

He was in my own backyard the Whole Time **or** On the trail of the Elusive L. R. Comstock

by Tod von Mechow

I had just received a copy of Minnesota Soda Water Works by Austin Fjerestad in the mail and was flipping through all of the pages looking at the pictures of bottles and the biographies of the various bottlers. I was particularly interested in any information on L.R. Comstock of St. Paul, since I had attempted to do some research on him in the past:

Over 30 years ago, a friend of mine was at the Brimfield Flea Market and had purchased a pontiled blue sided soda marked "L. R. Comstock & Co St Paul Min." I did not even know there were pontiled bottles from Minnesota, let alone a blue sided bottle. Years later, I

bought the book The Bottles, Breweriana And Advertising Jugs of Minnesota 1850-1920 by Ron Feldhaus. There was a picture of the Comstock bottle and a later pontiled cobalt blue pony marked "Comstock & Steere St Paul, Min." Wow, two pontiled blue sodas from Minnesota!

To that point no historical information had surfaced on Comstock or Steere. The book dated these bottles circa 1860 and 1865, respectively. I disagreed with these dates and believed they were more like 1855 and 1857.

Minnesota in the 1850s was the frontier. In 1848, when Wisconsin became a state, the area that was to become the Minnesota Territory had a European population of just 4,500 people. Minnesota Territory was formed in 1849 and grew quickly. Saint Paul became the territorial capital. The population swelled and was about 30,000 by 1854 and 150,000 by 1857. The Mississippi River around Saint Paul became a tourist attraction and an estimated 56,000 tourists visited there in 1856 alone. Saint Paul was ripe for a soda water bottler serving these tourists and the swelling population of Easterners who had enjoyed a carbonated beverage back home. Minnesota entered the Union on May 11, 1858.

In the late 1990s, when research materials were becoming more available via the Internet, I tried to do some research on Comstock, but to no avail. This guy proved elusive.

As I paged through the Saint Paul section of the new Minnesota book, I anticipated that newly discovered research would either prove or disprove that dates I placed on these bottles. When I got to the section, I saw the two bottles and quickly scanned the text for the biography, but sadly what I found was:

"It would be interesting to know the story of L R Comstock, as to date no information is known on him in

L R. COM

Minnesota. We do know that he came after 1860 as no mention was found to him in the 1860 Census, but he is not in the 1865 either.”

Dang, the guys in Minnesota have more research resources than I have access to on the Internet and have still come up blank. It seemed that the story of Comstock would remain untold and what I believe to be the earliest part of Minnesota bottle history would remain locked up some where. I paged through the rest of the book looking at other nice and rare Minnesota bottles, many from towns that I had never heard of, but the Comstock mystery kept tugging at me. In doing research in the past, I have at times found one key piece of information that reveals much more. If I could find that key, maybe I could unlock the Comstock mystery.

By the end of the book, I had decided to take another shot at researching Comstock. My researching skills have been honed over time as I have learned techniques to crack open historical records.

I started with Ancestry.com, where there is a wealth of records listed. I tried entering Comstock in Minnesota and pressed search. Of the many records presented. I was focused on the Census Records for Minnesota. Minnesota did its own census in 1855, 1857 and 1865, in addition to the U.S. Census of 1850 and 1860. There are also IRS Tax records that recorded payments made by merchants to fund the Civil War during the years 1862-1866. Brewers and soda water bottlers had to pay a special tax and I have found many obscure brewers and bottlers looking at these records. Many of these taxes were due monthly, so you can really pinpoint start and end dates of these merchants. All of these records cover the period that Comstock should have been in Minnesota.

Nothing! Well, the old records often have the names

spelled wrong or the people who transcribed the records did not correctly interpret the handwriting of the census takers. I tried the soundex or “sounds like” search. Nothing! What county is Saint Paul in? Ah, Ramsey. Let’s try all males in Ramsey County whose last names start with “COMS.” Nothing!

