Driving by Lake Berryessa, I can still see the ranches and farmland that used to be there instead of a lake. I see the road into Berryessa Valley that led us to the farm where Aunt Alma’s family had once lived. I see Putah Creek running at the bottom of the hill in back of their home. I see my fingers red and black with stain from picking wild blackberries and my mouth waters the taste of blackberry pie.

Up until I was 15 and had a car, my Mother’s sister Vi and cousin Don would pick me up in Sacramento where I lived with my Dad, and take me to see Mom. This was in the 1930s when Mom lived between Davis and Winters on a ranch south of County Road 29, or what is now called Russell Boulevard. We’d pick up Mom and the four of us would be on our way to visit their other sister, Alma.

If it was apricot season, Mom would have us stop in Winters for a box of apricots from Lizzie Chandon’s roadside orchard. Then we’d head up Hwy. 128 through the canyon and drive along Putah Creek to the town of Monticello. We talked and laughed and ate apricots along the way. Once in a while we saw a deer, maybe a doe and a fawn, lucky if we saw a buck. Don and I would rush to count the points on the deer’s antlers. Aunt Vi would slow the car before the buck ran for cover into the manzanita or behind scrub oaks, or down the hillside into the brushy thickets along the creek. We rarely saw a buck that had more than a two-point rack.

We did see a rattlesnake once in a while, maybe already dead, or one slithering along in the heat on its way across the road. We stopped one time to look at a dead rattlesnake, and Don cut off its tail. We counted ten shell-like segments on its rattles, plus the black button marking on the tip of the tail. The more rattles there are, the bigger the snake.

At nightfall on our way home we might see a skunk. We often saw a dead one alongside the road. Even if a skunk was dead, as we drove by, the smell quickly stunk up the car and stayed with us for a long time. Once we saw a skunk travelling up the road, not hurrying, not moving over, ambling along as if the road was the best way to go. Aunt Vi pulled to the opposite side of the narrow road and was careful not to run over the skunk. I don’t know which was worse, the thought of hitting the skunk, or looking down at the side of road where it dropped off into the canyon below. Another time, when we did hit a skunk, the smell was so
penetrating that we scarcely opened our mouths to talk. I pinched my nose closed and cupped the palm of my hand to cover my mouth, as if that would keep out the smell.

Although the drive to Alma’s was a good hour or more, it didn’t seem like it when we topped the hill on the Knoxville Mine road. Off to the left led to the quicksilver mine and the town of Knoxville. Looking west, we’d see Cobb Mountain in the distance, the headwaters of Putah Creek. Below us and to the right of us stretched the Berryessa Valley. Putah Creek ran through the middle of Berryessa Valley. Along Putah Creek was the community of Monticello where Aunt Alma and Uncle Ray lived. There was a gas station, a church and a cemetery, and the Cook, McKenzie & Son country store. The store sold groceries, some hardware, and high brim cowboy hats and coveralls, for maybe a dozen homes in this farming community.

On either side of the creek lay thousands of acres of grain fields, vineyards, and prune and pear orchards, along with cattle and sheep ranches and some pigs. The valley was known for its cattle and grain and its Bartlett pears. Uncle Ray farmed and was always working. He farmed mostly grain and sometimes worked in the pear orchards.

We would spend the day with Alma and their children, Bill, Jim, and Jean. When I was little, but big enough to help, I picked wild blackberries with cousin Jean for one of Alma’s blackberry pies. The berry vines grew wild in the backyard of Alma’s home. Their backyard sloped down the hill to Putah Creek where cousins Bill and Jim took me fishing. Bass, bony carp and trout swam in the fast running creek. What an experience it was to go fishing in your own backyard. Even though I didn’t care much for fishing, I liked going to Monticello and being with my cousins. I enjoyed exploring the creek, the hills and countryside, an adventure each time that was so different from the Victorian home and neighborhood where I lived with Dad in Sacramento.

When I reminisce, the gas station and grocery store, along with Alma’s home, are at the bottom of Lake Berryessa because of a dam. Construction of the Monticello Dam began in 1953. It took four years to change the landscape, no more roads into Berryessa Valley, the historic town of Monticello and 12,000 acres of farmland gone. I look down into the lake and wonder if any of the buildings are still there, and I wonder what happened to everybody.

Actually, every building was moved or torn down to its foundation and burned. Orchards and vineyards were cut within six inches of the ground and burned. Graves in the Monticello Cemetery were dug up, and the remains were moved to Spanish Flat, a bluff overlooking the valley. Putah Creek Bridge on the road from Monticello to Napa is the only structure left at the
bottom of Lake Berryessa. It’s a heavy stone bridge with three large arches, the largest stone bridge west of the Rocky Mountains and was deemed too difficult to remove. When the lake is down, especially in these years of drought, you can see the tops of the arches.

When Alma and her family were forced to move from their farm, they bought a home in Napa. I wasn’t there to help them move. I didn’t see the demolition of homes in Monticello. I didn’t watch them chop down the orchards or century-old oaks. And I didn’t see the holes left in the cemetery fill up with water when water started flooding into the valley. I wonder what it was like for those who lived there, when everything and everybody had to be moved.

On a trip to visit Alma’s family in Napa, we drive around Lake Berryessa, the outskirts of what was Berryessa Valley, now simply a ghost of what was once there. As we drive through the canyon, I can’t help but think that some of the happiest memories of my childhood are in the town of Monticello at the bottom of a lake.