



PRESERVING THE LEGACY OF OKEI-SAN AND THE WAKAMATSU COLONISTS

AMERICAN RIVER
CONSERVANCY



A NEWSLETTER OF THE *AMERICAN RIVER CONSERVANCY (ARC)*

January 2016

The 2019 Wakamatsu Festival Celebrating 150 years of Japanese-American Accomplishment

Save The Dates: May 18 - June 18, 2019

The Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm near Placerville, California is widely considered the first Japanese settlement in the United States. Less well-known is that the Wakamatsu Farm is the only Colony outside Japan established by Samurai. It is the birthplace of the first naturalized Japanese-American and the gravesite of Okei-San, the first Japanese woman buried on American soil.

Following defeat in the last battle of Japan's Boshin Civil War (1868-69) at Aizu Wakamatsu, twenty-two farmers, carpenters and Samurai boarded the paddle-wheel steamer *China* at Yokohama and sailed for San Francisco. Consigned within its cargo, the Colonists had placed 50,000 three-year-old mulberry trees for silk worm farming, bamboo, wax trees, six million tea plant seeds, rice, citrus and other traditional Japanese crops. After 22 days at sea, the Wakamatsu Colonists arrived in San Francisco on May 30, 1869. They transferred their cargo onto a riverboat bound for Sacramento and then proceeded east by wagon train to Placerville. On June 18th, the Wakamatsu Colonists purchased 160 acres of prime farmland at Gold Hill from Charles Graner for the price of \$5,000. Thus began the first introduction of Japanese agriculture to California and the United States. The Wakamatsu Colonists also became the vanguard of Japanese immigration to the United States.

In 2008, the Wakamatsu Farm property was listed for sale and was in danger of being subdivided and developed for residential homes. Over the next two years, the American River Conservancy (ARC) in partnership with the Japanese American Historical Society, the National Japanese American Historical Society, the Japanese Consulate, the Aizu Wakamatsu Chamber of Commerce, the California Rice Commission, People to People International and many private supporters, raised sufficient funds to secure a loan and purchase the Wakamatsu Farm in October, 2010. Since then a committed group of ARC staff and volunteers were able to place the property on the National Register of Historic Places at a level of "national significance."

They raised \$500,000 to restore the historic 1856 Graner farmhouse that was actually occupied by the Wakamatsu settlers. They stabilized barns, a dairy and other original farm structures. They built trails and interpretive signage around a 6-acre lake and to Okei-San's gravesite. In addition, an exhaustive research project has begun to clarify the history of the Wakamatsu Farm, the history of the Colonists, and the extraordinary impact the Wakamatsu Farm and Okei-San have had on the following 150 years of Japanese-American history.

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During these 150 years, Issei (first generation Japanese-Americans) farmers introduced sophisticated irrigation methods that enabled the cultivation of fruits, vegetables and flowers on previously marginal lands. By the 1920's nearly 25% of all farmers in California were Japanese-American. During the 20th Century, Nissei and Sansei (2nd and 3rd generation) Japanese-Americans have made extraordinary contributions to American military and civil service. During World War II, the all-volunteer Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team/100th Infantry Battalion was awarded 18,143 decorations, including 9,486 Purple Hearts, becoming the most decorated military unit in United States history. On October 5, 2010 the Congressional Gold Medal was awarded to the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and the 100th Infantry Battalion, as well as the 6,000 Japanese Americans who served in the U.S. Military Intelligence Service during the war.

In 1959, Daniel K. Inouye became the first Japanese-American to serve in the United States House of Representatives, in 1962, the first Japanese American in the United States Senate, and in 2010 succeeded Robert Byrd as President pro tempore in the U.S. Senate. In 1965 Patsy Mink (Takemoto) became the first female minority to join the ranks of Congress. She helped author the Higher Education Act which prohibited gender discrimination in federal-funded institutions. In 1976, she became Assistant Secretary of State for Oceans, International Environment and Scientific Affairs. In 1971 Norman Y. Mineta was elected mayor of San Jose, becoming the first Asian American mayor of a major city. In 2000, Norman Mineta became the first Asian American appointed to the United States Cabinet, serving as Secretary of Commerce from 2000-2001 and Secretary of Transportation from 2001-2006.

