

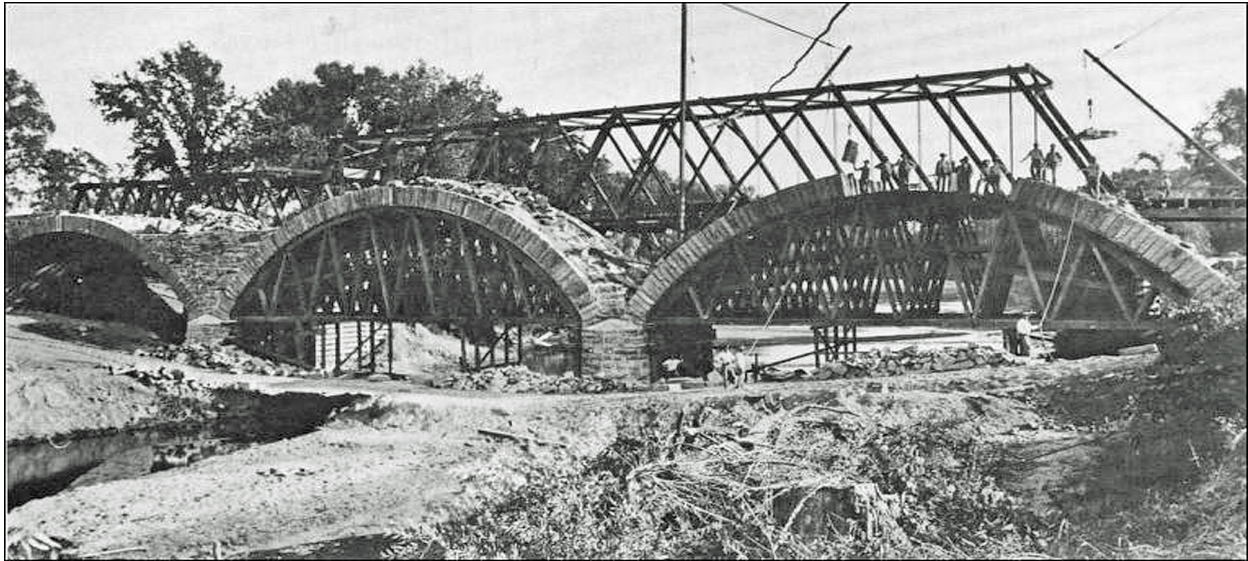
## **The Original Putah Creek Stone Bridge Epic Adventure**

An engineering marvel in its day, it was titled the “Queen of the Stone Bridges”. Few people have ever seen it; almost no one living today has ever crossed over this bridge. The Napa County Board of Supervisors decided to build a stone span across Putah Creek. It would become the largest stone bridge west of the Rocky Mountains. It was constructed in 1896, and Mr. Pithie of St. Helena was the contractor in charge of the project. He had a crew of 40 men and several teams of horses and mules. Laborers were paid on average \$2 per day and Masons were paid \$5 per day for their expertise.

It had three arches, each spanning 70 feet and extending down to bedrock. The bridge totaled 298 feet in length, and it rose 42 feet above the low water at the center of the span. The stone used was from a quarry less than two miles away. Obtaining the rock at Sugar Loaf Canyon, horses and wagons were used to move it. Workmen boarded for 50 cents a day and used a large tent for a dining room and kitchen.

The bridge stones were set into a cement mortar. The sandstone blocks used withstood testing of 8,000 to 12,000 pounds per square inch. They used 675 barrels of cement, 380 barrels of lime, 55,000 feet of lumber for false work, as well as tons of iron. The arch stones were 3 feet 6 inches deep; 12 3/16 inches at the crown and 11 inches at the base. They used 2,600 loads of rock. Each load comprised 5 to 10 cubic yards of material. The total cost of the bridge was \$19,980.





