

# Biographical Portrait

## DUANE LEROY BLISS

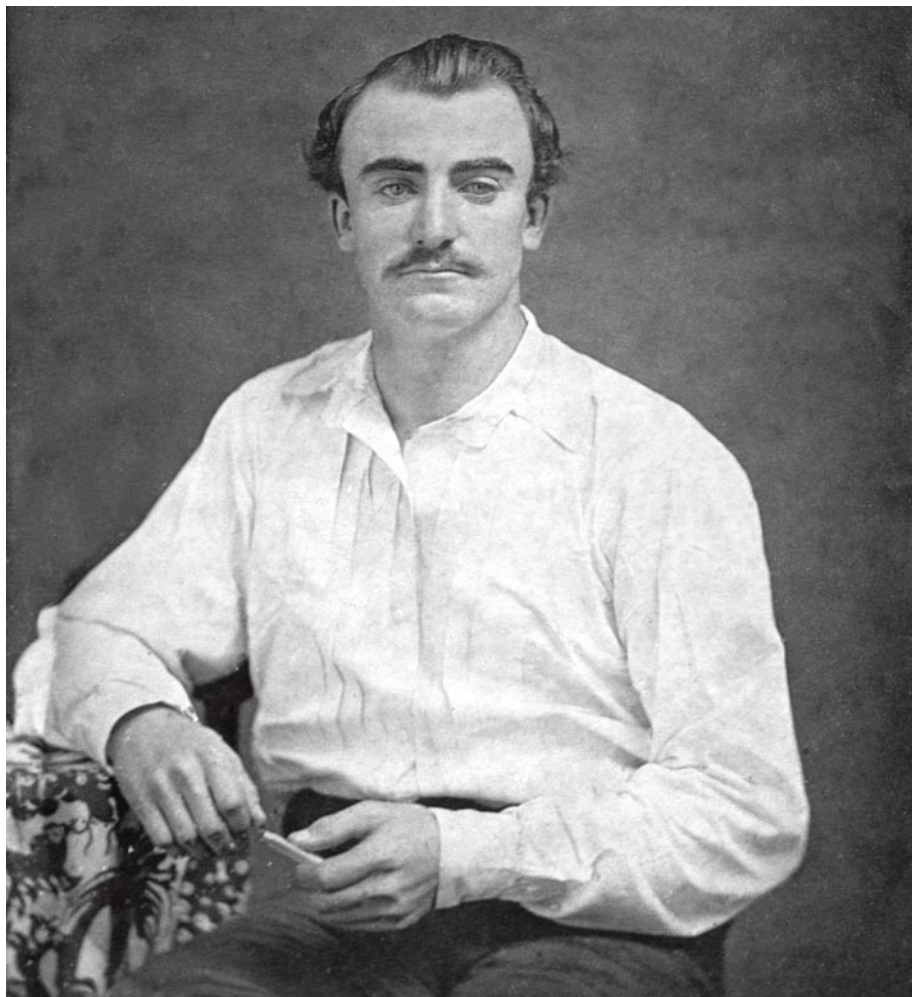
LUMBER BARON OF THE COMSTOCK LODE

By Jack Harpster

Among the owners, operators, and suppliers of the Comstock, the 125-plus tunnels in Nevada where silver and gold were mined for four decades of the late nineteenth century, there were many scoundrels and scalawags. There were also some men of high character and superb business skills. C. C. “Charlie” Goodwin was one of the most talented newspaper journalists and authors working and reporting on the Comstock, and he wrote frequently of all these men. Of those he considered praise worthy, Goodwin reserved his highest acclaim for Duane L. Bliss. Upon Bliss’s death in 1907, Goodwin wrote, “He has been one of the foremost men of Nevada for quite forty years.... He was one of the most thorough men and one of the most perfect gentlemen. There was no worthier man on the west coast than Duane L. Bliss.”

