

# KALEVA HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

March 2026 | [www.kalevamichigan.com](http://www.kalevamichigan.com)

## Dear members of the Kaleva Historical Society:

2025 was a busy year in Kaleva, at the Bottle House, the Community Center and during Kaleva Heritage Days as the town celebrated its 125 anniversary. One of the highlights is always the Lighting the Cemetery for the Winter Solstice on December 21. There are quite a few steps involved in preparing to set out 1000 luminaries: 5 inch utility candles must be ordered, 1000 bags have to be folded from the top twice, the garage to operate from must be secured, clean sand must be delivered, sometimes the cemetery has to be plowed due to excess snow, the garage must be set up to efficiently put together the bag, sand and candle as volunteers arrive to distribute in the cemetery. Since this custom began almost 30 years ago many of the faithful volunteers are no longer with us, although their relatives often fill in for them and the Kaleva Norman Dickson sports teams help as well.

There are many to thank for this to happen: the village supplies the sand, Kaleva Party Store supplies the bags, Dawn Best lends us the garage, board members fold the bags, Sandy orders the candles, several volunteers arrive early to set up the production line. This

part is important because there is only a little over an hour until dark when all the candles must be glowing. Finally, we thank the Bethany Lutheran Church for the soups they provide to the frozen volunteers.

This year we had a nice surprise. Unknown to us someone was observing the event and wrote a description of what he saw. The article appeared on Facebook a few days later and it is so moving I'm going to share it in this newsletter. It is fairly long so it will compose most of the pages. There will be the usual dues and donation form to return and some newsworthy items.

Thank you for your support of Kaleva's unique Bottle House Museum.

Cindy Asiala, president



*KND boys basketball team helps put out luminaries*



*Preparing the luminaries*

## Michigan Enjoyer:

*On the Darkest Night of the Year, they Lit Up the Graves.*

In the small town of Kaleva, they revived this ancient tradition in the 1990s to honor the dead.

By O.W. Root

Kaleva — Every year, on the longest night of the year, hundreds of candles burn in a little cemetery in northern Michigan. The low winter sun slowly dips and orange light begins to flicker in that blue light that comes in the deep part of winter. The green pines stretching into the sky fade slowly into vertical black shadows, the sky becomes covered, and the cemetery glows in the silence.

Kaleva is a little town with a population of 507. Like most towns in northern Michigan it's no more than a few streets blocked in a grid, a couple stores, modest homes, and a lot of trucks. In dry statistical terms, Kaleva isn't particularly unique. But life isn't only census data. Most towns in northern Michigan don't light candles on their graves on the winter solstice. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen candles being lit on gravestones on December 21st until I came here.

Life is more than statistics, though the explanation for the little lights on the darkest night can partially be explained by statistics. Kaleva was settled in the early 20th century by Finns. The town's name is Finnish. The street names are Finnish. The last names on the graves in the cemetery are Finnish. And the tradition of lighting candles on gravestones is Finnish. It's most common in Finland and Iceland, though it also happens here in places like Kaleva and other Finnish communities in the Upper Peninsula. Though most communities today light the candles on Christmas Eve, Kaleva is unique in their lighting directly on the winter solstice.

I sat there behind the wheel on Kaleva Street, parked next to Maple Grove Cemetery, with heat from the plastic vents pouring into the vehicle keeping my little cocoon warm, and my winter throat dry. At around 4:15 PM trucks started coming down the road, parking in front of me, behind me, and in open drive-ways wherever they were. A garage opened across the street, a table was set up, and brown paper bags in brown boxes were shuffled out. People got to work.

Old folks walked slowly on the ice, carrying a few bags across the street and into the snowy cemetery, carefully placing them on gravestones. Groups of high school students rode in the beds of trucks, grabbing as many bags filled with sand and candles as they could, driving back into the cemetery and covering as much territory as possible. They talked about school, sports, and debated what they should do if they don't have enough bags for every grave. A couple dressed in camo and black dragged two young kids in a sled behind them as they trudged through the cemetery toward a truck with an open bed and a bunch of brown bags in back.

Over the course of an hour, people moved across the graveyard, tending to every stone. Once the light had faded just enough, the glowing orange inside the brown paper bags finally became faintly visible. Over the next hour the light in the sky became darker and the lights in the bags brighter until finally the little cemetery was lit with hundreds of beautiful glowing orange stations.



There's a painfully heavy darkness in the north that's very hard to understand unless you live here. It's in the soul. The skies are endlessly gray, the ground is frozen for what feels like forever, the pines are more ominous than anything else, and the quiet of the winter feels like suffocation. We all light candles around this time of year no matter where we are or who we are. We all need that light in the night, a glimpse of hope, of life. But we need it more up here in the deep north. It's perfectly unsurprising the people of Scandinavia started lighting their graves in frozen winter. A warm light of hope in the darkness of death.

Culture, heritage, tradition. We can't watch them on a screen or buy them at the store. They aren't passive things; they are acts. The Finnish tradition of lighting candles in Kaleva was lost for some time. It wasn't until the mid 1990s they started honoring the tradition again. Culture, heritage, and tradition live when we act, and die when we don't.

Sitting in my car, watching the people of Kaleva light their little cemetery on a freezing Sunday evening in late December, I thought about how none of it was done for money, or clicks, or fame, or anything materially frivolous. There was no fanfare, no outsiders there but me. There was only a little community coming together to light their graves on the darkest night of the year.

People stayed to admire their work for a few minutes. They took photos on their phones, remarked how, "It looks pretty good" and then they got in their trucks and drove home for dinner. One by one they left, and eventually all the noise died down. There were no more idling trucks or adolescent voices, only the glowing lights in the dark northern night.





Desserts at Taste of Finland

**2026 events:**

Bottle House Museum open Saturday and Sunday beginning May 23. Depot Railroad Museum open Saturday, May 23 until Labor Day. 12:00-4:00

Special displays at the Bottle House will honor the logging industry and America's 250th anniversary

**Saturday, December 5:** Taste of Finland 12-4 at Bottle House. (photo)

**Saturday, December 12:** Christmas Marketplace at Bottle House, Art Gallery and Community Center

**Monday, December 21:** Light the Cemetery on the Winter Solstice. 4:00 at Maple Grove Cemetery

**Sunday, December 20:** Bottle House closes for the season.

**Concerts at the Log Cabin:**

Walta & Panu Streets • 7 p.m.

August 7 ..... Mary Sue Wilkinson and Mark Schrock

August 14..... The Downtowners

August 21..... The Schrock Brothers

August 28..... Pocket Change

*Thanks to our 2025 sponsors: In memory of Richard, Michael, Chuck, John T. and Dennis Asiala; Sandra Kingsley; Environmental Services; Blue Water Transportation; Honor State Bank, Terwilliger-Bennett Barz Funeral Home; Kaleva Telephone; Three Sisters Tavern; Finan Services; Calvin Lutz Farms, Melvin and Beverly Fennell; Law Office of Mark Quinn.*

*Also thanks to the Depot sponsors: Cherryland Electric; Kaleva Telephone; Terwilliger Funeral Home; Northern Michigan Dragway; Calvin Lutz Farms.*



