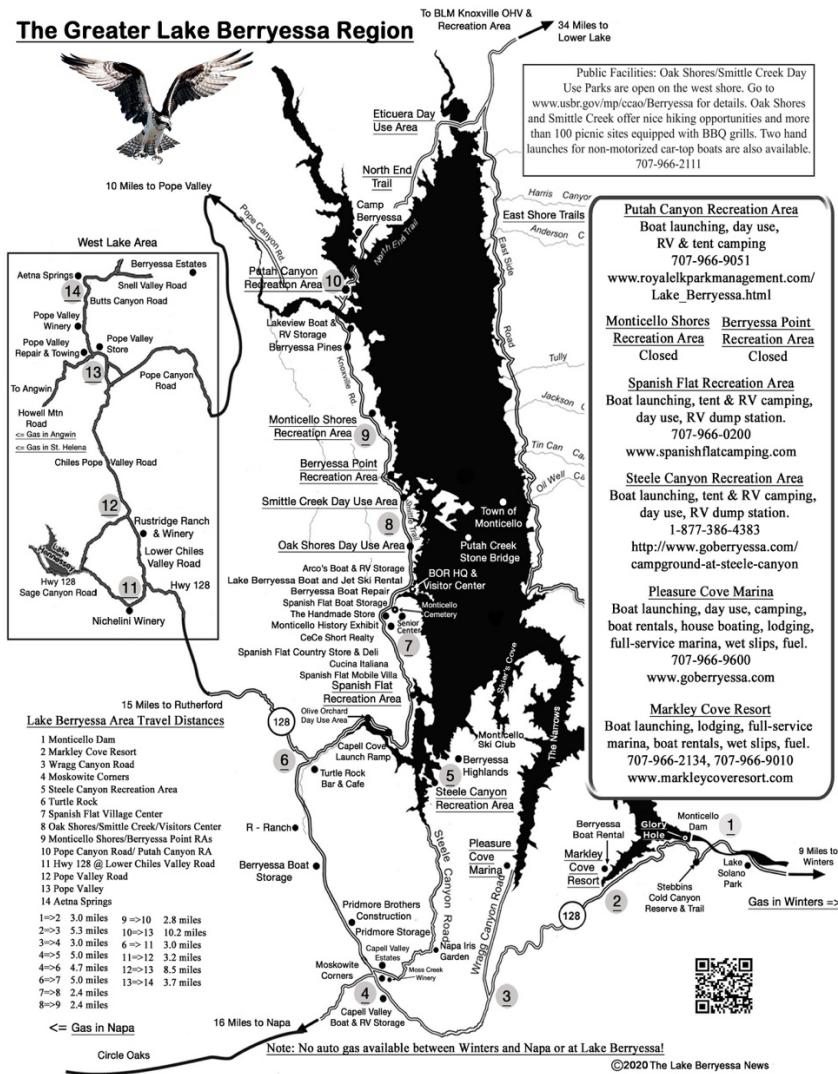


I. The Five Tragedies of the Berryessa Valley: A History of Heartbreak

Without THE LAKE BERRYESSA NEWS there would be no Lake Berryessa News...and finally there would be no definitive history of what happened at Lake Berryessa. Having participated directly for more than twenty years as an advocate for the lake in the fiasco that was the Bureau of Reclamation's Visitor Services Plan, its farcical but tragic outcome, and the process of rebuilding, I have very strong views of the causes and results - supported by facts and data which were mostly obfuscated by the proponents of the destruction of the lake's residential and business community.

As I stood with Brian Hackney of KPIX's Eye on the Bay looking out at the fantastic view of Lake Berryessa from the site of the demolished Steele Park Resort's Boathouse Restaurant, I was struck by the many levels of history we were witness to. And much of that history, unfortunately, was filled with heartbreak.



The First Tragedy: The Destruction of Native American Culture

Formerly known as Talahalusi (Beautiful Land), the Napa Valley is one of California's longest inhabited areas. Archaeological surveys indicate 10,000 years of uninterrupted habitation. "It was a paradise - a cultivated paradise where one only had to reach out their hand to eat. A place rich in beauty, water and food," stated the oral history of Native American Elder Jim Big Bear King.

Native Americans lived peacefully in pole houses, using clamshell beads and magnesite cylinders for money and jewelry. They processed obsidian into shafts, spears and arrowheads, which were used for hunting and export. Acorns, perennial grasses, wild berries, freshwater shellfish, salmon, fowl and game were their diet. These hunter-gatherers lived in a rich environment with a capacity for a dense, socially complex population of 35,000-40,000 people. They established large permanent villages with nearby seasonal resource and task-specific camps.

Spain claimed the land that included California in about 1530. It stayed in Spanish hands until Mexican independence in 1821 when it became part of Mexico—Alta California as it was called by the Mexicans to distinguish it from Baja California.

After the Spanish and Mexican invasion in 1823, the tribes were nearly decimated by forced marches and smallpox. When forced to relocate to various missions for religious indoctrination, many fled to friendlier territory.

