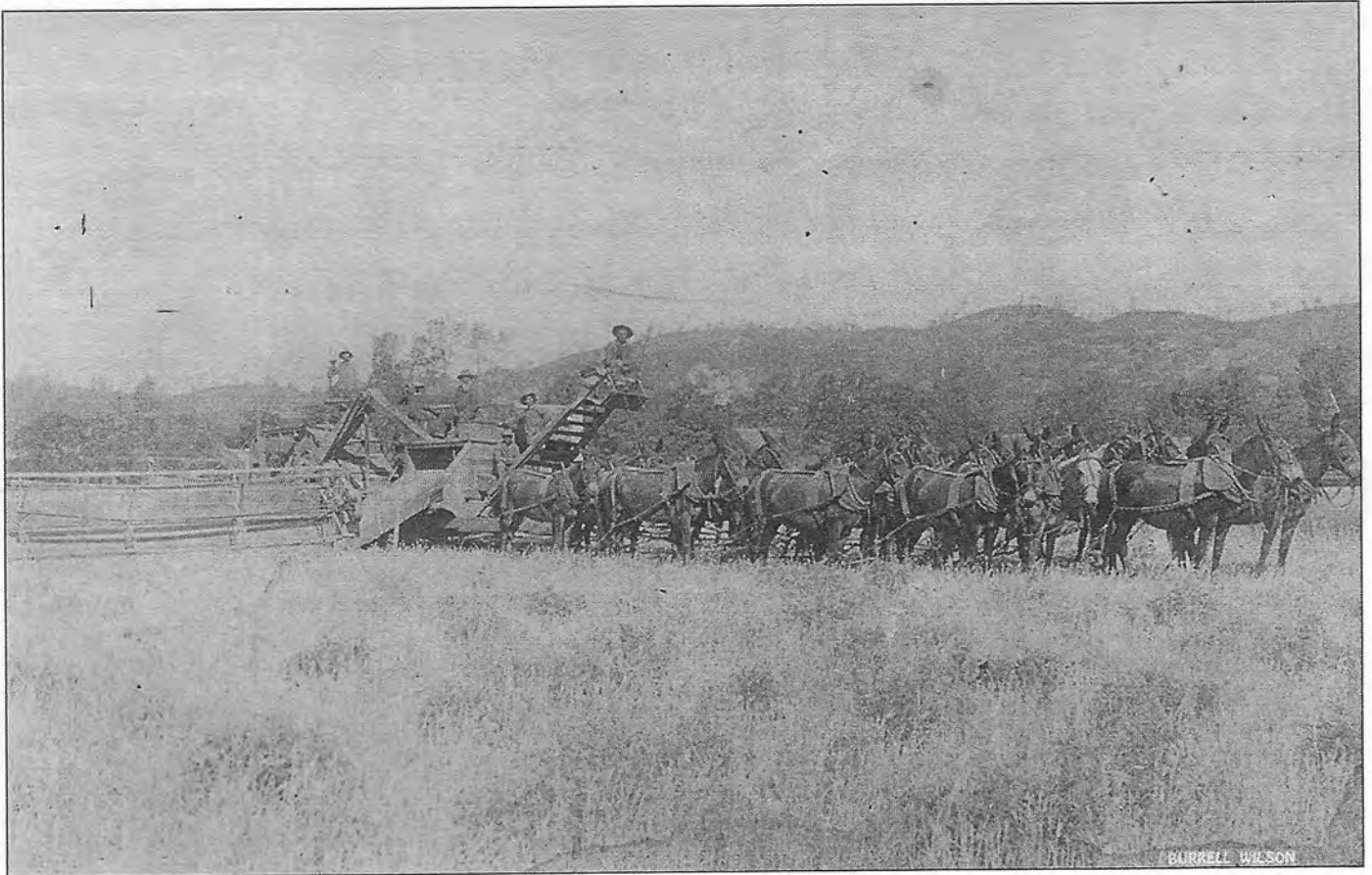




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Berrélleza to **B**erryessa a family history

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Berrélleza to Berryessa: A Family History

by Alexandria Brown

The first Berréllezas arrived in Mexico in the early 18th century. At the time Mexico was not an independent nation but part of the Viceroyalty of New Spain, part of the extensive Spanish colonial territories. Although couple's names are unknown, we know they were related to the Berrélleza and Cayetano families from Basque, Spain. In Sinaloa, a state on the northwestern side of Mexico bordered partially by the Gulf of California, they had a son in 1717, José de Jesús "Cayetano" Berrélleza. When he was 18 he married 10-year-old María Nicolasa Micaela Leyva, and the couple eventually had two children: Ana Ysabel (1754), and Nicolás Antonio (1761). After their mother died, their father remarried. For reasons unknown, when the siblings were only 21 and 15, they left home to seek a new life beyond New Spain.

