

## *THE MERRY JANE*

Building a stagecoach is not your average family project but, in 1899, the Merritt family decided to build a coach for general camping and trips to their Pike Lake cabin. Although regional train service had replaced most of the large long distance coaches, smaller wagons were still common. The Merritts kept a log book filled with construction details of their family coach, soon to be named the “Merry Jane.” When craftsman in West Duluth began work on the coach in January, the family ledger lists the use of “basswood and second growth hickory.”

By April the frames and ribs were shaped and second growth ash, mentioned in the journal as a “good stick,” arrived from St. Paul. In May the coach was painted, an odometer and window curtains were added and “..we ran her out on the scales...” which registered almost 1200 pounds. After a few short trips up and down Duluth hills, a new brake bar was installed. In June the coach was complete for a cost of \$532...considerably less, according to Howard Kendall, who provided stagecoach service to his Pike Lake Hotel than a genuine Concord wagon priced F.O.B. \$675.00

At the time, there was considerable interest in coaches, the “coach and four,” especially in New York where large “Tally Ho” vehicles were fashionable. But Minnesota was also entering another age: in 1902 there were about a dozen automobiles in the state; by 1909 there were 7,000 licensed automobiles.

Around 1903 the Merritt stagecoach was shipped to Nebraska for ranch work, eventually returning by rail along with the family’s first automobile. The coach was stored at Pike Lake and, during the 1918 Forest Fire, the barn and carriage house, along with the Merry Jane, were destroyed.

*(Sources for this article include files in the Northeast Minnesota History Center at UMD, Duluth.)*