

Follow Your Dream With A Stagecoach

JOYCE BUPP

York Co. Correspondent
HALLAM (York Co.) — Nearly everyone has a dream.

Some folks dream of wealth, some of travel, some of power or property.

Alex Siegfried II had a dream. He wanted a stagecoach.

A stagecoach is not an everyday, readily-available item. Still, from the time he was 14 and worked at Lauxmont Farms near Wrightsville, Alex II had become enthralled with the idea of owning this symbol of the old West.

"Let's build a stagecoach," Alex II said to his father, Alex Sr., last fall.

Alex Siegfried, Sr., York R11, had taken early retirement from the IBM company and was considering turning his building/cabinetry/woodworking hobby into a second career of building reproduction furniture. He pondered his son's suggestion only briefly.

"You're out of your mind," father replied to son.

Not one to abandon a dream too quickly, Alex II persisted. The operator of an excavating business, he hoped someday to own a small farm where he could keep a few horses, using them to pull a stagecoach in public events, like parades, to advertise his business. After continuing persuasion from his son, Alex Sr. agreed to at least look at a stagecoach.

"We couldn't find one to go look at," he recalls of their dilemma. Even the state museum at Harrisburg had no stagecoach. After some sleuthing, they tracked down coaches in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. and at a Long Island museum. Meanwhile, they began researching stagecoach history and lore.

"Stagecoaches were only made by the company of Abbott and Downing, of Concord, New Hampshire," relates Alex Sr. "Abbott was a wheelwright and blacksmith and Downing was a cabinetmaker; they got together in 1832. Abbott was the 'engineer' of the project and Downing was the 'perfectionist' who had an instinctive knack for picking the right woods for the job."

About 20 years later, the partners separated. Their children ran separate companies for awhile, eventually got the firm back together and later took in another partner. In all, five separate companies built the coaches, but all were Abbott-Downing related in

some fashion.

Abbott and Downing built both "mudwagons," the farm-truck of the 1800s and "roadcoaches," the travel equivalent of today's bus. Mudwagons were more rugged, squared and utilitarian, for hauling freight and commodities. Road or stagecoaches had a more rounded, stylish design. But they were nevertheless overland travel vehicles which needed to traverse rough roads and ford streams under weather's extremes, and required durability.

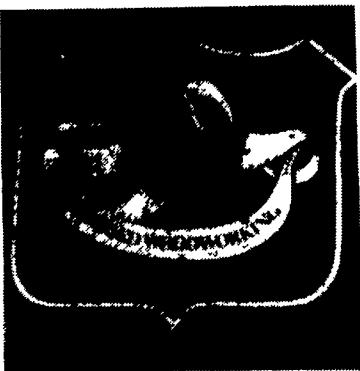
"The stagecoach shape is taken from an eggshell. Its strength came from the use of tongue-and-groove boards; that was their strongest method of construction," explains Siegfried. "Bows, the frame of the coach, were steam bent."

At peak production, the Massachusetts firm made about 2,000 vehicles annually. Abbott and Downing and its spinoffs remained in business for about 70 years total. Siegfried estimates that a total of 5,000 roadcoaches were manufactured in that time. The last were built about 1910.