About the same time that the Berrélleza family was dealing with internal turmoil, Juan Bautista de Anza was returning from his first big expedition up the Pacific coast. Determined to settle their western territory and expand the mission system, New Spain sponsored his second trip to the fledgling principality of Alta California. Because de Anza chose to depart in October, the colonists were forced to travel through the winter, making an already difficult journey even harder. But finally in January or February 1776, Ana and Nicolás Berrélleza and 245 other colonists led by de Anza arrived in Monterey.¹

Along the way, Nicolás formed an attachment to María Gertrudis Peralta, the daughter of Gabriel Peralta, a soldier working under de Anza. Ana had a romance of her own. She married Juan José Peralta while her brother wed María Gertrudis. Even though his sister had no children, Nicolás and Gertrudis raised at least nine children.² At some point the siblings dropped the Basque spelling of their surname and modified it to Berreyesa (which would later be Anglicized to Berryessa). They saw two daughters married off into the prominent Soto and Castro families and two sons join the military. Gertrudis died in 1802 at only 36 years of age, and her husband followed in 1804 after a brief second marriage to María Ygnacia Apolinaria Amador from yet another well-known family.³

As an interesting side note, their second eldest child, María de la Luz Ynes, married José Joaquín Soto, the older brother of María Fernanda Dolores Soto. In 1805 Fernanda married Damaso Antonio Rodríguez, a soldier and staff member under General Mariano Vallejo and the recipient of Rancho Yajome north of downtown Napa in 1841.⁴ Damaso never lived on his rancho. During the Bear Flag Revolt, he was living near what is now Novato. After the Battle of Olompali, a group of Americans pillaged his land and ran off with cattle and property worth nearly \$1,200. The men then barged into his home and in front of his terrified daughters and granddaughters beat him so badly that he died shortly thereafter.⁵

1. Juan Bautista De Anza, "Diary of Juan Bautista de Anza: October 23, 1775 - June 1, 1776," *Web De Anza*, last updated 2000, <https://bit.ly/2JFCac5>.

2. "India, Irene," *Schwald Family Genealogy*, last updated 2019, <https://schwaldfamily.org/getperson.php?personID=I12475&tree=RodSchwald>.

3. "Berryessa, Nicolás," *Schwald Family Genealogy*, last updated 2019, <https://bit.ly/2EKelC8>.

4. Janet Clark and Michael Clark, "Genealogy of the Soto Family," *Bellavistaranch.net*, last updated February 15, 2015, <http://www.bellavistaranch.net/genealogy/soto.html>.

5. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft: History of California*, vol. V, 1846-1848 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886): 168, <https://books.google.com/books?id=0xh1AAAAMAAJ>.

One of Nicolás and Gertrudis' sons, Nazario Antonio, married María de Jesús Antonia Villela, the daughter of Juan Manuel "Marcos" Villela and Viridiana María Carrillo Barcenas and the granddaughter of neophytes Cristobal José and Delfina de Jesús Carrillo. In other words, María de Jesús was descended from either the Ohlone or the Esselen people from Monterey. Many of the members of these tribes were forced into Mission San Carlos Borroméo de Carmelo after it was founded in 1770 by Father Junípero Serra. Nazario and María de Jesús settled in the Berryessa Valley in the 1830s where he and a corp of Indigenous people, most likely Southern Patwin and/or Eastern Pomo, ran cattle and horses in the eastern hills.⁶

The extended Berreyesa family was substantial. Most Berreyesas intermarried amongst many prominent Californio families, and most wives gave birth to ten or more children. Unfortunately, the genealogical data varies greatly on the number of children each couple had. Much of the confusion probably comes from the constant recycling of only a handful of names, many being recorded by nicknames, and American confusion with Spanish and Mexican naming traditions. Nazario and María had somewhere in the vicinity of 15 children, including José de Jesús and Sixto "Sisto."

Like many Californio men from respectable families, they continued the family tradition of joining the military. José ran afoul of the law in 1835 when he was sentenced to five years in the Santa Rosa presidio for stealing horses.⁷ Three decades later, Sisto had his own encounter with the law when he and several male relations were cleared of trumped up charges of resisting an officer.⁸ Generally, however, the brothers had successful military careers.