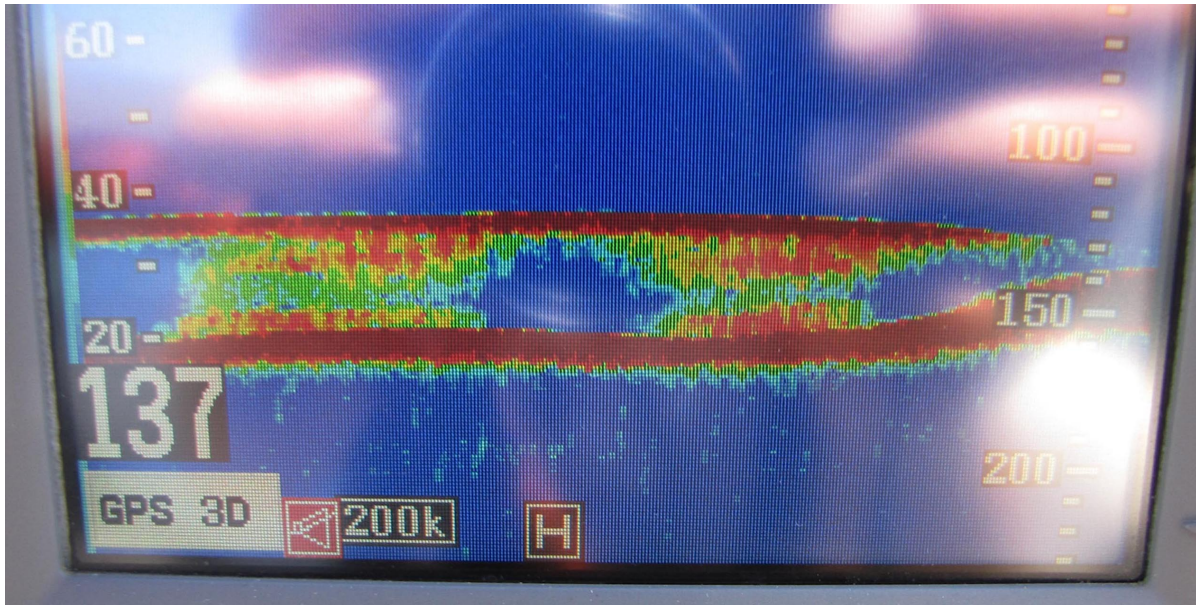
## **The Search for the Drowned Putah Creek Stone Bridge**

As adventures go, this is quite a story – and an interesting coincidence! On June 25, 2011, John Daniels of St. Helena found the Putah Creek Stone Bridge. On October 8, 2011, he was the first human being to see the famous bridge since Putah Creek was harnessed by Monticello Dam to form Lake Berryessa in 1958. On November 26, 2011, Les Wilkinson and Chris Hanson, members of the Berryessa Bridges Project, were the first human beings to see it with their own eyes and touch it with their own hands. John’s eyes were channeled through a 160-foot cable connected to an underwater video camera. The amazing video of this first sighting is available on You Tube at:

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCdstk\\_9Vpc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NCdstk_9Vpc).