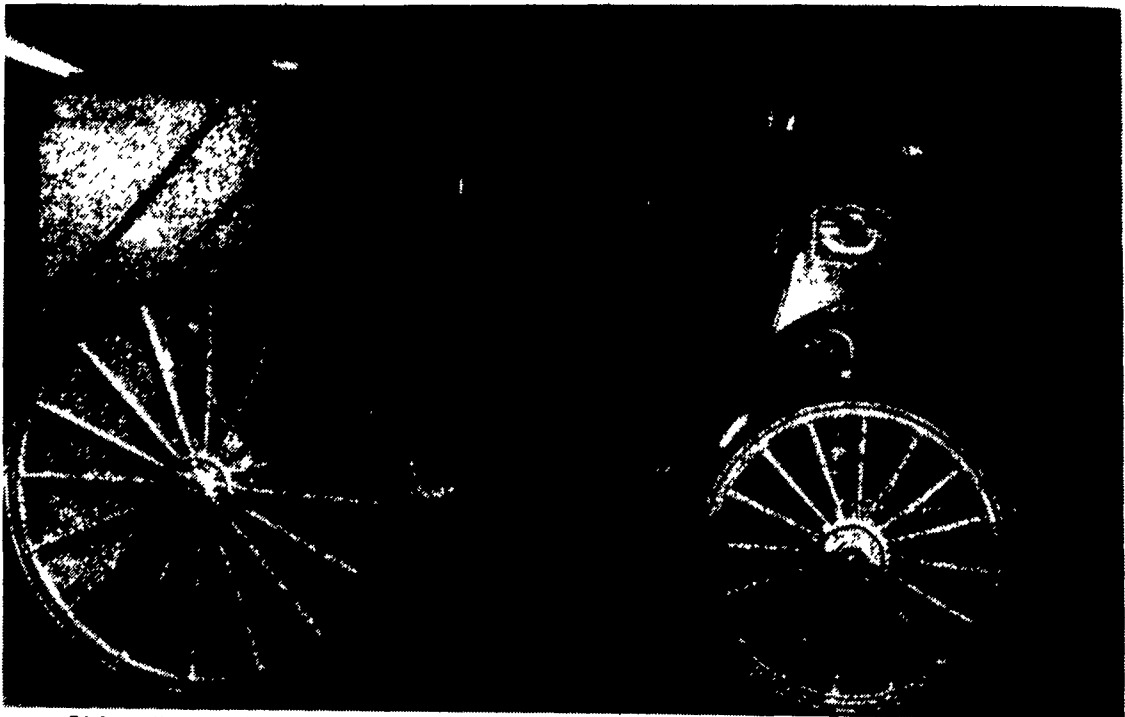
"There are reportedly 12 of the originals left in the United States, two of them at the Smithsonian," he notes. Most he believes, just rotted away, abandoned to motorized transportation.

In 1832, a roadcoach sold new for about \$1,200, a considerable investment for its time. Today, an original stagecoach is worth about \$90,000.

But, a brand new one can be had for \$25,000. That's the price tag on Siegfried Woodworking's hand-crafted stagecoach. Their coach No. 1 is getting a few final, finishing touches, with parts of three more in various stages of construction at their Hallam factory.



A hand-painted eagle, finished in gold leaf, is the numbered, signature identification of the Siegfried Woodworking coach.



Shiny, fire-engine red with bright yellow undercarriage, Siegfried Woodworking's completed stagecoach No. 1 is beautifully handcrafted, while durable and roadworthy.

The beautifully-crafted, fire-engine-red coach is finished with black and yellow pin-stripe details and a decorative eagle, in gold leaf, on each side of the front boot. It runs on a bright-yellow undercarriage, with rubber-edged steel wheels turning on Farmington hubs and Timken bearings. Picture-perfect, Stagecoach No. 1 is a tribute to determination, research, long hours, inventiveness, sweat and some heated "discussions" along the way.

Alex Sr. had woodworking "in his blood." His father and grandfather were cabinetmakers in the Bloomsburg area and dabbled in it over the years. Alex Sr. even built several houses. But the project that really tested his research and craftsmanship detail skills and was building a suit of armor for the Eastern School District's knight, the school "mascot."

"It was team effort that took thousands of hours of research; I learned how to research historic things," Siegfried says of the crafting challenge of creating the suit of thousands of tiny metal pieces. By comparison, the father-son research on stagecoach building took several hundred hours.

While pictures of stagecoaches are plentiful, patterns, and directions are virtually non-existent. And, various construction methods have been utilized over the years for different coach elements. The Smithsonian granted them



Alex Siegfried, Sr. is the woodcraftsman of the stagecoach-building team. His wood-and-glue lamination technique was adapted from boatbuilding and is similar to the method used in making paper mache'.

permission to measure their originals and assisted with reproduction copies of scale drawings of the stagecoach's design.

"Those were good for ideas, but were not a usable scale that we could work from. And, we had to adapt the design to what is available today," explains Siegfried.

Having a slender piece of oak steamed in the shape of a sidebow for their finished coach gave them a guide for the size of the undercarriage they would need to build. After several weeks of setting up equipment and workspace in Alex Sr.'s garage, stagecoach building got under way. Alex II, the blacksmith worker of the team, spent a full month handcrafting the extensive and exacting ironwork details of the undercarriage.

Their intent was to build the first complete coach in the garage; but in January, they were offered space in a large factory facility nearby. Already crowded and in need of a painting room, they put aside coach building and spent several more weeks again moving and setting up their equipment. It was early April when building of the coach construction was resumed.