Both brothers married in 1838, Sisto to María Nicolasa Antonia and José to María Anastacia, twin daughters of Nicolás Antonio de la Luz Higuera and María Margarita Ríos. Higuera owned Rancho Rincón de los Carneros and Rancho Entré Napa, comprising nearly 10,000 acres in south and southeastern Napa County. Higuera's parents emigrated from Mexico to Monterey in the 1770s or early 1780s. There he met María, who had been born there to Julian and Irene Ríos. Julian made the trek from Tehuacán de Las Granadas in southeast Mexico to become a soldier at the Monterey Presidio where he wooed and wed Irene, a neophyte born at Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa to Indigenous parents from the Tipu Rancheria (meaning they were likely Chumash).⁹

In 1843, Nazario petitioned Governor Manuel Micheltorena for a land grant on behalf of his sons. Getting a grant was a complicated process that required capital and connections to men in high places. After petitioning the governor, the potential grantee had to have the land surveyed and a diseño ("map") produced. On top of that there were requirements as to the size of the grant and how the land was used.¹⁰ Apparently enough conditions were met because that same year they received Rancho Las Putas in what was later known as Berryessa Valley in the northeast side of Napa County. The brothers soon built a single-

6. Kristin Delaplane, "Part 1 - Berreyesas Inundated Long Before Lake Formed," *Bellavistaranch.net*, January 28, 1996, http://www.bellavistaranch.net/suisun_history/berryessa1-delaplane.html. 7. Menefee, 47.

7. Hubert Howe Bancroft, *The Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft: History of California*, vol. III, 1825-1840 (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft and Co., 1885): 674, <https://archive.org/details/worksofhuberthow20bancrich>.

8. "Grand Jury Report," *Napa County Reporter*, September 12, 1863, Napa County Newspaper Archive.

9. "India, Irene"; C. Hart Merriam, "Tipu: Chumashan," C. Hart Merriam Papers Relating to Work with California Indians, 1850-1974, <https://bit.ly/2Wh1wUl>.

10. L. A. Bennett, *Spanish and Mexican Land Grants in California*. (San Francisco: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1935): 2-3.

story adobe on the banks of Putah Creek; the 90-foot long structure was broken up into five rooms.¹¹ Sisto also built one for himself near what is now the Monticello Cemetery in Spanish Flats. Residency on one's rancho was a requirement of the grant, and adobes were relatively quick and simple to construct.

The brothers continued grazing stock animals across nearly 80,000 acres spread between their rancho and Rancho Cañada de Capay, owned by their cousins José Catarino Santiago, Joseph Zenobia Nemicio, and Francisco Antonio Berreyesa. By all accounts, José and Sisto took great pride in racing their finest horses. The ranchos also produced corn and wild oats, mostly to feed their stock but also their growing household.¹² For Mexican California, hides and tallow were the biggest money maker for rancho owners. Cattle and sheep were butchered for their meat, their hides and wool processed into incalculable products - such as saddles, clothing, shoes, etc. - and their fat processed into tallow for candles and soap.



Aerial view of Berryessa Valley ca. 1950. Photographer: Burrell Wilson. (Acc. no. 1991.11.8)

Nearly all of the physical labor done on ranchos was handled by Indigenous laborers and landless Californios. For the Berreyesa brothers, the 100 or so Indigenous laborers working their land were more likely Southern Patwin. The territory of the Patwin people encompassed a large portion of Northern California, from Colusa County to Suisun and San Pablo Bays and west into eastern Napa along Putah Creek. The Southern Patwin people, who had been in the Berryessa Valley area from 5,000-11,000 years, were linguistically and culturally related but politically separate.¹³ Colonel Salvador Vallejo, a rancho owner and the brother of General Mariano Vallejo, described the extensive work done by the Indigenous laborers on his property in Napa:

They tilled our soil, pastured our cattle, sheared our sheep, cut our lumber, built our houses, paddled our boats, made tiles for our houses, ground our grain, killed our cattle, and dressed their hides for market, and made our unburnt bricks; while the indian women made excellent servants, took good care of our children, made every one of our meals.¹⁴

11. Peg Mackenzie, "Monticello Was Once a Proud, Thriving Community...Now Only Memories Remain," *Napa Valley Register*, March 30, 1963, Napa County Newspaper Archive.

12. James Clyman, *James Clyman: American Frontiersman, 1792-1881*, edited by Charles L. Camp (San Francisco: California Historical Society, 1928): 170, <https://archive.org/details/jamesclymanameri01cali>.

13. Zachary Redmond, "Solano Project," *Bureau of Reclamation*, 2000, 4-5, <https://www.usbr.gov/projects/pdf.php?id=195>; "Human History," UC Davis Natural Reserves, 2004, 5-6, <https://bit.ly/2MldFDq>.

14. Salvador Vallejo, "Notas historicas sobre California," BANC MSS C-D 22, 1874, 46, Bancroft Library; Benjamin Logan Madley, "American Genocide: The California Indian Catastrophe, 1846-1873," PhD diss., Yale University, 2009.