The man who so impressed Charlie Goodwin was born on June 10, 1833, in the Berkshire Hills of western Massachusetts. As a young man he did extremely well in school, first attending the local public school, then a private academy in a neighboring town. But at only 13 years old he dropped out when his mother—they were very close, as Duane was an only child—died unexpectedly, 36 years old. When his father remarried less than two years later, Bliss no longer felt comfortable in the family home, and he went to live with an uncle in New York City.

Bliss grew up in exciting times. The second quarter of the nineteenth century was the age of scientific discovery, a time when scientists and naturalists were reaching far beyond their own borders to learn more about the world around them. Englishman Charles Darwin, American explorer John Lloyd Stephens, and U.S. Navy Lieutenant Charles Wilkes were making groundbreak-



*The earliest known picture of Duane L. Bliss, taken in the mid-1860s. Bliss would have been around thirty years old at the time of this portrait, and on the cusp of beginning his banking career on the Comstock.*

ing discoveries all over the world. Then there were the newly published works by the dean of tropical field exploration, German naturalist and explorer Baron Alexander von Humboldt. Young Duane Bliss, an avid reader, took all of this in, and he wanted to be part of it. He went to the busy New York wharves and found a job

as a cabin boy on a six-month voyage to South America, and it went so well that he immediately signed up for a second six-month trip. Finally returning to the Berkshires, he mended fences with his father. By this time the boy had become a young man, and he began planning his next adventure.

COURTESY OF THE BLISS FAMILY



Early Virginia City on Sun Mountain as Duane Bliss would have seen it upon his arrival in 1860. Despite this hardscrabble beginning, during its heyday Virginia City would grow to be the most important city between Chicago and San Francisco. From a drawing by J. Ross Browne for his 1860 book, *A Peep at Washoe*.

In January 1850 Bliss traveled via the Panama crossing route to San Francisco, to join the 49ers digging for gold in the western Sierra Nevada. He would spend the next decade in California, first panning unsuccessfully for gold, then working at a general store in the lumbering town of Woodside on the San Francisco peninsula. During those years Bliss married and had two daughters; but in the brief span of three years, various diseases would wipe out his entire family. In January 1860, hoping to put those tragedies behind him, he moved to the hardscrabble town of Gold Hill on Sun Mountain, in the Virginia Range of western Utah Territory, now Nevada. It was the dawn of mining on the famous Comstock Lode, and it would be the next big adventure for the 27-year-old. In 1863, he returned to Massachusetts, married Elizabeth Tobey, and brought her

to Gold Hill. Between 1865 and 1875, Elizabeth gave birth to four sons and one daughter.

When Bliss arrived, Virginia City and Gold Hill were but hints of what they would soon become. An itinerant artist and writer, J. Ross Brown, described the settlements in 1850:

*Framed shanties, pitched together as if by accident; tents of canvas, of blankets, of brush, of potato-sacks and old shirts, with empty whiskey-barrels for chimneys; smoky hovels of mud and stone; coyote holes in the mountain side forcibly seized and held by men; pits and shafts with smoke issuing from every crevice... The intervals of space, which may or may not have been streets, were dotted over with human beings of such sort, variety, and numbers that the famous*

*ant-hills of Africa were as nothing in the comparison.*

Bliss mined for a while, but with no more success than he had experienced in California's streams as a 49er. But by a stroke of good fortune he met a man who would become his friend and mentor. Almarin B. Paul had mined copper at Lake Superior, gold in California, and silver in Nevada. However, he was at heart an engineer, and while in California he had developed the Washoe pan process for extracting gold or silver from quartz ore using mercury. On the Comstock, Paul's process would quickly replace the primitive, centuries-old practice of separating precious metals from ore by grinding it between flat stones. Paul hired Duane Bliss to help him build and then manage the first of the Comstock's massive, costly quartz mills.

