

**Policy and Politics Betray the People:**  
**The Lake Berryessa Saga: 1958 - 2020**

by Peter Kilkus

Introduction: The Five Tragedies of the Berryessa Valley

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.

A History of Heartbreak

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 (<https://youtu.be/nP9K8Ai0Lkc>), 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.

In 1976 an archaeological survey of lands slated for development for recreational purposes (Oak Shores) resulted in the discovery of a number of prehistoric artifacts along the shoreline of Lake Berryessa. Although the study area (Oakshores Park) is contiguous to Lake Berryessa and appears (at the present time) to be a favorable place for human occupation, prior to the construction of Monticello Dam it was a considerable distance from the principal stream draining the area (Putah Creek).

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 and 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, lead 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.

What, though, of the people of Alta California? Who were they, where did they come from, and how did they change over time? Particularly what of the people of Berryessa Valley?

The first people known to reside in the valley were American Indians from the Southern Wintun tribe. Up until about 1800 members of the Southern Wintun tribe lived in a village in Berryessa Valley named Topai. Their main diet was acorns which normally grew abundantly. Unfortunately, no members of the Southern Wintun tribe survive.

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 Third Tragedy: The Destruction of Rural Culture**

The town of Monticello was born the next year, 1867, when B.F. Davis built a blacksmith shop. It became the center of a prosperous agricultural community and was located somewhat in the middle of the valley, along Putah Creek. The valley itself was flat and fertile and was considered to have some of the best soil in the country.

Monticello was always a fairly small town, usually two to three hundred residents. The town at different times had a hotel, a school, two gas pumps, a general store, a community hall, and a bar (a roadside spot called “The Hub”). McKenzie and Sons store (originally McKenzie and Cook) was a center point for much of the activity in the town. Albert McKenzie, who ran the store for many years, was the grocery clerk, postmaster, community telephone switchboard operator, notary public, crop insurance man as well as the person to go to for free farming and income tax advice. He was a man who wore many hats. Monticello became a popular venue for rodeos, baseball games, and “cow roasts” drawing people from miles around.

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. It was considered the grandest stone masonry bridge ever built in California, consisting of three 70 foot spans. 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 Solano County Irrigation District was formed in 1948 to obtain irrigation water from a proposed multiple-purpose Solano Project and included the damming of Berryessa Valley at Devil’s Gate. Shortly thereafter Bureau of Reclamation included the Solano Project as part of its plan to develop water resources in the Central Valley Basin of California.

In 1953 construction began on Monticello Dam. The rest of the Solano Project includes a diversion dam on lower Putah Creek (creating Lake Solano) and an open waterway stretching 33 miles named the Putah South Canal. By 1956 all the trees, homes, barns, and other structures were dismantled, burned, or removed from the valley in preparation for its inundation. Because the land was condemned, compensation for people’s property was minimal.

The Dam was completed in 1957 and the former valley, now a reservoir, filled within two years leaving no clues that Monticello and Berryessa Valley were once populated.

### **The Fourth Tragedy: Destruction of Lake Berryessa Family Recreation**

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.



### **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 about 100 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. PG&E crews swarmed the area installing hundreds of new power poles in less than a week. Power was

finally restored to the Berryessa Highland residential area on September 2, about two weeks after it was lost in the original lightning storm, but other areas took several more weeks to be restored.

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The goal of my new book is to provide the history and the context within which such an incredibly destructive course of action took place. The book is dedicated to documenting this final tragedy - and, hopefully, the promised revitalization.

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## How It All Began: The Origins of the "Big Lie"

# County, Lake Businesses Losing in Berryessa Fuss

By NORA HANNON  
Times Staff Writer

NAPA — "Pat Botts has completely stymied the government," says Napa County Administrator Al Habberger, a little bitterly.

"Don't say one person can't do anything," he goes on with grudging admiration. "He has raised hell. He's brought in Nader's Raiders, Senator Tunney and the General Accounting Office."

"The federal bureaucracy is incapable of making a decision because of Pat Botts," he concludes.

Mrs. Botts is the Lake Berryessa real estate agent and manager who for a number of years has been leading the way Napa County has been running things at Lake Berryessa.

The controversy, however, which it took over 18 months for the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, in its efforts has resulted in:

— A moratorium on any further development by the present commission at the lake where mobile home developments and docks cover substantial areas of the east and south sides.

— A moratorium in Ralph Nader's report "Power and Land in California," charging misuse of government land.

— A report by the National Park Service, issued last month, recommending that it take over and operate Berryessa in a National Recreation Area, which would push Napa County out of the picture and conceivably wipe out the opportunity.

— A bill introduced in Congress which would take the last 10 years of the argument over what has happened at Berryessa in the last 13 years.

At the northern end of the lake, in a gate which bars access to the coast down the Berkeley east side, there are two signs. The big one reads, "Farm Access Road, Do Not Enter."

Inside it, inches away, is a smaller sign: "Boundary, Lake Berryessa, U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Reclamation." The berries' buffalo seal makes it official.

This is federal land from which the public has been barred by a county ordinance. About 15 people have been arrested for trespassing on the east side of the lake in the last 13 years.

A strong case can be made for keeping any kind of permanent development off the east side. The area is covered with fragile native grasses and small oaks and the recently filed bill helps it. It drains the lake beautifully and sets its flowwater.

Yet the only use allowed on it is grazing by three private leasees, Herbert Gene, a member of the park commission, the Frazier and Gossage Co., which owns 11,000 adjoining acres and Joe Dolittle. Their cattle graze right up to the shoreline which is off limits to people.