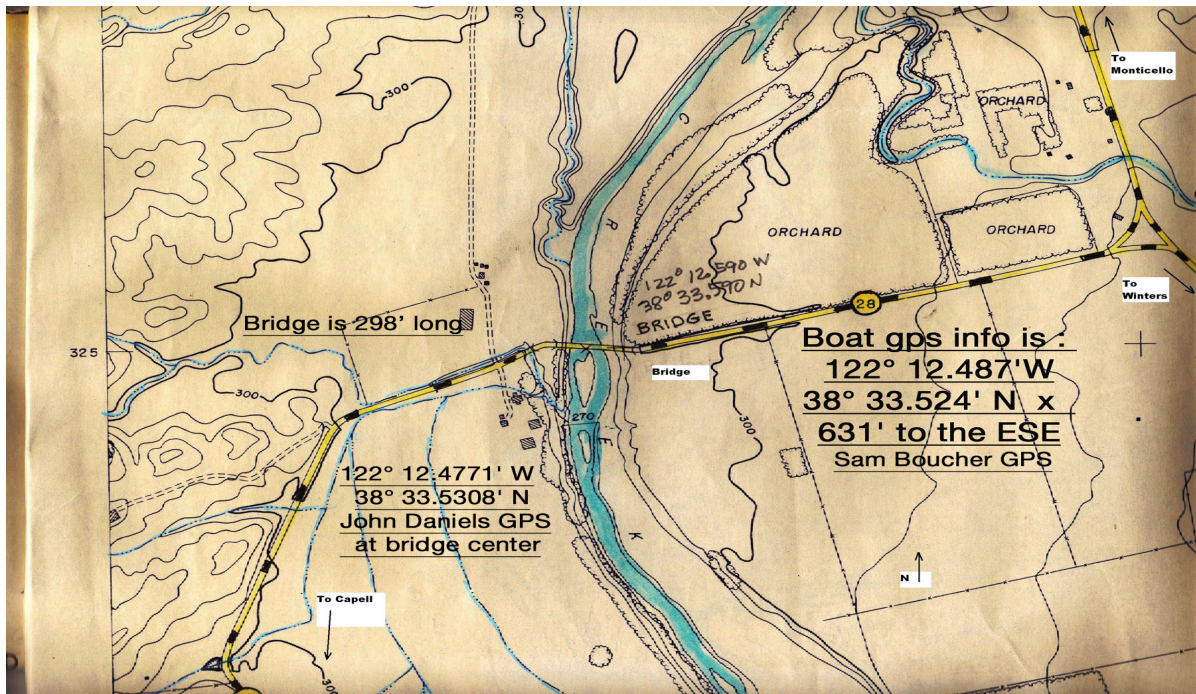
Les and Chris were actually floating next to the bridge in 150 feet of cold, dark water. John is a Napa County native who has been coming to Lake Berryessa since he was a child. He’s also an avid fisherman who combined his love of being on the water with an interest in the history of the Berryessa Valley and the Town of Monticello. Since the Putah Creek Stone Bridge is a major historical artifact, he decided to try to find and video record it.

In John’s own words: “I’ve spent thousands of hours with my family on Lake Berryessa, mostly waterskiing, but more recently, fishing. I’ve also wanted to see below the surface of the lake, to see large fish that I frequently mark on my sonar. Back in early June of this year I purchased a small underwater camera. I first tried to find any signs of Monticello, but without any success. I then started to search for the Putah Creek Bridge. After several weekends of attempts, I finally found it on June 25th, about 1,200 feet south of where I first thought it was, in 160ft. of water. I marked and saved it on the sonar. I spent numerous times crossing back and forth over it to verify its center until I felt that I might be able to secure my boat over that spot.



I lowered a bow anchor line down with the boat perpendicular to the bridge and secured it to the North face of the bridge wall. I then cast a stern anchor and secured it to the opposite wall. I lowered the camera down on a 160ft cable with small LED lights attached. To finally send the camera down I needed a perfectly calm day on the water. There was very little control of the camera, with it being so small and trying to send it straight down on a line that was half the length of a football field.

I was thrilled to see this beautiful front face of the bridge wall with mortar joints still looking as if they were just placed yesterday. The top outer edge had a perfectly shaped stone cap and reveal, typical of stone bridges for that time in Napa County. The key stones that formed the arches were massive and appeared gigantic in relation to others I've seen."



Coincidentally, during that same period another group of explorers was looking for the same bridge, as well as several other bridges, that are below the surface of Lake Berryessa. The group of technical scuba divers, led by Dave VanValkenburg and Sharon Eckroth, had formed the Berryessa Bridges Project to find and document the historical bridges with still photography and video recordings. They designated the Putah Creek Stone Bridge as the BSB, Berryessa Stone Bridge.

The Lake Berryessa News did its small part in this adventure by bringing John, Dave, Sharon, and Les together to share notes over pizza in October. I was amazed at the research that had been done by the Berryessa Bridges Project group, especially the computer graphics magic of Dave Van Valkenburg. Dave had superimposed a view from Google Earth, an old aerial photograph, and the plot map from Carol Fitzpatrick's Monticello History Exhibit to pinpoint the location of the bridge.

According to Dave: "Les Wilkinson, Sharon Eckroth, Gary Callihan, Chris Hanson, and I rented a patio boat from Pleasure Cove Marina and set out about 9:30 AM Saturday morning. We are all technical divers and have been diving together for quite a while. To be honest, although we were prepared, we were not really planning on getting any diving done Saturday, but things moved along well, and the conditions were ideal, so we went for it.