Placer mining for gold in California could be done by one person with a pick, a shovel, and a rocker or gold pan. However, hard-rock mining deep underground required money—massive amounts of it—and the Comstock, with its promise of fabulous riches, quickly became the favorite target of San Francisco's wealthy investors. In 1862 the San Francisco Mining Exchange was formed, and an avalanche of incorporations followed this creation of an efficient market in which they could operate. Historian David Lavender wrote that more than 4,000 incorporations were established in 1863, and 75 percent of them were for mining companies. One group of wealthy Bay Area men, often called the Bank Ring, joined together under the auspices of the Bank of California, led by bank president William Ralston and his point man on the Comstock, William Sharon. Within a few years the group would control most of the Comstock's mines, mills, banks, and water supply as one giant combine, or monopoly, as we would call it today.

Paul, Bliss, and a third partner had opened Almarin B. Paul & Co., Bankers in Gold Hill in 1863; but they saw the handwriting on the wall and sold their bank to William Sharon's group two years later. Bliss stayed on in an executive position, becoming an employee—and eventually a trusted lieutenant—of the Bank Ring's leaders. Bliss was never a member of the Bank Ring, however: he never had the necessary capital or political clout. Members' chicanery in manipulating the Comstock to their advantage was not an aberration during the





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*A constant train of freight wagons pulled by horses, mules, and oxen carried necessary supplies and equipment up Sun Mountain to Virginia City, Gold Hill, and other communities on narrow, crowded dirt roads. Laden with raw ore from the mills, they returned down the mountainside to the Carson Valley quartz mills where the silver was extracted. In 1869–70, the Bank Ring built the Virginia & Truckee Railroad to solve this problem.*

period following the Civil War. Historian Hal Bridges, writing in Harvard University's *Business History Review*, noted, "Widespread in American historical writing is the idea that business leaders in the United States from about 1865 to 1900 were, on the whole, a set of avaricious rascals who habitually cheated and robbed investors and consumers...and in general carried on predatory activities comparable to those of the robber barons of medieval Europe." Such was the case on the Comstock.

During its four-decade run, the Comstock was marked by highs and lows. Mine

owners would prosper, then it would suddenly appear that the rich silver lode had played out. But each time they would soon discover that the wide belt of rich ore had simply "gone south," or could be found ever deeper in Sun Mountain's 7,900-foot depth. So the miners would dig deeper into the earth and business would boom again.

During one of those high periods, William Sharon and William Ralston observed that the only phase of the operation not being controlled by their combine was transportation. They hired two of their trusted lieutenants, Henry Yerington and

Duane Bliss, to oversee the building of the Virginia and Truckee (V&T) Railroad to carry men, equipment, lumber, and ore up and down the mountainside. When the construction was finished, Yerington was put in charge; Ralston and Sharon had Bliss in mind for another job.

The Comstock mines required enormous amounts of lumber from the Sierra forests. Huge timbers were required to support the mines, using a system invented on the Comstock called the square-set system. A square-set is a criblike box made up of four- to six-foot-long timbers, inter-





*The massive C&TL&FC lumber and wood storage yard in Carson City in 1876. The storage yard was set afire by competitors the following year, likely as retribution for the special pricing concessions granted to C&TL&FC by the V&T Railroad. The Territorial Enterprise reported that over 75,000 board feet of lumber and 7,000 cords of firewood were destroyed, an estimated loss of \$80,000 to \$90,000 to the company.*

locked at the ends by mortises and tenons. Individual cribs can be added inside a mine, set by set, in any direction and to any height, width, or length, creating an endless number of configurations. Think of it as a set of toddler's wooden blocks, but hollow inside, being stacked one atop the other in an endless array of patterns. Once a square-set was placed in a mine shaft, if necessary the open sides of the crib could be covered with wooden slats and the crib filled with waste rock or dirt, making the set as firm as the original mountain. But these square-sets just added to the mines' voracious appetite for firewood to run all their machinery, plus lumber to build all the mills, houses, and stores on the mountainside. All the nearby timber stands in the Washoe and Carson valleys and on the easily accessible western slopes of the Sierra were soon depleted.

