

# On the Trail of the Elusive L. R. Comstock, again.....

by **Tod von Mechow**

After finishing the article on the elusive Comstock bottles from Saint Paul, Minnesota (B&E May - June 2013 “He Was In My Own Backyard the Whole Time or on the Trail of the Elusive L. R. Comstock”), I received some feedback that the article had “botched the information and details on him (Levi R. Comstock).” The detractors still believed the bottle was from the 1860s and that if it was from the mid-1850s it would be marked M. T. or Minnesota Territory as Minnesota was not yet a state.

Although I stand behind the facts that the L. R. Comstock was in Minnesota before 1857 and my assertion that bottle dates 1854 or 1855, I had no “smoking gun” to prove that Levi R. Comstock was in the mineral water business while in Minnesota other than the beautiful blue bottles.

Prior to publishing the Comstock article, Austin Fjerestad, an avid Minnesota bottle researcher, had contacted me about an early soda bottle I had attributed to Duluth, Minnesota and that was previously unlisted.

Austin published a book titled *Minn. Soda Water Works* in 2012. He is working on a second edition and was looking for my source information on the Duluth bottle. After the article was published, the subject of Comstock came up in one of our e-mail exchanges. Austin informed me that a new Comstock & Co. bottle [see Fig:1] had been found. It was a small Cronk beer impressed “Dr. Laglee’s Strawberry Mead Comstock & Co., St. Paul, Minn.” The name Laglee is not certain as it is poorly impressed. Again this bottle was not impressed “Minnesota Territory,” but there was another name, or part of one, to track down and an unusual product: strawberry mead.

Try as I might, these new leads turned up dead ends. Although I found nothing, Austin became my ally in the search, and he had access to local historical records that I did not. My hunch is that the only solution to this puzzle lay in the early Saint Paul newspapers. I cannot believe that Comstock would have a private mold made and expensive blue bottles manufactured in western Pennsylvania or New York, and shipped to the frontier, but would not have advertised his business. The same holds true for the strawberry mead. Surely having bottles manufactured in Ohio with “Dr Laglee” stamped on them would have warranted an advertisement explaining to the public the benefits of the product. There must be some ads in the newspapers!

Based on my research, Austin went to the local historical society and searched the newspapers from the mid-1850 and came away with two key clues. First, one of the newspapers listed all of the industries in Saint Paul in November of 1854. Cities of the period often boasted of their growth in hopes of attracting new residents and businesses. Unfortunately, no brewers or mineral water manufactures were listed. However, in June 1856, there was mention that ginger pop was being manufactured

L. R. COM



**[Fig: 1]**  
Cronk beer impressed  
"Dr. Laglee's Strawberry  
Mead Comstock & Co.,  
St. Paul, Minn."

in Saint Paul, but the name of the manufacturer is not mentioned. This would seem to narrow things down a bit. There were no mineral water makers in Saint Paul in 1854, but there was in 1856. We just need to prove it was Comstock.

In his book, Austin lists the earliest documented mineral water manufacturer as John Lines, supported by records in the 1860 Census. Edward Austin was a worker in Lines' factory. William Rockwell had bought the disheveled mineral water factory, located by Trout Brook, from Lines in 1863. The only thing of value in the purchase turned out to be the bottles. One would think if the plant and equipment were decrepit that it must have been old. After service in the Civil War, Austin partnered with William Rockwell in 1866. How long did Lines own the plant before 1860 and was this the plant founded by Comstock? We do not know.

In any case, Austin has proved someone was bottling pop in Saint Paul four years earlier in 1856. The best chance in solving this mystery would be for Austin to read the newspapers, find an ad, and provide the smoking gun to solve this mystery. My attention was turning to new mysteries. I had new glass manufactures and two new open pontiled soda bottles to research for my web site: [www.sodasandbeers.com](http://www.sodasandbeers.com).

My primary passion is researching early Philadelphia bottles. My arsenal of research tools includes two web sites [ancestry.com](http://ancestry.com) and [fold3.com](http://fold3.com). Ancestry.com has Census, tax, directories, newspapers, and local histories, but its Philadelphia directory coverage is not good for the early years. Fold3 has extensive military records, Census records, newspapers, and, most useful for me, a nearly full set of Philadelphia directories from 1785 to 1922.

Neither site has Philadelphia newspapers from the time

# COMSTOCK

period that interests me. So my arsenal was missing an important weapon. I tried finding a site for Philadelphia newspapers several times to no avail. There are several big newspaper sites out there, but their Philadelphia coverage is weak for the years I am searching. While researching a new open pontiled soda from Philadelphia, I tried a search again for a newspaper site and found a good prospect called GenealogyBank.com. I subscribed for one month to try it out and I was impressed with the coverage of Philadelphia for the pontiled bottle era. I did some trial searches and found a great article on Eugene Roussel from the July 10th, 1839 edition of the Public Ledger:

**MINERAL WATERS** - We received a day or two since, from the manufacturer, Mons. Eugene Roussel, chemist, 75 Chesnut street, a sample of his artificial Mineral Waters, put up on the French plan, in glass bottles, ready mixed, with all varieties of syrups, and calculated for immediate home use, for exportation, or to be used at sea. Upon being uncorked and turned into a glass, it effervesces freely, is very palatable, and is described as being superior to artificial mineral waters drawn from fountains, in common use in our cities, from being kept free from all liability to become impregnated, like them, with copper, from the vessels containing them.

