuilding hay loft ramps, replacement of floor joists, new manure room wall, new doors and windows, major roof work, new siding on the west, south and upper portion of the east wall, painting of the siding and logs on walls without siding, and more. Knuti estimates the remaining work will cost around $100,000, which includes repairing some floor and roof joists, which will be expensive, and some additional interior work on the barn portions. Sisu Heritage will also need to set up funding for a maintenance plan. While the interior of the cow barn is being restored, they are not sure how much other interior work will be done in the horse barn or house. Knuti said they are aware that repairs will be needed for the hayloft ramp in the near future.

The Seitaniemi farm had 10-12 cows, more than other farms in Embarrass typically had. Milk was sold locally though it's not clear how the milk was stored, especially in the winter. The trip to Embarrass was three miles with a horse and wagon, or sleigh in the winter. The cow barn is one of the most historically-interesting parts of the structure, Knuti said, and it was obviously an area of great interest to him personally. The barn has a water tank above the rafters, and metal tubing connected the tank to water bowls in each stall. The most unique feature was a self-watering system. When a cow stuck its mouth into the bowl, it moved a metal plate that opened up a valve, filling the bowl with water. "This wasn't a common system," Knuti said. "There is only one other I know of like this in the area." The work this year has rebuilt the cow stalls, using as much of the original wood as possible. A big surprise was finding several of the original metal bowls, which have now been reinstalled, though they are not in working condition. Knuti said they are not sure how the overhead tank was filled with water before the farm got electricity in the 1950s. He said they probably used a pump with a gasoline engine. There are still a lot of questions about the farm and how it operated, but what is known is that the farm was successful. Finnish farmers in Embarrass were very effective and efficient, Knuti said. "Embarrass was the agricultural capital of St. Louis County." Finns had to work from scratch to develop their fields, from land that had been logged. "They could survive on 80 acres," he said. "They also tended to have large families." The survival rate of family farms in Embarrass during the Depression was very high.The farm, besides producing milk, grew potatoes and rye, along with hay to feed to the cows and horses. In the winter, they logged the 80-acre farmstead. Alex eventually bought another 80 acres down the road, that were also farmed and logged. Embarrass, during this period of time, was renowned for its farming, specifically potatoes and rye. Cooperative stores and dairies were key to farming success, especially during hard times.

In 1925, the family built a stick-built home near the housebarn, and moved the family's three children there. Eventually the farm became home to Alex's two bachelor sons, Bill and Knute. They would continue to live in the house end of the barn in the summer months, as they worked the farm. While Knute died in his 50s or 60s, Bill continued to live on the homestead into the 1990s. After the 2003 death of Bill, the final living member of the Alex Sietaniemi family, the housebarn and property were sold to Carol and Larry Schaefer of Ely, who were interested in the property for hunting land. In 2009, they donated the housebarn to Sisu Heritage, with an easement for the land immediately surrounding the structure. Sisu has been working to restore and maintain many of the unique and historic Finnish farmsteads and buildings in Embarrass.

The Seitaniemi Housebarn property is not open to the public except during tours by appointment or specific community events. Sisu Heritage hosts the tours, which include other historic Finnish log homesteads and buildings.

**To schedule a tour, contact the Nelimark Gift Shop at 218-780-0133 (summer months only) or Sisu President Marlin Bjornrud at 218-410-9660 or marlin.bjornrud@gmail.com.**




**Visit sisuheritage.org for a link to purchase new Sisu-branded clothing.**

# Big Raffle Raises Over $10,000 by Board Member Robin Ramquist

I am sharing an update on our big Sisu Heritage four-wheeler raffle. What a pleasure it was to be involved. My sidekicks, my sister Becky and my dog Isabel, were adventurous in selling tickets, as were board members. Dan Alto let us use his trailer and we traveled the Iron Range with the four-wheeler to be viewed. On our travels we were able to meet many wonderful people and share the history of Embarrass and our heritage. We passed out a lot of our new brochures and a lot of candy. Isabel got lots of petting. Part of the enjoyment was seeing the color of our flowers, trees, and the changing of the seasons.