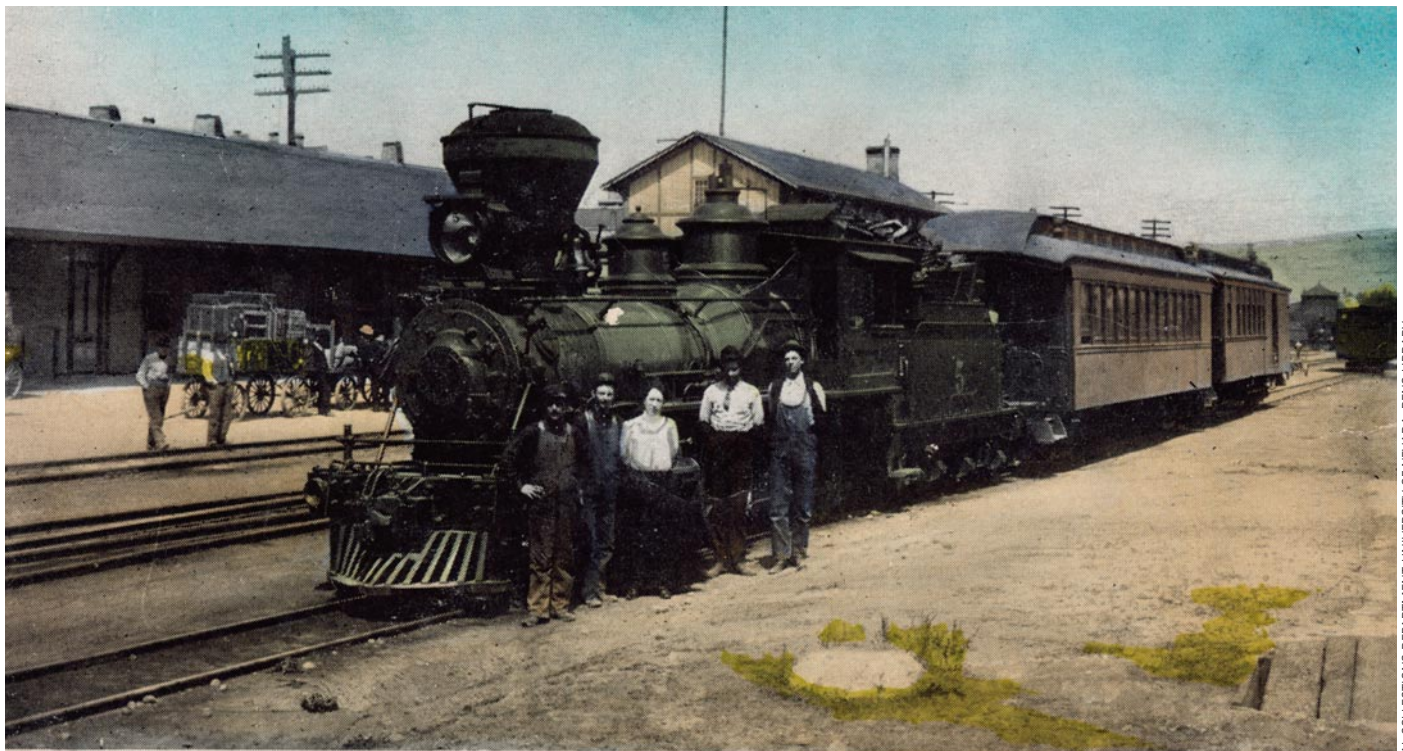
In 1870 Ralston and Sharon asked Bliss and Yerington to form a company to

harvest the untouched western slope of the Sierra, in the Lake Tahoe basin. The company was initially named Yerington, Bliss & Company. Bank Ring member Darius Ogden Mills was also involved in the company as a silent partner, and he funded some of the early timberland purchases; however, the company quickly became profitable and Mills's money was no longer needed. Three years later the firm was reincorporated as the Carson and Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company (C&TL&FC). James Rigby would also be a stockholder, but he held only a very small percentage in the enterprise.