This type of ad is a fairly common one for a producer of a retail product. A new business would send their product to the local newspaper editors, who would rate it and write a small article announcing the proprietor and his product to the public. This ad is important, because it confirms Roussel's claim to have started bottling mineral water in 1839 and having bottled flavored mineral waters, which previously had been only bottled unflavored.

I continued to search for other early bottlers that had proved elusive previously and found some great information, but again I found that the optical character recognition (OCR) tool used to translate the newspapers into searchable text can make finding what you want difficult. The lesson is if you do not succeed on a search, don't give up. Try looking for it using various combinations of key words and phrases. Try names, addresses and products as search items. Searching for Roussel, for example, did not turn up the above ad, nor did a search of his address. What found it were the phrases "mineral waters" and "1839." But using broad searches on common words means that you will have to weed through lots of unrelated ads and articles. When searching for mineral waters in later years there were hundreds of ads for merchants selling corks for mineral water and other types of bottles. Corks were of little interest to me. I'm a bottle man.

About a week later I got a call from Ron, a genealogist at GenealogyBank, offering his help in how to use the site and to see if I had any questions. The conversation quickly turned to their newspaper collection, of which they are very proud. Ron stated that the East Coast collection of early newspapers was the best on the Internet and I have to agree with what I have seen so far. He also claimed their OCR was at better than 90%. On this point I had to disagree based on my searches to date. It may have been better on later newspapers but these 1840s newspapers have very small print that can be unclear to the naked eye let alone a computer program. Although we disagreed on this point I ended up subscribing for a year, because there was so much gold to be mined from their collection and it was the missing weapon in my research arsenal.

After much fun searching for Philadelphia soda and beer bottler ads, I decide to try finding information on some of the mavericks, or bottles without town names, that are listed on my web site. I have a special page dedicated to maverick pontiled soda and beer bottles as well as pottery and smooth based bottles. I started working my way down the maverick list and identified a couple, one of which has eluded researchers since Van Rensselaer's book in the 1920. And it involves androids! But that is another article. This one is about Comstock, right? Bear with me, this was a winding trail.



[Figs: 2 & 3]

One of the mavericks on my web site is a late 1840s bottle embossed "M. Kom's Superior Mineral Water Great Western."

One of the mavericks on my web site is a late 1840s bottle embossed "M. Kom's Superior Mineral Water Great Western." [see Fig: 2 & 3] Two of these bottles were found in Wisconsin. Ron from GenealogyBank touted their Eastern newspaper collection, but what about the Midwest? If I could find this guy it would be the earliest soda bottle from Wisconsin. The newspaper coverage from Wisconsin was pretty good, but I was not able to solve this mystery. If the Wisconsin coverage was good, I began to wonder about their coverage of Minnesota? Maybe I would get lucky and find something.

My thoughts again turned to Comstock spending all this money to open a business, possibly the first of its kind in Minnesota Territory. He must have advertised. If Genealogy Bank had Saint Paul newspapers in their

collection for the years 1854 to 1859, I might find that smoking gun. My first search was "Comstock" in Minnesota for the years 1850 to 1860. I get a small number of hits, but nothing is even close. I am quickly disappointed, but the good news is that there is a Saint Paul newspaper in the collection and I see hits from 1854 through 1857; so there is coverage. I tried a couple of key word "Strawberry Mead" with no hits "Strawberry," hits but not relevant, "Mineral Waters," no hits, "Mineral Water," ah several! The first was an ad in the Saint Paul Pioneer dated April 21st, 1857 and announced the "Dissolution of Partnership" between Winder & Dreher who operated a mineral water factory. James L. Winder was going to continue to operate the factory himself. Maybe they purchased this factory from Comstock & Steere in 1856 or 1857. The other ad was in the same paper, but later in the year on

July 7th. It speaks of a stabbing at the mineral water factory of Danford & Shelly. Apparently a Charles O'Neal went to the factory to settle a debt with James L. Winters (one of the employees) and the altercation resulted in Winters stabbing O'Neal in the chest with an ice pick. Luckily for O'Neal, he had a "stiff card" in his breast pocket that lessened the blow and kept the wound to an inch and a half in depth. James L. Winters must have been the James L. Winder from the previous firm. Winders must not have been successful and sold the plant to Danford & Shelly soon after he broke up with W. F. Drehrer. But the interesting fact is that this article mentions that the factory was located at Trout Brook! If you remember, the decrepit Trout Creek factory was purchased in 1863 by William Rockwell. This seems to place this plant in operation as early as 1857.