In 1978, Ellison S. Onizuka became the first Asian American astronaut. There are so many others with extraordinary contributions in law, engineering, science and the arts. Along with these accomplishments have come significant challenges: racial discrimination, internment during the war, and the significant loss of property.

For the extraordinary history of the Wakamatsu Colony and the significant contributions that Japanese Americans have made to California and American life, the American River Conservancy and its partners are working to host a 150-Year Celebration of Japanese American Life at the Wakamatsu Farm. Over a five-week period May 18 – June 18, 2019, this Festival will celebrate traditional Japanese-American Agriculture, cuisine, both Performing and Studio Arts, Music, Dance and the history that is so unique to Japanese American history and culture.

The American River Conservancy is busy preparing three different performing arts stages, parking lots, trails, dining and restroom facilities. Additional historical exhibits for trails and the Visitor Center are being painstakingly researched and built, but additional help is needed.

Please consider a sponsorship of \$100, \$500, \$1,000 or more to help support the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm and its 2019 Festival celebrating 150 Years of Japanese-American History. Volunteer service commitments are encouraged along with commitments by performing arts groups to assist during this five-week festival. Please contact Julie Andert or Alan Ehrgott at the American River Conservancy at (530) 621-1224 or email: wakamatsu@arconservancy.org

We look forward to your support and seeing you at the festival!

Wakamatsu Historic Farm Tours

We have ongoing monthly public tours.

See our website for dates at arconservancy.org/activities,
or call to schedule a private tour 530-621-1224.

All tours are \$10/person, \$5/child 12-18

\$100 minimum for private tours



Photo by Betty Sederquist

Wakamatsu Docents Visit Okei-san's Memorial Site in Japan

by Melissa Lobach



ARC docents at Okei's grave in Aizu.
From left Melissa Lobach, Laurie Edwards, Monk host, Pat Monzo, Herb Tanimoto

In 2015, the El Dorado County chapter of People to People International in coordination with the Warabi Sister City Association supported a 13-day trip to Japan. During the tour, the travelers enjoyed a two-day trip to Aizu Wakamatsu in the Fukushima prefecture. Among the 38 Americans were four docents from ARC's Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony in Coloma, California. The ARC docents were most eager to visit Okei-san's memorial site in Aizu Wakamatsu on Mt. Seaburi.

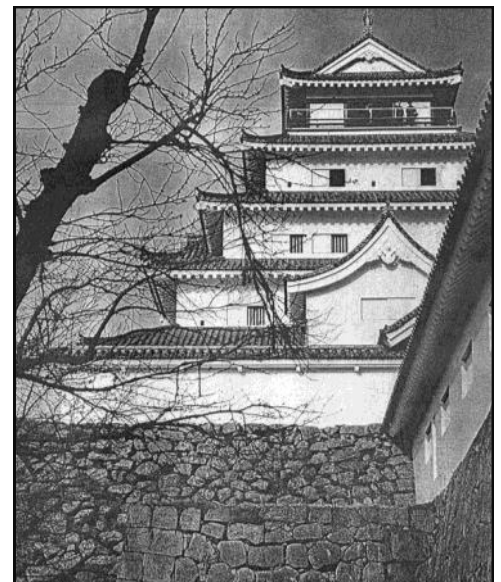
The road to the summit of Mt. Seaburi is surrounded by forests of evergreens and maples. To the West are sweeping views of the Aizu basin. To the East are panoramas of the heart of Fukushima, including Mt. Bandai and Lake Inawashiro, the fourth largest lake in Japan. November 1st was a crisp, sunny day with dazzling displays of yellow, orange, and red Fall foliage in every direction.

