

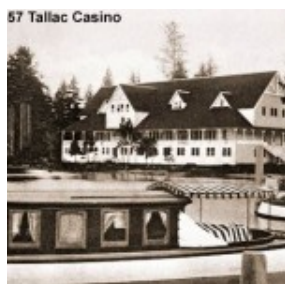
History: Bliss family's roots of lumber and watercraft

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By Marie Walsh, Lake Tahoe Historical Society

Glenbrook, that picturesque little community on the Nevada shore of Lake Tahoe, had its colorful past described to an overflow audience at the Feb. 28 meeting of the Lake Tahoe Historical Society.

Program guest for the evening was Bill Bliss, present owner of Glenbrook Inn and Resort, and fourth generation member of Tahoe's' legendary Bliss family.



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Bliss is the great-grandson of Duane L. Bliss, "Grand Old Man of Tahoe," whose interest included a lumbering empire, hotels, streamers, railroads and real estate.

An eventful year for Glenbrook and the entire Tahoe Basin was 1872, for that was the year that Bliss, in partnership with Yerington and Mills, entered into the lumber business. They formed the Carson and Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company with Bliss as president and general manager, and purchased land and

a sawmill from Capt. Augustus Pray [who had first settled Glenbrook back in 1861], as well as the Glenbrook House-Hotel, Summit Mill and Fluming Co., and other mills and properties in the area.

In 1875, Bliss and Yerington completed a monumental construction project, the unbelievably steep Lake Tahoe Railroad – a narrow-gauge line to carry lumber and cordwood from Glenbrook up to Spooner Summit, from where it was sent down water-sluiced flumes to Carson City, and then on to the Mines at Virginia City via the V and T.

The railroad was $8\frac{3}{4}$ miles in length, and consisted of 10 trestles and 2 switchbacks, one of them on a dead-end trestle which extended out over Lake Tahoe. The line climbed an average of 130' per mile and after reaching Spooner Meadow from the northwest, followed closely the route of present-day Hwy. 28 to Spooner Junction and Hwy. 50 to the summit. A 270 foot tunnel bore took the racks thru the final ridge to the top [portions of the old roadbed and tunnel are still viable].

The main flume of the Carson and Tahoe Lumber and Fluming Company, running from Spooner Summit to Carson City, was 13 miles long, and could handle 500,000 board feet of lumber per day! Portions of this, too, can still be seen.

As forests along Tahoe's east shore were depleted [everything in sight was logged!] virgin timber on the west shore began being felled. Once into the water, the cut logs were chained into huge V-booms and then towed by company operated steamers [Meteor, Emerald I, Emerald II] across the lake to the Glenbrook mills.

Such exploitation of the Basin's timber reserves soon took its toll by denuding the forest and by 1896 large-scale logging had virtually ceased.

The curtain was now rising on Tahoe's fabulous resort era. And the Bliss family, observing the change in times, began moving

its scope of operations over to the California side of the lake.

They formed the Lake Tahoe Railway and Transportation Company and purchased from the parent firm, the steamers "Meteor" and "Emerald I." From Lucky Baldwin, they purchased the steamer "Tallac," renaming it the "Nevada." And in 1896 they built the 169-foot "Queen of the Lake," the "Tahoe."

In addition, they bought out both the Glenbrook and [Meyers-to-Bijou] Lake Valley Railroads, tearing up the rails and moving them [along with all the buildings and equipment they would need for their new operation] across the lake to Tahoe City.

Their new railroad, excursion in nature and featuring an open-air observation car and opulent parlor car, ran from Tahoe City 13 miles down the Truckee River Canyon to Truckee, where it met with the Central Pacific out of San Francisco.

In 1901, the same year their railroad was completed the Bliss family built world-famous Tahoe Tavern at Tahoe City. From the Tavern's eighth-of-a-mile-long trestle pier which extended out over Lake Tahoe, passengers, mail and freight destined for ports of call around the lake were transferred to the company owned steamers "Tahoe" or "Nevada," now providing mail and excursion service on an uninterrupted year-round schedule.

Meanwhile, over at Glenbrook the sons of Duane L. Bills built the present hotel and resort complex using some of the old houses and mill buildings. The year was 1906.

"Innkeeping was not a new thing when the resort complex went in," said Bliss. "As far back as the 1860's, Glenbrook House [a 2½ story wayside inn that fronted directly on the Lake Bigler Toll Road, the main artery of travel between Friday's Station at the base of the Kingsbury Grade, and Carson City] catered to such distinguished patrons as Presidents Rutherford B. Hayes and Ulysses S. Grant, General William Tecumseh

Sherman, Mark Twain and John Muir.”

“Perhaps the one question that is most asked of me,” said Bliss, “is why my grandfather [William Seth Bliss] sunk the Tahoe.” The “Tahoe” had been the Bliss family’s most famous steamer, and from 1896-1934 had carried up to 200 passengers, plus the mail and supplies to different ports around the lake [until the coming of improved highways in the late 1920’s].

“It was truly out of sentiment,” Bliss said. “Grandfather didn’t own the boat at the time and it was just sitting in a dry dock up at Tahoe City in a state of disrepair and being vandalized. Since it as fashionable to sell steel scraps to Japan in 1940, grandfather bought the hull [and later the hulls of the “Nevada” and the “Meteor”] for practically nothing. He then had her towed back across the lake to Glenbrook Bay, and in August of 1940 he sentimentally sunk her in the lake she had crossed and circled thousands of times in nearly half-a-century of operation.”

“The Nevada and the Meteor [which also met with identical fates] have never been located, but the Tahoe has been in approximately 370’ of water half-a-mile off Glenbrook pier. There have been parties interested in raising the Tahoe, but it appears it would just be too costly.”

“Ever wonder how Levi Straus, the famous jeans-maker, came up with his idea for the ever-popular levis?” asked Bliss.

“Legend has it that levis date back to the days when Hank Monk, pioneer stage driver along Tahoe’s Bonanza Road, often had Straus for a passenger. And Straus, taking notice that his driver wore a corduroy outfit, patched in spots with harness rivets, simply took up from there!”

Today, the historic little community of Glenbrook looks with pride upon its present role as a modern community with remarkably scenic grandeur, fine homes, sandy beaches, a public golf course, and a renowned resort complex – all

situated near the Bliss family's graceful old home, still standing in a peaceful setting of meadows, gardens and treeshaded lawns.