How about:

- Anyone with the initials L. R.
- Anyone with the initial R.
- Anyone with the initial L
- How about all of the males living in Saint Paul between the ages of 22 and 62.
- Anyone in the whole country named Comstock!

Nothing, Nothing, Nothing! OK, I have to switch gears. Let’s check Minnesota marriage, birth and death records. There are lots of records to look at here, but again no luck. Civil War military records: nothing. OK, let’s look at newspaper and history books and family histories: nothing.

I then started a series of target searches:

- Comstock Soda
- Comstock “mineral water”
- Comstock bottler
- “Comstock & Steere”
- “Comstock and Steere”
- Comstock Steere

Nothing and I am out of tricks. If I only had a first name that might help, but nothing. I think of those Minnesota researchers who likely came up with dry results. Was I being arrogant to think that after years of others trying to find a trace of Comstock, I could succeed in

STOCK



cracking the safe? The vault remained tightly sealed.

OK, I have a few more avenues; Google it. I entered in “Comstock & Steere” and get the expected Ebay related hits. Try Google Books and Newspapers to no avail. What if I try Comstock soda, Comstock “mineral water,” Comstock bottler? Again I get nothing. Ok, how about “L R Comstock?” Here is an entry to an 1880 Census record at Ancestry.com. I take a peek. Interesting, L. R. Comstock (aged 58) and his wife Julia A. (aged 47) both born in Canada were living in Richmond, Virginia. His occupation is listed as a tinner. Tin is used to line the inside of the copper fittings that are used to manufacture soda water. How did two Canadians end up in Richmond? Usually, they crossed the border and settled in the northern states, like Minnesota! My senses are tingling. I suspect this is the guy, now I just have to prove it and now I am armed with two valuable pieces of information to help: the suspect is Canadian and born in about 1822 and his wife is named Julia A.

I go back to Ancestry.com and search the Census records for someone named Comstock born in Canada about 1822 plus or minus 5 years. Bingo! There is an 1870 Census record. Opening it, I find our new friend L. R. Comstock, a tinner, living in Keokuk, Iowa in 1870. Bonus! His wife J. A., was born in Minnesota! I’m getting closer. His children are also listed with their birth places. Laura, born 1860 Missouri, J. M., born 1862 Nebraska, Franklin, born 1866 Missouri. Now I know that Comstock was born in Canada, married a girl from Minnesota, was in Missouri in 1860 and moved around a lot. I don’t see any records for the 1860 Census and the records for the 1890 Census burned in a fire. It is doubtful that he lived until 1900, but I look anyway.

WHAT! A 1900 census record in Chester County, Pennsylvania—where I live! This guy ended up in my backyard and as a bonus now I know his full name: Levi R. Comstock, widower born June 1821 in Canada and living in the Chester County Home. This is gold! Once you have the first name, additional possibilities are opened up. The safe door is creaking open, I just need that last piece of information to solidly put Comstock in Minnesota and I find it! I search for Levi R. Comstock and I find the following record:

THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
CERTIFICATE No. 1011

To all whom these presents shall come, Greetings;

Whereas Levi Richardson Comstock, of Ramsey County, Minnesota Territory

Has deposited in the GENERAL LAND OFFICE of the United States, a Certificate of the REGISTER OF THE LAND OFFICE at Minneapolis whereby it appears that full payment has been made by the said Levi Richardson Comstock according to the provisions of the Act of Congress of the 24th of April, 1820, entitled “An act making further provisions for the sale of the sale of the Public Lands,” for

The South East quarter of the North East quarter of Section Seven in Township One hundred and Sixteen, of Range Twenty one, in the District of Lands subject to sale at Minneapolis, Minnesota, containing Forty acres. According to the plat of the Survey of said lands, returned to the General Land Office by the SURVEYOR GENERAL, which said tract has been purchased by Levi Richardson Comstock

.....
In Testimony Whereof, I, James Buchanan,
PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES, have
caused these letters to be made PATENT, and SEAL of the
GENERAL LAND OFFICE to be hereunto affixed.