Our first adventure started with being in the Fourth of July Parade in Tower. We were also at the Northern Lights Musical Festival, Hoyt Lakes Water Carnival, Mesabi Trail Great River Energy Bike Tour, Finnish-Americans and Friends tour, the Embarrass Region Fair, Ride to the Ridge at Giants Ridge, Community Night Out at the Seitaniemi, Dean & Debbie Concert at the Finnish Apostolic Church, Honktoctoberfest at Giants Ridge, Babbitt Library Vendor Day, Ely Community Center Vendor Day, and every week at the Embarrass Farmers Market, Babbitt Farmers Market, Tower Farmers Market and Ely Farmers Market. Due to the fires that our neighboring communities experienced with smoke and ashes, some of the events we planned on doing were canceled.

Our raffle was a success due to hard work and dedication on behalf of our team. We sold all of our tickets and made a profit of $10,227. These monies will be used to maintain and preserve our historical sites in Embarrass.

The winner of the four-wheeler was Rich Paulson of Ely. Second-place winner was Peggy Erzar of Ely, who won the power washer. Amber McCarter of Embarrass won third prize which was a $50 gift certificate to L&M.




The Sisu Heritage Board would like to thank everyone who purchased a ticket or took the time to listen to us share our heritage in Embarrass and take a brochure. You made our raffle a success.

**Summer Raffle Nets $800**

In addition to the new Big Fundraiser Raffle, Sisu held its usual smaller Summer Raffle this year. Prizes ranged from a George Foreman grill to sauna gift buckets, gift cards and gas cards, and original artwork by Andrea Alto. Winners were drawn at Community Night Out. They were Tina Bosma of Evansville, Pat Heikkila of Fridley, Michele Jackman of Virginia, Margaret Kavanaugh of Marble, Mary Kinner of Nowthen, John Kinnunen of Embarrass, Marti Kinnunen of Embarrass, Joann Koski of Tower, Jason Lamppa of St. Paul, Jeff Leese of Gilbert, Mark Mounek of Babbitt, Virgil Saari of Embarrass and Shelly Tahya of Chisholm.

**Congratulations to all the winners of both raffles and a big thank you to everyone who supported Sisu by purchasing a ticket.**

## Upcoming Events – Mark Your 2027 Calendar!

**Annual Meeting • Sunday, February 28: 2 p.m.**
Embarrass Town Hall - Speaker TBA

**Sauna Day • Saturday, June 5: 9 a.m. - 3 p.m.**
Nelimark Homestead and Museum
Speaker Aaron Brown - Music by Steve Solkela

**Community Night Out • Sunday, September 12: 4 - 6:30 p.m.**
Seitaniemi Housebarn - Music TBA

## **The Nelimark: What a Successful Summer!** by Board Member Ron Sutton

The summer of 2026 has flown by and the leaves have blown off the colorful Fall trees. The night temps are in the 30s. The Embarrass community gathering place, the Nelimark Museum and Gift Shop, is closed for October after a busy summer of activities. From June through September time flew out the window. Now it is time for an update review of how things went. It was amazing to all the volunteers who man "the Neli" on the Thursday through Saturday openings what an astounding variety of people there were who stopped in to visit every week. Free coffee an' (goodies) were had by all; and did we use the coffee? Hundreds of cups were brewed over the four months.

The gathering place was accessed from the nearby Mesabi Trail by bikers and walkers and from Highway 21 by automobile, four-wheelers, and even horse riders! People from all over the USA and worldwide came to visit. The pinning of visitors' residences on the maps near the door of the museum show the hundreds of guests who visited, as well as those who signed our guest book. Many new friends were made; people who were interested in our little community inquired about housing, camping, walking, biking and living here. We heard from many (who stayed an extra hour or two) that they "just have to come back again to visit" and get the complete tour of the township. It was indeed a great summer for all those involved and we thank each of you for taking part in many ways. So, now Christmas is coming and we invite you to stop in at the Neli as "Sleigh Bells Ring" to celebrate.

