

Memories of Monticello and the Berryessa Valley

November 05, 2007
By Carole Noske

As Solano County commemorates the Fiftieth Anniversary of the completion of the dam constructed at "Devils Gate" on Putah Creek that filled the scenic Berryessa Valley with water, it is time to remember the sacrifice the residents made when the water took their valley. About fourteen miles long and up to three and one-half miles wide, fossil seashells found in the limestone tell of a time long past when the ocean had covered the land and created the rich soils of the valley.

The National Park Service conducted a survey in the valley of the Indian mounds, and the Napa County Historical recorded the history of the Spanish, Mexican, and pioneer settlers who followed the Indians. Students from Sacramento Junior College under the watchful eye of Professor Adan Treganza, research associate in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, excavated sites near the Monticello Stone Bridge. Dr. Treganza reported that evidence existed that from one hundred to one hundred fifty villages had occupied the area over a period of about 2,000 years. The Miwok, Patwin and Maidu lands merged in the area and the natives were exceptionally skilled in basketry, using thin strips of redbud root along with willow to create intricate designs.

At the point where the Putah gorge merges with the level Yolo-Solano plain, the first white settler came to claim his land grant and live amount the Indians. John R. Wolfskill, a Kentuckian, received his land grant from Governor Manuel Micheltorena in 1842. After driving his cattle from Los Angeles, it is said that he spent his first night on his rancho treed by the bears and panthers that claimed the territory. He was soon followed by John and Lucinda Adams, William and Mary Moore, Edwin Cage, Andrew Wester, Robert Harding, and P.D. Grigsby. Their heirs were to populate the valley for many years.

The Berryessa Valley proper was occupied by a single family, that of Jose and Sisto Berryessa. On November 3, 1843, Governor Micheltorena gave the Berryessa brothers one of the largest Mexican land grants in Alta California, eight square leagues bounded by the range of hills. The papers granting the final patent some years later were signed by President Abraham Lincoln. Their adobe hacienda was located about a third of the way up the valley, and contained five large rooms. There were tales of wild gambling parties taking place at Rancho de Las Putas with the greatest portion of the land being lost for about twenty-five cents an acre, and the last of their estate went to a man named Edward Schultz to satisfy a debt of less than \$2,000.

Schultz now owned the bulk of the valley and sold it in 1866 to John Lawley, J.H. Bostwick, and William Hamilton. These three cut up the land into farms, reserving enough land at the lower end of the valley for the tiny town of Monticello, which in 1950 had fewer inhabitants than in 1867. After the subdivision the value of the land increased 500 percent, pioneer settlers discovering the valley's rich soil, bought all of the farms in a single year. The roads to Sacramento and Green and Gordon Valleys were impassable when Putah creek was swollen by rain, but soon there was a bridge across the creek and a road to Napa over which T.S. Scribner drove the stage as early as 1870.

This road was extended in the other direction to the Redington Quicksilver Mine at Knoxville to haul freight to the mine that employed 300 men. A six-horse stage carried passengers to the mine after changing horses in Monticello. The barn was still standing when the town was demolished. In 1866 E.A. Peacock erected the Berryessa Hotel (or Peacock Hotel, as it was more commonly known), it was the first commercial structure of importance in Berryessa Valley, and stood until it was burned in the late 1930's. Abraham Clark drove a four-horse wagon over Wild Horse Mountain with twelve hundred feet of lumber, the first in the valley.

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Alex McKenzie arrived from Nova Scotia in 1869 and worked for Lawley, Bostwick and Hamilton on their ranch. Noble H. and Mary E. McGinnis arrived in 1876 and by 1878 there were two blacksmith shops, two hotels, a saloon, and Alex McKenzie had opened a carriage and harness shop across the street from George McKenzie's merchandise store. When George became sheriff of Napa County in 1888, brother William arrived to run the store.

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bridge west of the Rocky Mountains. The bridge was so well engineered that it withstood the raging waters of the creek and still remains at the bottom of Lake Berryessa.

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There were five schools in the valley, named Cherry Valley, Pumpkin Ridge, Monticello, Knoxville and Oak Grove. The Monticello Methodist Church was organized as a community church and Brother Cultan came over from Winters every other Sunday to preach. Mr. Caleb Gosling was the Sunday School Superintendent and put-up the preacher on Saturday night, dinner was served after services on Sunday and then the preacher traveled back to Winters. The church burned in an arson fire in 1912, and a community hall was built on the site in 1921. It became the home of the Community Club when it was organized in December 1925 by William D. McKenzie who was the club's only life member. The club was renowned for many years for its annual Monticello Rodeo. Usually the first rodeo of the season, it drew spectators by the thousands. The focus of year-round planning by the community, it was Napa County's largest attraction.