Okei-san is memorialized near the summit of Mt. Seaburi at about 2800 feet. On site is an exact replica of Okei-san's actual gravestone in California. The replica is made from granite mined in Gold Hill near her grave site two miles south of Coloma. Large rocks around her replica headstone tell the story of young Okei, who left her home in Aizu Wakamatsu in 1869 with a small band of colonists to establish a tea and silk farm in the heart of gold country, USA. Okei died in Coloma at the age of 19, and she became the first documented Japanese woman to die and be buried on American soil.

Through the years, Okei-san's story has inspired many people to journey between America and Japan to pay homage to her pioneering spirit, just like the American travelers this year. For an ARC Wakamatsu docent, visiting Okei-san's memorial on Mt. Seaburi is like a dream come true.

A Buddhist monk greeted the visitors at Okei-san's memorial site. He chanted in prayer as each visitor was invited to burn a pinch of incense and bow in honor of Okei-san in front of her headstone. The visitors took many photos of the headstone, story inscriptions, large stone lanterns, stunning vistas, and the black rock wall inscribed "Gold Hill" in English and Japanese on Okei-san's memorial pathway.

The ARC docents were most honored to visit Okei-san's memorial site in Japan this year. They are very excited to bring this newest chapter of Okei's story back home to America.



Aizu Wakamatsu Castle

Nurturing Community at the Wakamatsu Farm

By Elena DeLacy



Volunteers work the earth planting asparagus and rhubarb in Winter

If you haven't visited the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm in recent months, you will be in for a big surprise during your next trip to the historic site. The American River Conservancy (ARC) was recently awarded a grant from the California Natural Resources Agency through the Environmental Enhancement and Mitigation Grant Program to create a Community Farm, Native Plant Nursery and complete a one-mile wheelchair accessible trail around the large pond. The \$336,000 grant award has been matched by additional funding from Intel, Sam's Club, American River Conservancy, 4H Fundraising 4 Farmland Project, as well as thousands of hours of support from volunteers. Boy Scout Troop 134 from Folsom also came out to build a new kiosk as part of Jacob Snodgrass' Eagle Scout Project. The Wakamatsu Community Farm and Accessible Trail Project brings fresh new partnerships and ultimately will provide fresh produce for ARC events, nearby schools and food banks.

One aspect of the project that is particularly exciting for the Stewardship Program at ARC is the creation of a Native Plant Nursery, where staff and volunteers are growing locally-sourced native trees, shrubs, grasses and flowers. These native plants will be used for on-site restoration projects as well as habitat enhancement projects at other nearby sites

managed by the American River Conservancy. In fact, the soon-to-be-completed trail at the Wakamatsu Colony site will provide self-guided interpretive signage identifying important native plants, their traditional uses and importance to wildlife. A native plant demonstration garden and plantings throughout the Community Farm site feature drought-tolerant and pollinator-attracting native species.

This undertaking is larger in scope and scale than a traditional Community Garden – it's truly a Community Farm, in that it provides a working "Farm System" where visitors can interact with the land, row crops, orchards and eventually farm animals. We've already started by planting bare root asparagus and rhubarb crowns, about 50 fruit trees of different varieties, and have sowed winter cover crops. The layout of the row-crop area and the orchard utilize permaculture design techniques including capturing precious runoff, utilizing perennial crops and plants, cover-cropping, practicing no-till agriculture and utilizing tons of mulch. Once we have at least one growing season under our belts, the Community Farm can be used as a resource for local schools and members of the community who desire to learn more about sustainable agriculture, native gardening and simply want to connect with the land.

Last, but not least, a brief introduction is in order for our new Sierra Nevada AmeriCorps Member, Timmy Jacobs. He is serving with ARC as the Farm Stewardship Coordinator and can be found at the Farm planting plants, mulching, installing fencing and weeding. For information on how you can be a part of the Wakamatsu Community Farm Project, contact him at (530) 621-1224 or timothy@arconservancy.org. The great news is we already have a small but dependable group of volunteers who regularly participate in workdays to help make this happen. Please join us for one of the upcoming volunteer workdays – it's always fun, engaging and inspiring.