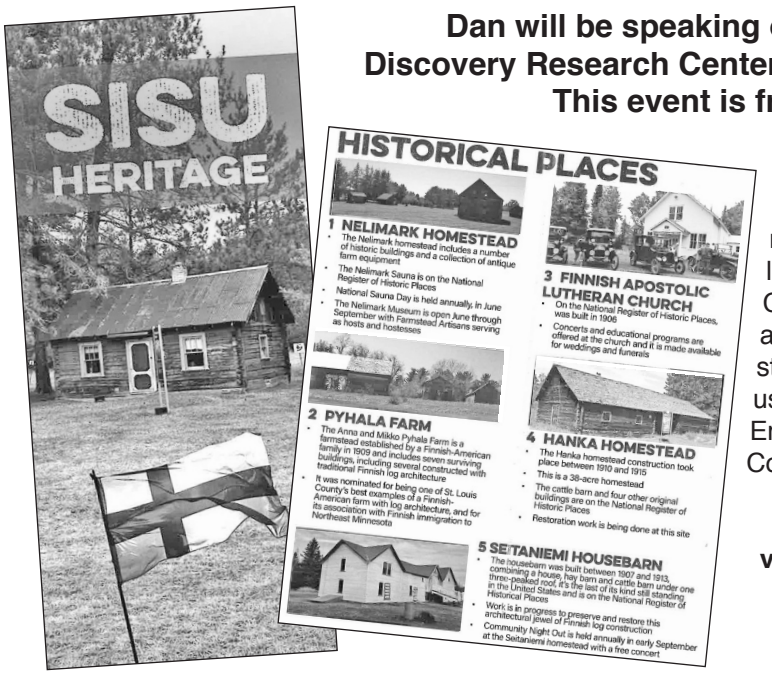



**We will be open Thursday-Saturday on Nov. 12, 13 and 14 and Dec. 10, 11 and 12, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. The Neli is located at the corner of Highway 21 and Salo Road in Embarrass, across from the Timber Hall Event Center.**

*May you and your family richly enjoy November and treasure the coming holiday season!*

# Promoting The Mission Of Sisu Heritage

Board Member Dan Alto has been busy giving presentations on Sisu Heritage and the Seitaniemi Housebarn. He spoke at our Annual Meeting in February; attended by Zoom and spoke to the Finlandia Foundation National Meeting in March; spoke to the Ladies of Kaleva in Ely in May; and in June presented to Little Finland (National Finnish American Festival Center) in Hurley, WI.




**Dan will be speaking on Thursday, Feb. 25, 2027, at the Discovery Research Center-Presents Series in Chisholm at 5 p.m. This event is free and open to the public.**

Dan was the driving force behind the new Sisu Heritage brochure, completed in June and distributed across northeastern Minnesota at multiple tourist information locations, from the Minnesota Discovery Center in Chisholm to the Ely Chamber of Commerce. Dan was also instrumental in the creation of large portable display storyboards about Sisu and its properties that have been used at a variety of events and locations, including the Embarrass Region Fair, the Nelimark Museum and Community Night Out.

**Thank you to Dan for taking the initiative on this variety of projects to educate, share Sisu's mission, build support, and encourage memberships.**

NELIMARK MUSEUM & GIFT SHOP

# SLEIGH BELLS RING

*Are You Listening?*



*Step into the charm of an old-fashioned Christmas*
and discover a delightful collection of seasonal treasures,
handcrafted gifts, vintage-inspired décor,
and unique finds for everyone on your list.