The Second Tragedy: The Destruction of Spanish Culture

Alta California stayed in Mexican hands until an infamous incident in 1846. John C. Fremont led a group of American adventurers and earlier American immigrants in an uprising to try to free Alta California from Mexican hands. On 14 June 1846 Fremont and company declared California to be an independent state: the Bear Flag Republic. What so stains the Bear Flag Republic is the killing by some of Fremont's men, led by the famous Kit Carson, of three innocent Mexicans—Jose de los Reyes Berryessa and two of his nephews.

This "republic" only lasted until 7 July 1846. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ended the Mexican-American war and ceded northern Mexico to the U.S. California, then, became a territory of the U.S. In 1850 California was admitted to the Union as a state and stayed in the Union during the Civil War.

The next known inhabitants of the valley were two Mexican brothers, the Berryessas (Berryessa is a corruption of their actual name—Berelleza). The Berryessa brothers, Sisto and Jose, received the valley as part of a land grant to them in 1843 from the newly independent Mexican government. When California became a state in 1850 the Berryessas petitioned to have their land grant recognized by the United States government.

However, by the time Lincoln finalized the Berryessa brothers' right to the land almost none of the land was still in Berryessa hands. The Berryessas had sold the vast majority of the land in order to cover their plentiful debts, particularly gambling debts. It seems that Sisto and Jose were overly fond of Three Card Monte and horse racing. In 1879, the last Berryessa homesteader, Nicholosa Higuera, wife of Sisto Berryessa, died. Her husband died the year before in 1878. Both were buried in the valley. Sisto's body, unlike that of many of the other homesteaders, was not recovered when the cemetery in Monticello was relocated to Spanish Flat. Sisto lies beneath the waters of Lake Berryessa even today.

The Fourth Tragedy: The Destruction of Family Recreation Culture

The Bureau of Reclamation and their supporters destroyed family recreation at Lake Berryessa for a generation of families, children, and friends. Many people ask me about the history of the process that led to the present situation at Lake Berryessa. When I explain what happened most become incredulous and can't believe the government could have done something so stupid. "How could they have gotten away with that?" they exclaim. A good question! There were times I felt what being part of an oppressed minority must feel like - ignored, lied to, and lied about by those with the power to do so. Government fails because it pays no price for failure!



The Fifth Tragedy: Opportunity, Irony, Tragedy, Recovery - A Lake Berryessa Cycle?

On August 18, 2020 the LNU Lightning Complex fire, the largest in California history burned much of Lake Berryessa and the surrounding region. The Spanish Flat residential community had become an inferno of burning rubble. The fire soon raced around the lower part of the lake sped up Steele Canyon Road and burned down 95 of the 300 homes in the Berryessa Highlands. A week after they began the wildfires were extinguished or contained. The region had no electricity due to hundreds of wooden power poles being burned and wires melted. Roads in and out of the region were closed for a week after that to allow Napa County, PG&E, AT&T, and others to clear the roads of downed trees and debris.

What does the future hold?

This book is a historical anthology, a raw, as-it-happened, unfiltered picture of what many of us lived through. The goal is to provide the history and the context within which such an incredibly destructive course of action took place. It is dedicated to documenting this tragedy, this final betrayal of Lake Berryessa by the federal government - and, hopefully, the promised revitalization.

The initial timeline shows a condensed history of the process. The next section tells the story through the eyes of Lake Berryessa News articles. With the permission of the Napa Register, a parallel history is presented through a representative sampling of contemporaneous editorials, articles, and letters to the editor from the Napa Register. Reading these letters, especially, gives the raw emotional context of the ten year battle to preserve family recreation in the face of the "Big Lie" and the many little lies that were spread by elitist environmental exclusionists.

Also included is a history of a parallel political process that created the Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument, considered by many as the dumbest national monument in the U.S. Neither the federal government nor local politicians stand out as models of integrity in this history.

Lake Berryessa has long suffered from an overabundance of enviro-elitism. Those pseudo-environmentalists who attempted to demonize other community members out of some misplaced sense of their own moral superiority did a disservice to Napa County and to the whole Lake Berryessa community. There were no sinister "special interest groups" plotting to do evil things. The binary mindset that if someone rides a jet ski they're bad, but if they paddle a kayak they're good is patently silly. But that type of argument was fundamental to promoting "The Big Lie" about the lake. In some of the letters and editorials you'll read in this book you'll notice a basic mean-spiritedness that blinds any attempt at logic or reason.

We all want Lake Berryessa to be accessible to the public, provide the infrastructure necessary to service a broad range of needs, and to the maximum extent possible, be economically self-sufficient. Lake Berryessa should be a sustainable community, which means a considered balance of environment, economics and social equity (or planet, pocketbook and people, if you prefer). The future of Lake Berryessa should be based on real needs and real data, not some economically-misguided, enviro-elitist model.

The future may finally be looking brighter for Lake Berryessa - or does it? History continues to unfold.

My thanks to the Napa Register for giving me permission to include a sample of the Letters to the Editor and Napa Register stories printed during this period. It provides great factual and emotional context to the saga.

Peter Kilkus, Lake Berryessa, October 2020