

Travel arrangements would be unacceptable today

by [Luther Granquist](#) // September 10th, 2012

The *Wright County Eagle* for Friday, July 31, 1874 reported that Sheriff John Nugent had come through Delano the previous Tuesday while bringing seven-year-old Henry Buri to the Hospital for the Insane in St. Peter. Henry, who lived south of what is now Annandale, had been committed in Wright County Probate Court the day before. His trip to St. Peter started with a stagecoach ride from Buffalo to Delano, where he and the sheriff took the morning train to St. Paul. They would have taken the afternoon train from St. Paul to St. Peter.

The expansion of railroads in the 1870s opened up rural Minnesota to settlers and trade. The railroad also placed the Hospital for the Insane in reach of families struggling to deal with children who were not insane but labeled “idiot,” or “imbecile,” or “feebleminded.” Probate courts committed these children and ordered the sheriff or some other person, often a stranger, to take them to St. Peter. More often than not they went by train.

In a day and age when travel by children is carefully monitored and scrutinized, it is sobering to realize how seemingly casual the travel arrangements were made for children with disabilities. In September 1873, eight-year-old Nels Larson, committed by the Meeker County Probate Court, left Litchfield early in the morning for the hospital. The man who accompanied him knew only that his mother was a widow with eight other children. Johan Tobaben’s trip was longer. The eight-year-old boy from Elizabeth Township in Otter Tail County likely took the afternoon stagecoach from Fergus Falls to Campbell with the sheriff, stayed overnight there and took the train all the next day to St. Paul. After another overnight stay, they arrived in St. Peter early in the afternoon on the Fourth of July 1875.

Stina Aspaas, a young 11-years-old girl, traveled all day from Crookston to St. Paul, stayed the night and the next day went on to St. Peter with a “gentleman” who “knows little about her” and who she must have known little about, as well.

Nels, Johan, and Stina were immigrant children, who likely traveled by train after reaching America.

But traveling with their family would have been a vastly different experience than traveling to a state institution in the company of a stranger. For Henry the train was probably a new experience. The brief comment in the *Wright County Eagle* is the only account of such a trip. No record remains to tell how they reacted to being taken from home and to travelling with a stranger among strangers toward a destination they neither knew nor understood.

These children had been difficult to deal with. Henry had “paroxysms of violence.” Nels was a restless boy, constantly running about. Johan could not speak. He also liked to throw things and make trouble.

Stina had torn her clothing to pieces and mutilated her fingers with her teeth. No record remains to tell how their travelling companions, including other passengers, treated them. We will never know whether their trip was exciting, frightening or even terrifying.

If the question was asked, by hospital staff when they got to St. Peter, the answer was not considered important enough to record.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com