Again, Bliss, Yerington, and Rigby served as trusted lieutenants of the Bank Ring, but none were actually members. This was a major deviation from all past Bank Ring practices, where members of the cartel owned the stock in all the mines, the mills, the V&T Railroad, and the local water company. During the entire quarter-century

life of C&TL&FC, Bliss would own more shares than any of the others, he would serve as president and general manager, and he would run the entire operation. Assertions by latter-day historians and writers that C&TL&FC was a Bank Ring operation are inaccurate. Although the company and the Bank Ring had forged favorable agreements to exclude other lumber companies, Bliss and Yerington still owned controlling interest, and they were never members. As further proof of C&TL&FC's independence, when another combine—four Irishmen whose operation became known as the Big Bonanza—forced the Bank Ring combine off the Comstock beginning in the mid-1870s, C&TL&FC continued to flourish. The Big Bonanza did launch its own lumber company, the Pacific Wood, Lumber and Flume Company, but when its relatively small 12,000-acre timberland was exhausted, it too became a customer of C&TL&FC.





LAKE TAHOE TRAIN, TRUCKEE, CALIFORNIA

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Duane Bliss and his sons built the Lake Tahoe Railway (not to be confused with the earlier Lake Tahoe Railroad that served C&TL&FC's lumbering business) in the late 1890s to bring national and international tourism to the lake. The train, shown here at the Truckee, California, depot where it linked up with the transcontinental railroad, carried passengers all the way out onto a 1/3-mile-long pier built out into the lake at Tahoe City.

Eventually C&TL&FC would own or lease between 50,000 and 80,000 acres of timberland in the Tahoe basin in five counties in Nevada and California, employing an estimated 3,000 people during the lumbering season. The company maintained its headquarters, a mammoth lumber storage yard, and a box and planing mill in Nevada's capital, Carson City. The company also owned extensive millworks in Glenbrook on the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe, and it built and operated four logging and freight railroads and a fleet of steam-driven tugs and barges to move logs from around the lake to the mills. It also operated an extensive network of wood camps and flume camps; and auxiliary mills were placed in strategic locales to construct and maintain an expansive system of flumes and reservoirs, a labyrinth of haul roads, skid trails, and log chutes, along with wood wagons, pack mules, oxen, and horses.

It has often been supposed that during this era the Tahoe basin was "denuded" of its trees. That is an exaggeration, although during the peak years between 1875 and 1880, an average of more than 30 million

board feet was cut at mills in Glenbrook and Incline, both in Nevada.<sup>1</sup> But by the early 1880s the Comstock era—and the timber it required—was played out. A few small revivals occasionally occurred when the mines and mills reprocessed leftover low-grade ore, but the halcyon days were over. From 1859 through 1899 the Comstock mines produced \$400 million in silver and gold wealth. Surprisingly, another \$100 million was also generated from timber sales, chiefly from Duane L. Bliss's C&TL&FC.

Following the Comstock era, Duane Bliss and his four sons launched a huge tourism business at Lake Tahoe. This included a fleet of steamships, the mammoth Tahoe Tavern resort at Tahoe City, the family-oriented Glenbrook Inn & Tavern in Glenbrook, and a narrow-gauge railroad from Tahoe City to Truckee, where it made connections with the transcontinental railroad, opening national and even international tourism to the once isolated area.

By the time all these changes were in place, Duane Bliss—once castigated for

the environmental damages his lumbering activities had wrought upon the Tahoe basin—had become popularly known in Lake Tahoe basin communities as "The Grand Old Man of Lake Tahoe."

Duane Leroy Bliss died December 23, 1907. In 1929 his family donated 744 acres to California's state park system, land now preserved as D. L. Bliss State Park on the southwestern shore of Lake Tahoe. □

*This article is adapted from Jack Harpster's eighth book, Lumber Baron of the Comstock Lode: The Life and Times of Duane L. Bliss (American History Press, 2015).*

## NOTES

1. Historian Donald J. Pisani noted that logging here was no more destructive than elsewhere but that it attracted more attention once wealthy Californians began vacationing there in the 1880s. "Lost Parkland: Lumbering and Park Proposals in the Tahoe-Truckee Basin," *Journal of Forest History* 21(1) (January 1977): 9, 10–11.