15. "Shocking Murder in Contra Costa County," *Sacramento Daily Union*, February 17, 1864, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

Despite their early successes, the Berreyesas were also a troubled clan. Several in violent acts of crime, others through physical or psychological maladies, and too many at the hands of white Americans. Martine Berryessa was stabbed to death in 1864 in Pinole by a man known only as Francisco whom Berryessa had cut in a fight after accusing Francisco of stealing a horse.¹⁵ The *Solano Herald* noted how poorly the Berryessas residing in that county had fared. In the decade between 1854 and 1864, approximately fifteen Berryessa men had died, either from accidents or murder, including one man who was shot and killed in Martinez a few days prior.¹⁶

One particularly awful case involved Captain John C. Frémont. During the Bear Flag Revolt, Frémont marched on Sonoma and arrested José de los Santos Berreyesa, Nazario's nephew and the town's alcalde (local magistrate), and two of his brothers. José de los Reyes Berreyesa, Nazario's 61-year-old brother, was sent to Sonoma by his worried wife to check on their imprisoned sons. He was accompanied by his teenage nephews Ramon and Francisco Haro and they journeyed north from Santa Clara. When they paused near the mission in San Rafael, they had the unfortunate luck of encountering Frémont and his men. The Berreyesas were murdered in cold blood then stripped of their clothing and belongings. After watching one of Frémont's soldier parade around in his murdered father's serape, José de los Santos was forced to buy back for \$25.¹⁷

Antonio Berreyesa of San Jose bemoaned that of all the old Californio families, his was "one which most justly complained of the bad faith of the adventurers and settlers and of the treachery of American lawyers."¹⁸ Yet it's worth remembering that as poorly as the Berreyesas were treated by Americans, it was still better than the horrific treatment of Indigenous people by the Spanish. Nevertheless, by the early 1900s the Berreyesa family was mostly landless and destitute. The trifecta of scheming and manipulative Americans, poor financial management, and the increasing cost of defending their land against squatters left the once prominent Berreyesa family - including José and Sisto - with little. C. A. Menefee described the squatter challenges faced by rancho owners thusly, "A large portion of the immigrants therefore became 'squatters,' to the great annoyance of the Grant holders, who had to pay the taxes upon their lands, while the squatters had the free use of them, and bade them defiance."¹⁹

After the Mexican-American War, the brothers and every other rancho owner in the former Mexican territory were forced to prove they owned the land given to them by the Mexican government. It took until 1863 for the grant for Rancho Las Putas to finally be reapproved, and, for complicated legal reasons, it was done in the names of Nicolasa and Anastacia. In the meantime, the Berreyesas had begun selling parcels of their once extensive land holdings.

Unluckily, José and Sisto found themselves in debt to Edward Schultz. Unable to pay him back, the Berreyesas were forced to surrender their land. "Where they had once owned as far as the eye could reach,

16. "Ten Years Since," *Marysville Daily Appeal*, February 12, 1864, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

17. "More Proofs," *Los Angeles Star*, September 27, 1856, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

18. Leonard Pitt, *The Decline of the Californios: A Social History of the Spanish-Speaking Californians, 1846-1890* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1966): 103, <https://books.google.com/books?id=Cip2kdIUdFoC>.

19. C. A. Menefee, *Historical and Descriptive Sketch Book of Napa, Sonoma, Lake and Mendocino* (Napa, CA: Reporter Publishing House, 1873): 53, <https://archive.org/details/historicaldescri01mene/page/n7>.

had had cattle almost literally on a thousand hills, had reigned supreme over a tract of nearly forty thousand acres, and could say to this man 'go and he goeth, and to that, come and he cometh,' they were sold out of house and home for a paltry debt of less than \$2000."²⁰

Schultz had the county auction off 26,000 acres of Berreyesa land as recompense, which Schultz acquired for himself. He then sold it off in 1866 for \$100,000 to John Lawley, J.H. Bostwick, and William Hamilton who intended to develop a town and farmland. The three men laid out what would soon become the town of Monticello.²¹

Both José and Sisto died in 1874 within a few months of each other. They were buried somewhere in the valley they once loved. In 1879 Nicolasa Berreyesa died in her home in Steele Canyon.²² No one knows what happened to Anastacia. Much of the Berreyesas' original rancho now sits at the bottom of Lake Berryessa.



Close-up of Map of Monticello Township, 1867. Courtesy of Napa County Assessor-Recorder's Office.

20. Lyman L. Palmer, *History of Napa and Lake Counties* (San Francisco, Slocum, Bowen & Co., 1881): 312-313, <https://archive.org/stream/historyofnapalak00palm#page/n5/mode/2up>.

21. "New Town," *Red Bluff Independent*, December 5, 1866, California Digital Newspaper Collection.

22. "Nicholasa Higuera," *St. Helena Star*, December 5, 1879, Napa County Newspaper Archive.