GIVEN under my hand, at the CITY OF
WASHINGTON, the Second day of April in the year of our
Lord one thousand eight hundred and Fifty seven and of the
INDEPENDENCE OF THE UNITED STATES the Eighty
first

BY THE PRESIDENT: James Buchanan

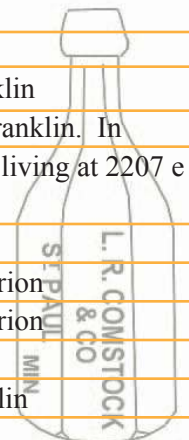
By G. H. Jones Secretary.

L. N. Granger, Recorder of the General Land Office

This is the jackpot! It clearly indicates that Levi Richardson Comstock was living in Ramsey County (Saint Paul) in 1857 and purchased farm land outside of Minneapolis. In 1860, based on the census records, he had moved to Missouri and ended up in a poor house in West Bradford Chester County in 1900.

Once I had the full name, a plethora of records became available indicating Comstock was an inventor and innovator. The following are records found in chronological order:

Date	Location	Source	Notes
1850-08-20	Heartford, WS	Census	28 year old Tinsmith & family
1850-09-10	Madison, WS	Census	28 year old Turner in hotel
1857-04-02	Saint Paul, MN	Land Grant	
1866-11-06	Macon, MO		Patent: 59,362 Stove Pipe and Damper
1866-11-06	Macon, MO	Patent: 59,363	Stove Pipe Drum
1868-10-27	Keokuk, IA	Patent: 83,467	Refrigerator and cooler
1869-04-20	Keokuk, IA	Patent: 89,027	Railway Stove
1869-04-30	Keokuk, IA	The Daily Gazette, Davenport	Levi R. Comstock, of Keokuk has just patented a railway car stove
1870-07-12	Keokuk, IA	Census	
1870-10-04	Keokuk, IA	Patent 107,880	Water-Cooler & Refrigerator
1871	Keokuk, IA	Keokuk Directory	patent right, res cor Main and 9th
1871	Keokuk, IA	Keokuk Directory	Comstock Bros. & Co., (T. G. & E. Comstock, F. Collins, T. Castle, S. Emery, and C. Castle,) manufacturers of stoves and hollow ware, cor Johnson and 12th
1871	Saint Louis, MO	Saint Louis Directory	tinner, r. Arsenal, se. cor 8th
1871-11-24	Toronto, ON	Patent 1229 extension of patent 2064	Revolving flue radiator
1872	Saint Louis, MO	Saint Louis Directory	tinner, r. 1235 S. 7th
1872-12-06	Philadelphia, PA	Patent: 132,635	Heating stove and Drum
1873-01-21	Baltimore, MD	Patent: 135,083	Oyster Packing Cans
1873-06-17	Baltimore, MD	Patent: 139,873	Manufacture of funnels
1873-07-08	Philadelphia, PA	Patent: 140,577	Improvement in means for draining basins
1873-08-12	Baltimore, MD	Patent: 141,765	Heating Stove
1874	Saint Louis, MO	Saint Louis Directory	inventor, r. 2021 S. 7th
1875	Saint Louis, MO	Saint Louis Directory	inventor, r. 411 Carroll
1875-02-16	Richmond, VA	Patent: 159,797	Stoves
1876-04-11	Richmond, VA	Patent: 175,854	Improvement Hot Air Furnace
1876	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	tinner h 409 w Broad
1877	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	tinner Shanks, Barrett & Wilson h 409 w Broad
1879	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	tinner Shanks & Barrett h 2207 e Franklin
1880-06-12	Richmond, VA	Census	
1881	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	inventor, h 2207 e Franklin
1882	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	iron worker, h 2207 e Franklin. In 1883 Geo W Pettway is living at 2207 e Franklin
1884	Saint Paul, MN	Saint Paul Directory	res 150 Eva
1890	Saint Paul, MN	Saint Paul Directory	Julia A., boards 605 Marion
1891	Saint Paul, MN	Saint Paul Directory	Julia A., boards 605 Marion
1893	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	tinner h 2810 e Clay
1894	Richmond, VA	Richmond Directory	tinner rms 1511 e Franklin
1896	Baltimore, MD	Baltimore Directory	tinner, 14 w Hill
1900-06-01	West Bradford, PA	Census	Widowed
1901-11-17	Chester County, PA	Death Certificate	Born Canada, Age 80, Blacksmith