Using a chart plotter GPS with sonar we grappled near the bridge. Next, we placed a commercial grade color television camera on a shackle to the grapple line and lowered it on its 300 foot cable along the line. With Les monitoring and maintaining the grapple line and directing boat movements, me driving, and Sharon and Chris handling the electronics, we confirmed that what we were seeing was the bridge. Gary handled the camera cable and with Chris giving him directions like "down one foot - back a little", we were able to get close enough to see the stonework of the bridge. Les reported about eight inches of powdery silt on the roadway, midnight black without lighting, and roughly six feet of visibility with the lights on. He says the bridge is covered with virgin, undisturbed silt, a likeness to a fresh snowfall.

## **Scuba Diving into Lake Berryessa History**

There are many types of scuba divers. Some like me want clear warm water so we can feel like birds flying freely through the clear air. Jacques Cousteau said, "From birth, man carries the weight of gravity on his shoulders. He is bolted to the earth. But man has only to sink beneath the surface and he is free." Some adventurous souls like to cave dive and wreck dive – a much more technically demanding type of diving. And then there's Sharon Eckroth and her colleagues from the East Bay.

Sharon and her friends are trimix and tech divers. According to the Advanced Diving Technologies Dive Team, TDI/SDI, which has a tech diving training and gear center in Antioch, "For the extreme diver ready to further explore the world of technical deep diving, the gas of choice is trimix – a blend of oxygen, helium and nitrogen." Trimix is used in very deep dives instead of air to reduce the partial pressure of oxygen (to avoid oxygen toxicity) and nitrogen (to avoid nitrogen narcosis).

These six Northern California divers have set a goal to scuba dive to the bottom of Lake Berryessa and will document and photograph the Putah Creek Bridge and possibly the remains of the old Town of Monticello. They would also like to find and dive the newer 1941 Capell Creek Bridge near the Capell Public Launch Ramp, which actually was above water in the early 1990's drought.

In recent months we have located several folks, descendants of Monticello residents who have offered exciting new insight to our effort. We are engaged in this project as a means to help preserve the colorful history of the area, feed our love for adventure and most importantly give back to the families to let them know this wonderful community is not forgotten! We have searched current and historical maps, lake maps, Bureau of Reclamation

records, USGS data, bridge experts, lake levels over the years, depth readings, media articles, local people and their memories, and historical records, to list a few.”

Sharon Eckroth, Berryessa Bridges Project wrote: "Our team has made yet another terrific SCUBA dive to the Big Stone Bridge. My partner and I performed the dive on May 12. It was in a word; amazing. The day offered the best in-water visibility we've had in the lake to date. The surface conditions were fabulous with the warm, nearly tropical sun falling on the placid teal water. A refreshing northerly breeze kept the boat deck conditions comfortable. We quickly descended to the bridge carefully arresting our decent above the roadbed at about 120 feet so as not to disturb 55 years of baby powder fine silt. I tied off a safety line and we swam over the side of the BSB to locate an arch. This was truly a sight to behold, the BSB in all of her architectural splendor. The beautiful soft hues of the stone had an almost calming effect.

With lights ablaze and video camera rolling, we collected ourselves and executed the dive plan, a swim through the arch to the other side. The roadbed is roughly 27 feet in width, so it was a short jaunt as underwater swims go. Although the visibility was an amazing twenty feet, the water was dark akin to a coal mine after midnight. Without artificial light the conditions could rapidly turn into one's worst nightmare. The water temperature was a comfortable 52 degrees, if you're an Eskimo!

We proved the arch is clear to a depth of 144 feet void of debris that may have submerged over several decades or washed down originally with the inundating waters. Now 27 feet doesn't seem like far until you consider the darkness, limited visibility, and potential for disorientation in an overhead environment. Suffice to say this is where specialized training comes into play and is crucial to diver safety. We documented the condition of the arch as best possible ultimately emerging on the North side. We were promptly greeted again by the beautiful golden taupe and brown hues of the masterfully lain stone.

Our time beneath the BSB arch was limited to 15 minutes. A diver's time at depth is brief due to the bodies' inert gas absorption from respiration. With that, the decompression obligation grows exponentially each passing moment, so we wrapped up the video documentation and made for our first of many decompression stops."