

A. The Death of a Valley

Excerpt from: [Roots of the Present: Napa Valley 1900 to 1950, by Lin Weber](#)

“Beautiful, tranquil, sparsely populated Berryessa Valley was once the rancho of a high-ranking California family, the Berryessas. Little by little, their grant had been stripped from them and their heirs by the political machinations of the 1850's and '60's. Now the golden, gently undulating countryside was divided among an assortment of local and absentee owners, many of whom ran cattle there. A robust stream or small river, Putah Creek, ran through the center of it. It flowed down the Middletown side of Mount St. Helena, meandered a bit through Lake County, then took a right turn and crept down through the center of Berryessa Valley.

Putah Creek provided water for the little ranching town of Monticello, where there was, at the start of the 20th Century, a little hotel, a nice hot springs resort and some pretty homes. Abraham Clark had owned most of the little valley's farming land for many years; indeed, he was the largest single landowner in all of Napa County for decades and lived in a palatial home on what finally totaled 13,000 acres. He died in 1892, but his wife and many of his numerous children were still around. They were all Democrats, and most of them were strict Prohibitionists.

The town enjoyed the distinction of being the first community in the state to have a telephone system installed (around 1905). In 1896 the famous Monticello Bridge over Putah Creek, was built. Consisting of three 70-foot spans it was considered the grandest stone masonry bridge ever built in California. Some claim it was the largest stone bridge in the Western United States. The Bridge is the only thing that remains of Monticello beneath the waters of Lake Berryessa—everything else was either burned to the ground or carted off.

The people of Monticello loved their quiet little valley and their miniscule town, which consisted of a general store/post office, telephone exchange/notary public/bank, insurance office, dilapidated jail, and gas station, all under the same roof and all run by the McKenzie family. There was a school to the southeast of town, and there were two hotels, the Monticello and the Peacock, the latter having been built in the 1860's. There was also a cemetery. Across a tree-lined street from the village proper were the rodeo grounds and a huge barbeque pit.

Monticello's main claim to fame in the 1930's was not its illusory oil fields nor its good, honest grain, but its annual rodeo and barbeque. It had been attracting thousands since 1926. An outgrowth of the little valley's annual springtime cattle round-up, it was one of the first in California to feature professional contestants. The Monticello Community Club hosted the event on the first Sunday of May for 15 years, and the program was always the same. The night before the event, the barbecue committee built a bonfire of oak wood in a big pit next to the Monticello community hall. When the timbers became white-hot coals, the men and women of the committee sprinkled on a thin layer of loamy dirt and then dropped in some prime hindquarters of local-grown beef, which had been wrapped in many layers of cheesecloth. They covered the meat with more loam and then built a new fire over it all, which glowed all night.

Late the next morning, the smell of roasting beef greeted the jam of cars that pulled into town from just about everywhere. Those who arrived early could play in a pick-up baseball game on the diamond next to the barbecue pit or just sit around and enjoy John Philip Sousa music provided by a live band, which performed all day. An endless supply of beer was available, both during and after Prohibition, as was an endless supply of cake.

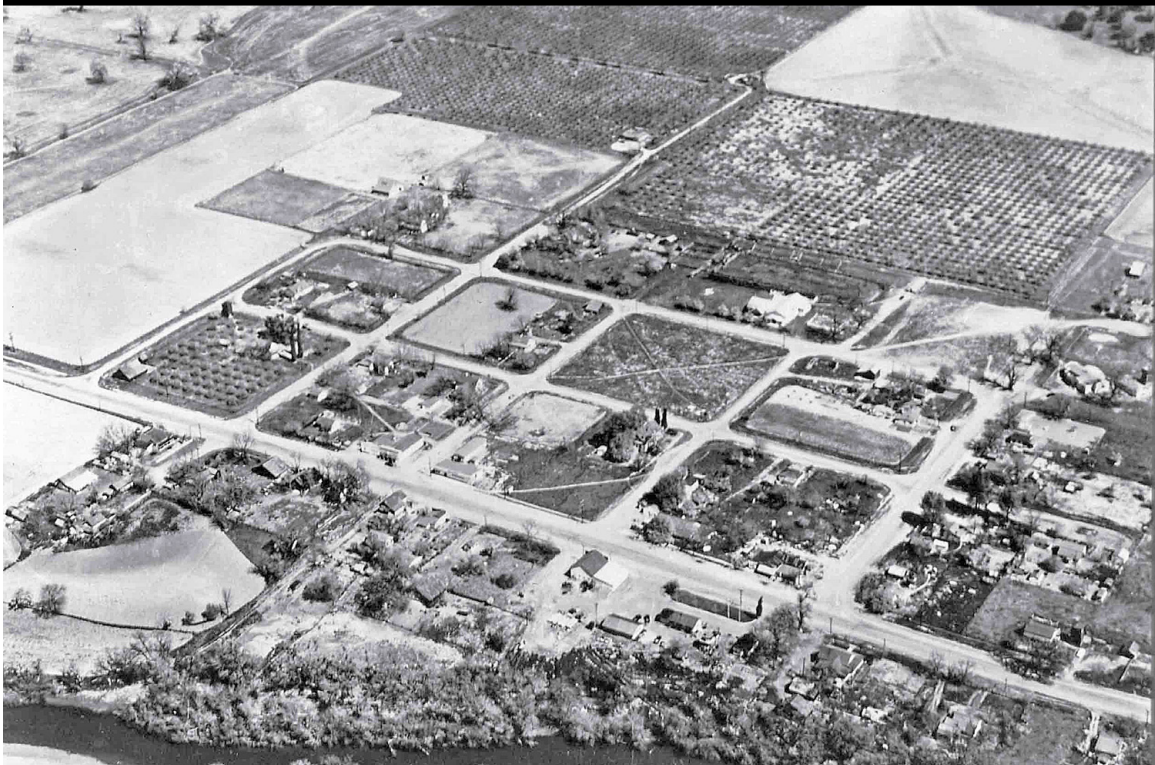
Then the rodeo began. There was saddle- and bare-back bronco riding, bull riding, calf roping and wild cow milking. There were races. There were clowns. There were courtships. Between the Blue Ridge hills to the

east and the chaparral of Cedar Roughs to the west, under the hazy May sky in a gentle, grassy valley, there was a sweet, simple, down-home joy.

With more than 200 horsemen, the opening parade went on for hours. In August, down at the County Fair in Napa, all the men who came had to wear beards and 10-gallon hats like in the "good old days." (Ten-gallon hats, of course, were a Hollywood invention. In the good old days of the 1880's, Napans wore top hats and bowlers, not cowboy hats, and at least half spoke with foreign accents.)

Napa, Solano and Yolo Counties met near a gorge dubbed "Devil's Gate," through which ran Putah Creek. Experts agreed that Devil's Gate would be an ideal place to build a dam. Impounding the water of Putah Creek, however, would mean flooding the little town of Monticello and drowning the cowboy haven of Berryessa Valley.







Monticello Main Street Before Demolition



Monticello Main Street After Demolition