Construction of the curved sided, wooden coach is done by laminating several thin layers of air-dried hardwoods, mostly oak and ash, and clamping the layers to a shaped form to dry. The layering of thin sections of woods — a

technique similar to paper-mache — creates a finished coach shell that is light, while durable and very roadworthy. According to Alex, Sr., the project's woodworker, he finally settled on the laminating technique because of its success in boat building.

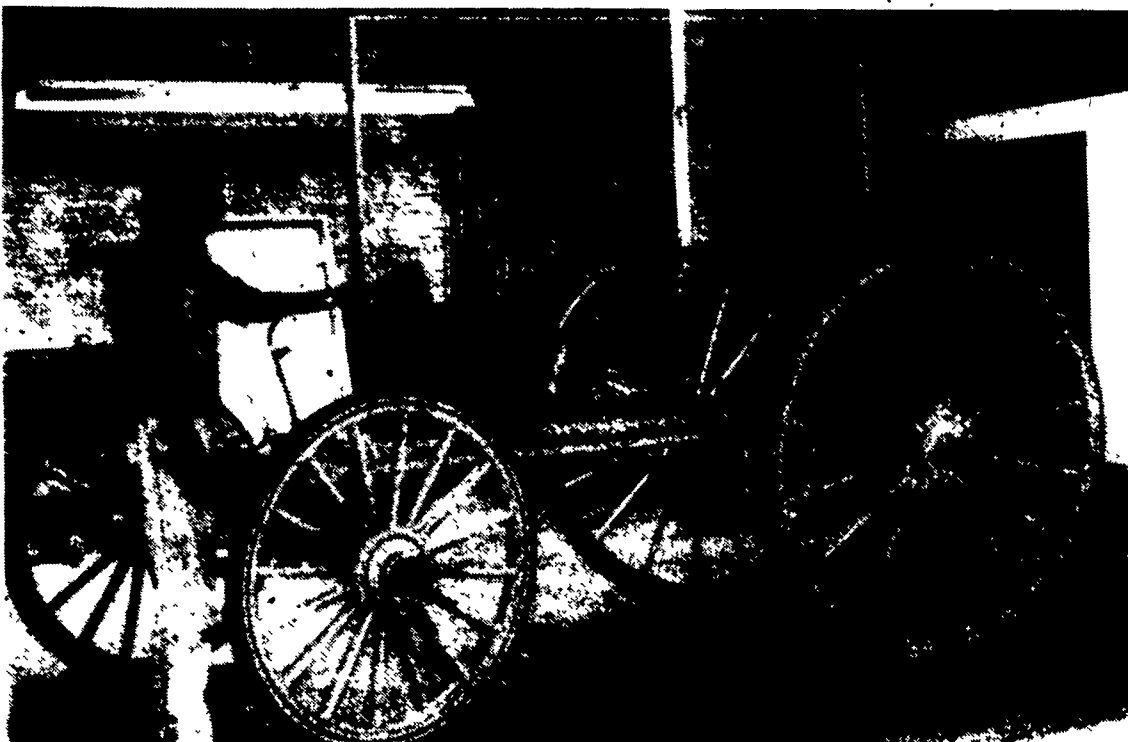
"We did a lot of arguing over how to build these sides," grins Alex II.

They are as strong, or stronger, than the originals were," explains Siegfried. "We wanted a good-looking piece that people can actually use, for parades, for weddings, for having fun with."

The cab is seven-feet long, with a 3½ feet boot on the front where the driver is seated. A trunk carrier on the back adds additional length. When set on the 16-foot-long undercarriage, the completed coach towers well over eight feet high. A metal-crafted step boosts passengers climbing in and out of the cab.

Modern wheels and hubs and avoidance of leather belts and straps in the design have eliminated the tedious everyday greasing and maintenance that original stagecoaches required. In fact, the rubber belts on which the coach rides — like the shocks in an automobile — are virtually maintenance free, with great strength and little stretch or sag. The Siegfrieds estimate the belting and undercarriage can probably support some-

(Turn to Page B3)



To check dimensions for their stagecoach, the Siegfrieds first had "sidebows" of wood steamed to shape, then visually compared the bows to the length and height of the undercarriage.

Homestead
Notes