MRS. PAT BOTTS  
Real estate agent

she has hundreds of facts and figures at the ready. Her remarks sometimes get a bit personal.

She admits to one scientific mistake for her campaign. "I said that the area is hard to sell when it's so much easier to buy a mobile home and put it on federal land at the water's edge."

Mobile homes and boat-docks go for about \$100 per year. Yours outside the federal "take line" run as high as \$10 per acre.

She would like to see a faster pace of development on surrounding lands, but she says the "vital position on the lake" and other ecological considerations also concern her, including lack of public access to most of the 1,000 federal acres surrounding the lake.

"I'm not sure if the proposed federal takeover would help," she says in the opinion of what they've got in mind, first.

On the west side where all the spear centers, there is as much complaining about what the county has done as there is about the open resort centers have taken up.

A mobile drive from the shore to the hill, a regular fishing area at the north end, won't help you to a picnic table. The way indicates the main complaints were the lack of access to the choice areas and the high cost of public access on the west side.

All the trunk cars have been provided by a beer company, although the county does spotter cars at intervals on trees and picnic spots up periodically with the portable boat.

Among dozens of fishermen this reporter spoke with up and down the west side the main complaints were the lack of access to the choice areas and the high cost of public access on the west side.

The operators defend the practice: "Many people take the position that they are entitled to use the lake in the same way as the mobile home resort camp, as long as their use is proportionately representative of the total public use required to be served by this regional facility."

"Dramatic experience with mobile home access curbs the revenue which help overcome operating losses inherent in such seasonally oriented businesses," one of their written statements says.

The biggest part of the difficulty, the operators and the county maintain, is that the resorts have been lobbying under a 36-day business which

## Oakland Tribune

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reaches a point at which it becomes unmanageable.

Gil Yates, the park director, points out that a serious fire hazard exists on the east side in the summer. But he is more concerned about the problem of parking it. For the 13 years the county has run things at the lake, it's seen five ranges, winter war boats, have had responsibility for the entire area.

Under present financing there is no prospect of buying up Yates' liability stretched ranger force, so his concern is understandable. It's easier just to keep people off the east side, which is probably 80 miles long or more, covering all the coves and inlets.

It's rather an uncomfortable place in the afternoon summer sun anyway, with temperatures often topping 100 in the water, however, when fishermen are the main users, they can't see why they should be kept off the entire area.

Yates is a one-time owner of the Berryessa Marina, which he sold in 1956. He decries one

"I don't think the water right out of the lake when I'm out in my boat," said Marie Lee of Fairfield, a vehicle inspector for the state.

"The only thing that matters to the people up here is money," said Bill Vaughn of Fremont, who had two nice silver sailboats in a string near the Berryessa Marina. He said he was there in winter.

"The complaint, Harry Hager of Newark, said he wasn't sure if the proposed federal takeover would help."

"I'd like the opinion of what they've got in mind, first," said D. LaLoche of Napa, who had just landed a four-point rainbow at the Fall said, "absolutely not! If we're going to turn everything over to Uncle Sam, we're in trouble." But the many of the others he felt there should be public boat ramps outside the resort.

The Park Service report maintained, and the complainants bear it out, that the resorts have not provided enough facilities for day use, such as picnic areas, and for transient use by overnight campers. This was all supposed to be part of the deal, according to the lease agreement.

They have given over acres and acres space to the lucrative "mobile home" developments and the county apparently has gone along with it.

The trouble has been that the mobile homes have tended to be sold in semi-private second homes or plots of federal land, with private docks.

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ED BERNARD  
'Odd compromiser'

making it impossible to borrow money for improvements.

If this was removed — and they've been trying to have it stricken for some years — they would be able to "develop to ultimate standards" inside their own areas and provide the kind of facilities the public wants.

This supposedly would mean an increase in the return to the county from the 18 per cent passivity interest tax which the operators pay on their grants. The county then would supposedly have the where-withal for better facilities outside the resorts.

Don McFarland, manager of the Shute Park Resort and member of the County Planning Commission, said that in the spring of 1970 the count

SOME are saying that we're incompetent because we are local.

had expected to get a new contract in which the 36-day clause would be thrown out, but it fell through.

Then the Bureau of Reclamation stopped the negotiations on the area and all bids were off until the Park Service plan was finished.

Meanwhile the county worked up its own plan, to send in late, which ended the 36-day clause out.

When the Park Service dropped its handbills, the county still continued to stand behind the operators, claiming that "private enterprise" can provide the needed improvements if given a chance.

The county insists that "not a cent of outside tax money" has ever gone into Berryessa. The county run things are 100 per cent from county interest taxes and boat stickers.

Why does the county want to continue to run Berryessa when it's turned into such a headache?

"Some counties would say, 'Let the U.S. Government do it,'" Hager says. "But that's the reason of local government, and we don't want ours ended."

"The gamblers and no people... we just think we're the best to be in charge." "It's a lousy plan, it's ridiculous," he says of the Park Service's report.

He said the operators take particular aim at the "median use" figure of one million users annually which the plan projects. About 1.5



JOE MELLO TOOK TROUT IN CAPELL CREEK  
Fishing is fabulous, even from lake bank



SIGNS WARN VISITORS AGAINST USING LAKE  
Camping, boat launching are limited to resorts



THIS IS WHAT THE CONCERN IS ALL ABOUT AT LAKE BERRYESSA  
Mobile homes on federal land have almost exclusive use of facilities