A section of the wheelchair accessible trail to be completed in 2016.

GET INVOLVED! Workdays at the Farm on February 13, February 23, March 12, April 19, April 30, May 14 and May 24.

The Wakamatsu Doll

By Herb Tanimoto

It is all of 6 inches tall. The doll is dressed in a silk kimono with white flower patterns with red centers over a still-brilliant red base color. The miniature obi is gold silk and simply knotted in the back. The head is sewn silk with hand-painted eyes, lashes, and a small puckered mouth. Black hair has been attached with an adhesive. Tiny white fabric arms and legs peek out from the red sleeves and hem.

The doll is perhaps the second most enduring mystery surrounding the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony, next to the fate of John Henry Schnell and his family. How old is it? Did it come from the colony? Who made it?

The doll had been lost for some 20 years until 2013 when American River Conservancy volunteers went to the home of Sally Taketa to catalog items that she was donating to ARC. Sally and her husband, Henry, had undertaken years of historical research about the colony from the 1930s up to Henry's death in 1991. Around 1990, Sally had allowed the doll to be displayed at a Sacramento exhibition. It had disappeared soon after. ARC historian Wendy Guglieri rediscovered it in a neatly folded piece of cloth in one of Sally's trunks.

The doll had been donated to the Taketas by Pearl Butler, a descendant of Egbert Veerkamp. Egbert was one of the six sons of Francis and Louisa and had a close working relationship with colonist Matsunosuke Sakurai. In an interview, Pearl said that Egbert's wife, Mary, helped care for Matsu when Matsu was too ill to come to their house for his meals. Mary had her young son (Pearl's father, Adolph), take bowls of steamed rice to his cabin. Matsu had worked on the Veerkamp farm for 30 years until his death in 1901. He was the last Japanese colonist to remain on the farm and many regard Matsu as having been a friend of Okei-san.

When interviewed by ARC, Pearl said that she had found the doll in a trunk that had belonged to her grandmother, Mary Veerkamp. Also in the trunk was a photograph of Matsu Sakurai and the remnant of a wedding cake from times long past. Sally Taketa remembered being told that the doll was made by Okei for the Schnell children.

Pearl, however, could not remember anyone in her family telling her about the doll's origin.

Doll and kimono experts who have seen the doll's photograph have said that the construction and facial expression point to a manufacturing date later than the Meiji period (1869-1912). A theory by a doll museum curator in Japan is that a visitor from Japan had brought it around 1930 and had left it at the grave site or with the Veerkamps.

Even examination by experts might not be able to determine the age of the doll. There are areas of machine sewing on the kimono fabric, but by 1870 the Veerkamp family probably had a sewing machine. Henry Veerkamp had recalled that Okei "learnt needlework and cooking from my mother, who was very fond of her."

Was the doll made by Okei-san to demonstrate her newly learned sewing skills? Did Jou Schnell make it for her children? Did a visitor from Japan leave the doll in the 1930s? This is one of the unanswered mysteries remaining from the first Japanese colony in North America.



Sally Taketa

2016 El Dorado Reads

Highlights from a press release by **Cathy Barsotti** (December 20, 2015)

The committee members of the Joan Barsotti Memorial Fund are thrilled to partner with five local organizations for the fourth annual *El Dorado READS* program. The focus book will again be Joan Barsotti's book, *Okei-san: A Girl's Journey, Japan to California, 1868-1871*. This is the cherished story written by local author, Joan Barsotti, based on the real life journey of Okei Ito from Japan to California. The "El Dorado READS" program is scheduled to launch again in January and will be available to all 4th grade classrooms in El Dorado County – which includes 34 schools. The "*El Dorado Reads Okei-san*" project will run from January through May 2016 depending on schools' schedules.