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Fires spread easily in the dry brush of the valley and a volunteer fire service was quickly organized by the pioneers. In 1927 a fire district was organized, governed by directors appointed by Napa County Supervisors, the directors managed the district and spent the tax dollars collected.

The Mervyn Eaton ranch was the site of the Sugar Loaf Golf Club, which he planned and laid out with oil sand greens in the rolling hills of this sheep ranch. It was opened to the public in 1929, and golf became the favorite topic of conversation. There were few "golf widows" as most of the wives also enjoyed playing.

By 1946 defeatism had invaded the valley and talk of the dam continued and families began to leave the valley. There was a last-ditch effort to avert the Monticello Project, but by the end of 1956 the last building in Monticello had been bulldozed and burned.

The Putah Creek Bridge is all that remains, now at the bottom of the lake, a bridge to nowhere. On September 25, 1961, on the occasion of William McKenzie's 92nd birthday, the Vacaville Reporter stated that he had led a quiet life in Napa since his store and ranch had been taken for the construction of the Monticello Dam. And also that in 1957, Albert McKenzie Sr. and his son Albert A. (Sandy) Jr. had purchased Pacific Hardware in Vacaville.

The final days of Berryessa Valley and the Town of Monticello were recorded by photographers Pirkle Jones and Dorothea Lange with a commission they received from Life Magazine. Life never published the project but Aperture magazine dedicated a complete issue to the project called "Death of a Valley. In 1994 the Vacaville Museum included some of Jones' photographs in an exhibit by director Ruth Gardner Begell, Berryessa Valley. The Last Year. A copy of his sad photograph of an elderly couple on a final visit to the Monticello Cemetery on the last Memorial Day is included in the McKenzie photograph collection.

This article was prepared from materials donated to the Vacaville Heritage Council by the McKenzie and Scribner Families, Berryessa Family biographer Eftimeos Salonites, and articles published by the Automobile Club of Southern California, the Napa Register, and the Vacaville Reporter.

Part 1 - Berryessa inundated long before lake formed

Kristin Delaplane

Information for this article came from the Vacaville Heritage Council, Vacaville Museum, Solano Genealogical Society, and “Berreyesa, The Rape of the Mexican Land Grant” by Eftimeos Salonites.

Nicolas Antonio Berreyesa was born in 1761 in Sinaloa Mexico. His parents had come from the Basque provinces in Spain. In 1776, at age 15 Nicolas was sent on the De Anza Colonization Expedition, perhaps to seek his fortune. His sister was also in the party. The De Anza Expedition was to explore and settle San Francisco and the immediate area. Also in the party was a young Maria Gertrudis Peralta and her father, Gabriel Peralta, the latter being one of Anza’s soldiers, and Nicolas and Nicolas’s sister were under his direct protection.

Nicolas and Gertrudis married in 1779. The couple had nine children, including Jose de los Reyes and Nasario Antonio. Gertrudis died in 1803 and Nicholas in 1804.

In the 1830s, Nasario Antonio moved onto the land that was once a lush valley and is now covered by water and known as Lake Berryessa. He brought with him 100 Indians who were to work his cattle ranch. The land was so rich that the Pomo Indians who had called this area home for thousands of years had been able to live a life of ease due to the wide-ranging game and natural vegetation.

As the white man settled there, the Indians retreated. For several years, Nasario Antonio ran herds of 5,000 cattle and 20,000 horses on this land and over the mountain into what is today Capay Valley. In later years, James Clyman, an American adventurer and trapper, stated his memories of Nasario’s valley and ranching operation.

Crops were grown under the care of the Indians, who protected them from roaming stock. The mountains were full of bear and deer. The bears made trails over the mountains that if followed made the trip to the Capay Valley possible for men and cattle.

Meanwhile, two of Nasario’s sons, Sexto (Sisto) Antonio and Jose de Jesus, were in the Mexican army and stationed in San Francisco. In 1838, at age 20, Sisto married Nicholasa Higuerra in Santa Clara. Jose married Nicholasa’s twin, Maria Anatasia Higuerra, the same year. It was likely around this date that the two couples moved up to their father’s rancho.

In 1842, Nasario petitioned the governor for the land grant, El Rancho de las Putas, in the names of his two sons. In 1843, it was official. The grant was 8 leagues, or 35,515 acres.