I also find a record in the Comstock family history, A history and genealogy of the Comstock family in America:

Family 1485 § 5527. LEVI RICHARDSON COMSTOCK (Richardson, Levi, Lydia, William, Thomas, Samuel, Samuel, William) born Mallorytown, Canada, 1822; died after 1877; married, Ont., Canada, about 1842, Elizabeth Billings, b. Canada, March 23, 1824; d. Mayville, Mich., Feb. 28, 1873, dau. of --- and Theodosia (Spencer) Billings. Elizabeth Billings separated from Levi and married (2nd) in Canada ---- Hastings. Levi R. Comstock was a tinsmith, He was living in Milwaukee, Wisc., in 1848-'49, and was in St. Louis, Mo., in 1872-'75. He married (2nd) a French woman, name unrecorded.

CHILDREN

- 7724. Polly...b. Canada, July 31, 1843....
- 7725. Levi H. b. Oshawa, Ont., March 21, 1845
- 7726. Phoebe...b. Aug. 16, 1847
- 7727. Almon... b. Milwaukee, Wisc., Aug 11, 1851
- 7728. Lemuel... d. in infancy.
- 7729. Matilda....b. May 19, 1853

In the 1850 Census, Henry L. M., son of Levi, was 5 years old and born in Canada. His sister Phoebe Ann was 4 years old and born in Wisconsin. This indicates that the young family moved from Canada to Wisconsin in about 1846. None of the Comstocks were found in the 1855 Wisconsin Census and none were found in the September, 1857 Minnesota Census. There was a Max Steahr listed in the 1857 Minnesota Census as a 36 year old tinner in Saint Paul.

So how do we pull this all together?

Levi Richardson Comstock was born in Mallorytown, Ontario, Canada in June 1821. He was a tinsmith and tinner by trade. He married Elizabeth Billings about 1842 and their first two children Polly and Henry were born in Canada in 1843 and 1845 respectively. The young family moved to Wisconsin about 1846. Four more children were born there.

The marriage between Levi and Elizabeth was not a happy one and the two split up, which was highly unusual in the 1850s. Elizabeth moved back to Canada and eventually remarried. Levi moved to Minnesota, where he established a mineral water manufactory about 1854 or 1855 in Saint Paul. He partnered with a Steere, likely Max Steahr (Steere) also a tinner, about 1856 or 1857. In 1857, Levi brought several tracks of land, likely as an investment or on speculation perhaps with proceeds from selling the mineral water works.

He met a Julia A. and the two appear to have moved out of Minnesota during 1857. By 1860, Levi and Julia married and their first daughter was born in Missouri. In 1862, they were in Nebraska, and by 1866 they were in Macon, Missouri, where Levi was granted his first in a series patents for improvements to heating and cooling devices, which continued over the next decade. By 1868, the Comstock family moved to Keokuk, Iowa. In Keokuk, some related Comstocks were involved in the foundry business manufacturing stoves, likely with Levi's patents, and other types of hollow ware. Levi then moved to Saint Louis in 1871. In 1872 and 1873, he was bouncing between Philadelphia and Baltimore filing more patents, before returning to Saint Louis in 1874 and living off the proceeds of his patents.

In 1874, he moved to Richmond, Virginia, where he was issued two more patents. Things appeared to start going downhill in Richmond and he left in 1882 or 1883 and appears to have returned to Saint Paul, where we lose track of him until he appears back in Richmond in 1893. A couple of years latter, he moved north to Baltimore and then further north to the Chester County poor house, where he dies on November 17, 1901.

There is still some speculation on Comstock's mineral water business in Saint Paul, but at least we know who he was and when he was there and how he ended up in my back yard.