## CHRISTMAS BOUTIQUES

November 12, 13 & 14, 2026
December 10, 11 & 12, 2026
10:00 AM to 3:00 PM

ART
HISTORY
GIFTS
COMMUNITY

SHOP
EXPLORE
BE INSPIRED
CELEBRATE

**Nelimark Museum & Gift Shop**
Corner of Salo Rd and Highway 21

# IN MEMORIAM

**Memorials to honor family and friends in the amount of $1,115 were given to Sisu Heritage this year. Thank you to everyone, and our apologies if we have missed anyone.**

- **Dave Joki** from Peter Esala
- **Doris Lehto** from Mickey White
- **Ray Makkyla** from Paul and Carol Knuti
- **Judy Lempia Mazzeo** from Jacob and Fran Silverberg

• **Bob Kallio** from FW and Kathleen Cina, Raymond Niemi and Leanne Lundstrom, Donald and Joanne Barstad, Douglas Salo and Nancy Grierson, Kenneth and Barbara Alaspa, Michael Kalnbach, Peter Esala, Gene and Jane Halberg, Richard and Sheila Vandervort, Glorene Clark, Gary Berts, Scott Mauer, Rodney Holmes, John Lahtola, Haberman, Loretta Raftshol, Jaime Hess-Mitchell, Jack Nevala, Scott Sarkala, Peter Sarberg, Marguerite and Tim Baker

# Briefly...

## Nevala House

The oldest house in Embarrass has a spiffy new roof, thanks to a $10,000 disbursement from the St. Louis County Board of Commissioners, earmarked for use at the Nelimark Homestead. The work was done by Bargel Construction of Tower.



## Hanka Homestead

Mark Rahkola has been hired to pull the remaining stumps in the field. New items of furniture have been added inside the house, including a Coolerator ice box donated by Chuck Neil. Bruce Sweney has also done carpentry work and built some pieces for the kitchen. Grants are being pursued to finance the badly-needed painting of the farmhouse exterior.



## Apostolic Church

Two more concerts have been held at the church. On the evening of July 16, young performers from the Northern Lights Music Festival played a selection of classical pieces for string instruments. The concert was very well-received, the acoustics were praised, and NLMF asked to use the church again next season. On the afternoon of Sept. 20, the husband and wife duo, Dean and Debbie, entertained with standards, Latin and pop music.

## Seitaniemi Housebarn

Another successful Community Night Out was held in Waasa on Sept. 13. The weather cooperated beautifully, the crowd was bigger then ever, and Pat and Donna Surface were warmly received as the repeating musicians. This free event is a popular end-of-summer tradition and Sisu promises not to run out of pie in 2027.

# Sisu Heritage, Inc. Membership Form

**Our Mission:**

**The mission of Sisu Heritage is to enhance the Embarrass region by preserving and sharing its unique culture, climate and history.**

Name _____

Street Address or PO Box _____

City, State, Zip _____

Telephone _____

Email _____

**Individual Dues - $10 per year**

**Lifetime Membership - $250**

New _____ Renewal _____ Choose one, three or five years

Additional Donation _____

Total Amount Paid _____

Date _____

Please send a check payable to Sisu Heritage, Inc. and this form to:

Mickey White
Sisu Membership
PO Box 71
Embarrass, MN 55732

**For further information about Sisu Heritage and its projects, to volunteer time, or to donate artifacts or money, contact:**
Marlin Bjornrud, President, 218-410-9660 or marlinb@efreechurch.com

## SISU HERITAGE, INC.
***• Our Mission •***

To enhance the Embarrass region by preserving and sharing its unique culture, climate and history.

In conjunction with Embarrass Township, we maintain the Nelimark Homestead and Museum. We also own and maintain the Hanka Homestead, Seitaniemi Housebarn and Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church.

## MEMBERSHIP REPORT

As of October 2026, Sisu Heritage had 166 members, 36 of whom are lifetime members.

Please use the form in this newsletter to start or renew a membership, give a gift membership, or let someone else know about our mission.

Memberships help to support our work.

Thank you!



## 2026 Sisu Heritage, Inc.
***Board of Directors:***

**- Marlin Bjornrud**
President
- **John Kinnunen**
- Vice-President
**- Linda Koskela**
Secretary
**- Winnie Koivisto**
Treasurer
**- Mickey White**
St. Louis County Historical Society Rep and Membership Chair

**Dan Alto**
**Robin Ramquist**
**Jon Salo**
**Ron Sutton**
**Bruce Sweney**

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