Two Mexican brothers, Sisto and José de Jesús Berelleza (a name of Basque origin), petitioned the Mexican Governor in October 1843, asking for eight square leagues (14,366 hectares (35,500 acres)) of land along Putah Creek and in the surrounding

foothills from Capay Valley south to Vacaville. On November 3, 1843, Governor Manuel Micheltorena approved the petition, on the condition that the Berellezas would build a house on the property within one year, that they would plant domestic trees along the periphery of the property, and that they would never subdivide or sell the property. The brothers agreed and moved in with their families The original Basque name Berelleza was subsequently transliterated into English as "Berryessa," whence the "Berryessa Valley" and "Lake Berryessa" of today. (from the U.C. Davis site on [Quail Ridge Reserve](#))

Through this lush valley flowing eastward was Putah Creek. Jose and Sisto built adobe homes. At least one, Sisto's, was a 90-foot-long hacienda, which may have been constructed first, where the two lived together until Jose completed his home. Sisto and Jose continued their father's cattle- and horse-ranching operation. They also produced grain for which the area was to become well-known. It was reported that one of their main enjoyments was to breed and race their horses.

It is interesting to note how extensive the Berreyesa clan was. From the original brother and sister pioneers there were many offspring, many of whom were given land grants including Santa Clara, Milpitas, Capay Valley, Novato and San Pablo.

It was in 1846 that Sisto's cousins, Jose de los Reyes' sons, received the grant for Rancho Canada de Capay. The cousins were three brothers, Francisco, Santiago and Nemesio. It is known that Francisco died in Vacaville in 1894. Like many of the day, he ultimately lost his land after selling it to cover living costs and debts and through dispute over ownership in court.

In 1846, tragedy befell the larger Berreyesa family. Jose de los Reyes, now 61, received word at his home in Santa Clara that four of his sons, one being the mayor of Sonoma, had been captured in the Bear Flag Revolt in Sonoma. Deeply concerned for their safety, the aged ranchero proceeded to Sonoma to rescue them. On the way, he stopped in San Francisco and was joined by his twin nephews, Francisco and Ramon de Haro.

When they reached San Pablo Bay, they boarded a launch that took them to Point San Pedro in San Rafael. From there they proceeded by foot for Sonoma. Before they reached Sonoma, Fremont's men spotted them and reported back to Fremont. He sent Kit Carson, who was under his command, to stop them. When Carson inquired if he was to take them prisoner, Fremont replied, "I have no room for prisoners." The clear understanding was to kill them.

Ramon was the first one shot. Francisco, in great grief, threw himself on his brother's body. At that a command was given to "Kill the son of a bitch." The old man was then shot as well. The bodies were stripped of their clothes, and in the following days Fremont's men were seen wearing their apparel. The bodies were left to rot. In a few days, some Indians buried the remains.

News of this tragedy reached the family, and soon one of the Jose's sons and a nephew went to recover the bodies. When they confronted Fremont and demanded their father's serape, Fremont would not relinquish it until they handed him \$25 cash.

There was great outrage over the killings because the Spaniards had always befriended Americans. It was surmised that Fremont had an ulterior motive for the killings - designs on the vast Berreyesa holdings. In response to words of outrage, Fremont merely stated the men had been mistaken as rebel soldiers. None believed this explanation.

In due course, several of Sisto's 10 children married into Juan Felipe Pena's family. Jovia Berreyesa married Francisco. The marriage of her sister Inez to Demetrio Pena in 1849 was well-recorded, as 100 guests attended the wedding, which took place at the mission in Sonoma. The guests then traveled 40 miles to Pena's Los Putos Rancho, where they were entertained, including the spectacle of a bear-vs.-bull fight.

As time went on, Sisto and Jose's fate was like that of so many of the early pioneers - they lost their land. At first it was lost in bits when they sold off acreage to pay off gambling and other debts. In time there was only one piece of land left, and that was owned by Sisto. It was sold in a sheriff's auction in 1860 to settle a \$1,653 judgment. Sisto lived out the rest of his life in a crude cabin on land he once called his own. He died in 1874 at age 56.

In 1866, developers bought up much of the old Las Putas land and cut it up into small farms. By 1867, this fertile valley was well-settled by farmers who relished the mild winters and hot summers that allowed them to produce bountiful crops and wheat in abundance. But for these produce-wealthy farmers to get their product to market was no easy accomplishment. There were only two roads: a narrow one that followed the Putah Creek Canyon and ended in Winters, and another that wrapped through the mountains to Napa and was a tortuous, two-day trip by mule team.

George Scribner was a stagecoach driver on the route from Napa to Knoxville. He owned a small farm on which he had built a small house. In an effort to protect his 18-year-old wife and their baby, he locked all the doors and windows and gave her a loaded shotgun. One time while he was away, the baby became ill and started crying. As night fell, the baby's wails attracted mountain lions. The young wife listened in terror as two lions came right up to the cabin and paced outside all night.

In 1877, Miguel Berreyesa, a nephew of the pioneer brothers and reportedly an agreeable, hard-working man, was shot and killed while riding horseback near Winters. When an Indian named Martinez sold Miguel's rifle, it was ascertained he committed the dreadful crime. He was eventually tracked down in Solano County living in a cabin on land where he had previously been hired to herd sheep.