My attention turns back to Comstock. I try names starting with Coms, bottling, bottlers, bottled, soda water, soda waters, soda, Steere, names starting with Stee, bottles, beer. NOTHING! NOTHING! NOTHING! Again no smoking gun! This is frustrating. I cannot believe that Comstock did not advertise. Maybe that is why he went out of business. I wrack my brain to see what other words I could search on, but I realized that I have covered all of the obvious ones. Ah search the location! I search Trout Brook, the location of the plant in 1857. Nothing; .....again!

I'm done. This may be one mystery that will never be solved. Austin, my researching friend in Minnesota, mentioned that there were several papers at the historical library and maybe he will have better luck, as GenealogyBank appear to only have one Saint Paul paper in their collection for the years 1854 to 1857. I start joking with myself and remember all of the cork ads I had to weed through when I was searching for the phrase mineral water in Philadelphia. The Mineral Water search in all of Minnesota for the years 1850 to 1860 only yielded two ads and nobody selling mineral water bottle corks. As a Hail Mary, I enter in "cork" and search, lots of hits but no cigar. Oh yeah, always do the plural; "Corks." Press the "Search" button.....

ARE YOU KIDDING ME! I cannot believe it. I found the smoking gun! The Saint Paul Pioneer on May 19th, 1855 had the following article:

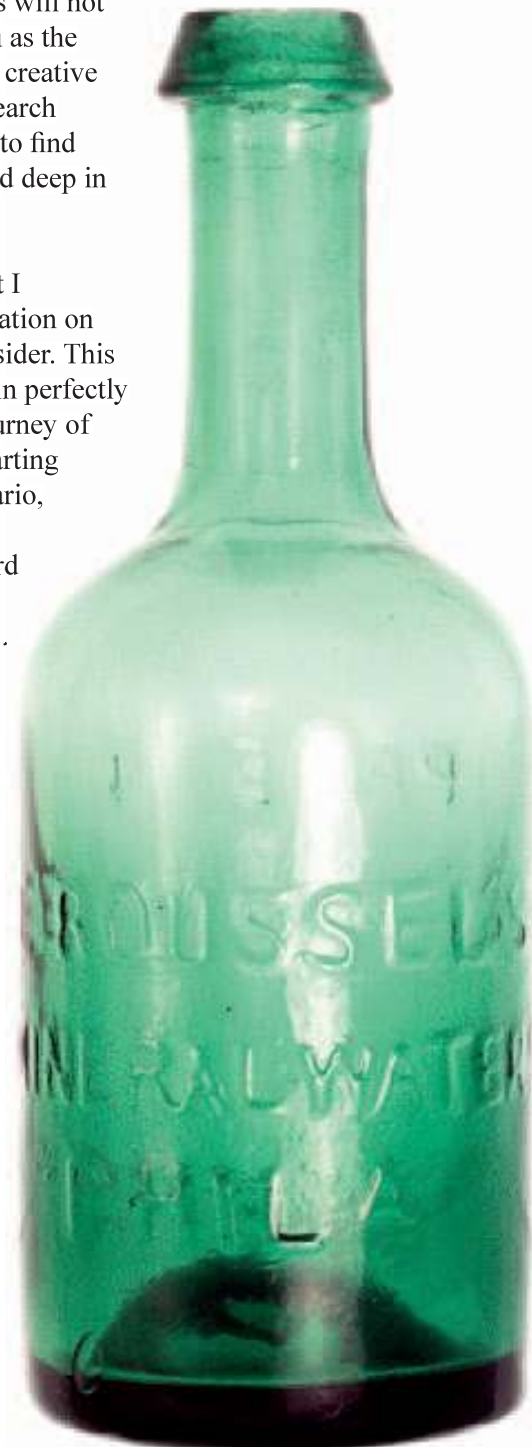
REFRESHING BEVERAGE. --. We are very agreeably surprised yesterday by a visit from Messrs. L. R. COMSTOCK & CO., who introduced to our notice and taste a goodly quantity of delicately flavored mineral water, carefully bottled up. A considerable popping of corks immediately took place, on all hands, and after due attention had been given to the welcome beverage, it was pronounced by our devil, whose judgment is unquestionable, to be not only very potable but admirably adapted to the taste and

season likewise. Messrs. COMSTOCK & Co., can hardly fail, especially during hot weather, to dispose of a large quantity of their manufacture, and we trust they will.

This is what I believe should exist. Just like Eugene Roussel [see Fig: 4] did sixteen years earlier when he introduced his mineral waters to the public, Comstock & Co. used the same approach of sending samples of their mineral waters to the local paper editors for comment. This confirms my assertion that this bottle is made in 1854 or 1855 and was made when Minnesota was still a territory, but is not marked as such.

The lesson here is that when searching for records on the Internet where books, newspapers, or other documents are scanned and later processed thru an OCR reader, the resulting test searches will not be 100% perfect. You as the researcher need to be creative in the way that you search historical documents to find those gems that buried deep in their pages.

Maybe those who felt I "botched" the information on Comstock will reconsider. This new information fits in perfectly with the historical journey of Levi R. Comstock starting in Mallorytown, Ontario, Canada in 1821 and ending in my backyard in West Bradford, Pennsylvania in 1901.



[Fig 4:]  
Early Tapered top,  
Eugene Roussel  
Mineral Water Phila