The fertile, rock-rimmed valley that Sisto settled in the early 1840s was the birthplace of his son Julian Berreyesa in 1853.

In 1888, Julian married Emiliana Pena, daughter of Juan Felipe Pena. His two younger sisters also married sons of Pena. All made their home on the former Los Putos Rancho near Vacaville. Julian, his wife and their four children later relocated to a 160-acre fruit ranch in English Hills.

In 1894 or 1896, they moved to Davisville, where six more daughters were born. During that time, Julian worked for local ranchers. After his retirement, the couple moved to Sacramento, where Julian died in 1933.

Even as early as 1906, proposals were being put forth to put a dam across Putah Creek and create a reservoir in the valley. This movement was notably led by the wealthy Lewis Pierce of the Suisun Valley. Dam construction was finally begun in 1954. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed a bill naming the reservoir behind Monticello be named in honor of the original landowners, Sisto Antonio and Jose de Jesus Berreyesa.

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Fires spread easily in the dry brush of the valley and a volunteer fire service was quickly organized by the pioneers. In 1927 a fire district was organized, governed by directors appointed

by Napa County Supervisors, the directors managed the district and spent the tax dollars collected.

The Mervyn Eaton ranch was the site of the Sugar Loaf Golf Club, which he planned and laid out with oil sand greens in the rolling hills of this sheep ranch. It was opened to the public in 1929, and golf became the favorite topic of conversation. There were few “golf widows” as most of the wives also enjoyed playing.

In the 1940s residents of the town realized that the Monticello Dam project was going to flood their valley, and families began to leave. Despite a desperate last-ditch effort to kill the project, the dam was ultimately completed in 1957, completely submerging the Berryessa Valley beneath Lake Berryessa. The Putah Creek Bridge is now all that remains of the town Monticello, sitting at the bottom of the lake, a bridge to nowhere.

Part 3 - Fifty years since the birth of the Monticello Dam

Nancy Dingler

At the end of World War II, the country was energized. America had suffered through the Great Depression, followed by a long war fought against formidable enemies, who were defeated.

There was a long, pent-up desire to move forward, to build homes, cars, infrastructure and continue with the ‘New Deal’ policies of dam building.

Since the turn of the 20th century, a dam to create a water source for the county had been proposed. The Berryessa valley walls, on the southern side, narrowed to a rocky passage, called Devils Gate. It seemed like the perfect place to site a dam and block up Putah Creek to form a lake.

The proposal sent a shudder through the long-time residents of the valley. How could someone want to destroy such beauty to benefit someone else? The proposal died during World War II, but then rose again in 1948 with the formation of the Irrigation District.

The Monticello residents protested and suggested an alternate site, which would not destroy the 12,000 acres of fertile ground or historic town. “We cannot see any economy in a project that will destroy forever a large part of one county attempting to benefit a part of another when we know that by careful planning the project can be set up to benefit all concerned.”

An Environmental Impact Report was not available to protect the land owners back then.

In spite of the protests, Solano County responded with petitions to Washington D.C., lobbying the Congress and Bureau of Reclamation for the need of a high dam at Devils Gate.

Even the governor of California got into the act. Earl Warren, a long-time dam enthusiast, felt there ‘was imminent danger of a severe water shortage’ due to post-war expansion and stressed the urgency of construction to keep Travis Air Force Base, Mare Island and the Benicia Arsenal from running dry.

Opponents countered that the military installations could easily be supplied from existing water systems.

Solano County launched an “informational” campaign with buttons, bumper stickers and sound trucks, which were sent throughout the county to help ‘educate’ other residents on the need for a high dam.

As ardent as the Monticello residents were, they were no match for the deep pockets of the county and the state.

However, their plight caught national attention. Life magazine, which was a hugely popular publication, proposed to Dorothea Lang, world re-known photographer, and Pirkle Jones to do a story about the valley residents displacement.

The article was never published in Life, instead Aperture magazine dedicated an entire issue to the project. The photos were later shown at the Art Institute of Chicago in the early 1960s. In spite of the sympathetic attention, the valley and its towns fate was sealed.

The inevitable was staved off for another three years, when America became embroiled in the Korean War. Then, in 1953, Congress approved and funded the long awaited, and at the same time, dreaded project.

The site swarmed with men and machines. About 325,000 yards of concrete were poured to form the dam, which rose 304 feet high and 1,000 feet long.

All the buildings of Monticello - its commercial district, school, church and homes had to be razed. All the trees, grape vines, cattle fences, had to be cut to 6 inches or less. The pioneer cemetery was moved. The bridge over the highway to Napa was left in place because it was of such a strong material.

All was lost as the rising waters washed over concrete foundations and steps to buildings that no longer existed.