"We are so excited to be a part of this wonderful program, working with the El Dorado County Office of Education and the El Dorado Community Foundation" says Cathy Barsotti, who adds "this book was first published by our mom in 2006. She spent years investigating and researching the story to further develop it, adding more detail to the already exciting historical fiction novel." Now, as part of the *El Dorado Reads Okei-san* project – all 4th grade students will learn about this brave young girl's journey, and the local and national importance that it has. As part of this unique program, participating schools will have the opportunity to apply for grant funds from the **Joan Barsotti Memorial Fund** at the El Dorado Community Foundation for a field trip to visit the Wakamatsu Tea & Silk Colony Farm – which is the site of the Okei-san story.

On the property, students will be able to walk in Okei's footsteps – thanks to wonderful support from the El Dorado County, California Chapter of People to People International. Founding member Myrna Hanses is a real life pied-piper, enticing over 30 members to volunteer to help for the field trip event. That group, plus forty more volunteers from this generous community help ensure that this field trip will be educational, inspirational and memorable for all participants. Events include touring the farm house where Okei lived and hiking up Okei's favorite hill. Presentations include a hands-on discovery of silkworms, origami and Japanese storytelling. Additionally the children will be introduced to Japanese cuisine, observe a demonstration of Kendo (martial arts) and Taiko drumming. Their final stations will acquaint them with Japanese clothing, language and historical swords.

Thirty-five schools and eighty-two classrooms in El Dorado County will be eligible to participate in *El Dorado Reads Okei-san* project. Each school has received copies of the book, along with a reading and comprehension guide to help engage students in the experience. New from this past year was a generous grant provided by the California Retired Teachers Association – El Dorado County - Division 73. The funds provided have helped enhance the field trip experience this year, and for years to come.

Our thanks go out to this community for donating funds in support of the program and for the wonderful volunteers who donate their time, energy and expertise on the day of the field trip and days leading up to the field trip in planning. This truly is a special place to live!



2015 participants learning Taiko Drumming



Students learning about historical Japanese culture and apparel.

OFUJI MATSUGORO, WAKAMATSU COLONIST

by Wendy Guglieri

In the year 1869, the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm was established as the first Japanese settlement in the United States. Along with their charismatic leader John Henry Schnell and his Japanese wife were twenty-two intrepid Japanese colonists. They included men, women and children. Samurai, carpenters, farmers - all had a place in the new colony. The ill-fated venture lasted but two short years, and then disbanded. Until recently, we have known the fate of only three of the original colonists. This is the story of Ofuji Matsugoro. He and his wife are two of the original Wakamatsu colonists. It is also the story of a young girl from Tokyo, and a chance school assignment.

In August 2014, the American River Conservancy was contacted by Naori Shiraishi, a 16-year-old junior high school student from Tokyo, Japan. While researching the roots of her family for a summer school project, she made an astounding discovery. Through discussions with her grand-uncle and her own research, she discovered that Ofuji Matsugoro, her fourth paternal great grandfather, had been a member of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony.

Ofuji Matsugoro was approximately 45 years old when he traveled to the United States with the Wakamatsu Colony in 1869. With him were his wife and young daughter, Sakuko. The child may actually have been born after their arrival in California, an important fact to discover, as this child would likely have been only the second child of Japanese descent to be born on American soil (Schnell's child was the first). Matsugoro worked at Wakamatsu Colony as a carpenter. After the failure of the colony, he and fellow colonist Masumizu Kuninosuke used their carpentry skills to help build the nearby Coloma Hotel in the town of Coloma, California.

In 1876 Matsugoro returned to Japan, where he and his family settled in Yamanashi Prefecture. He and another recently discovered colonist, Sakichi Yanagisawa, were said to have been studying viticulture in the Fresno area of California for a year, having been sent there by the government of Japan in 1875. Matsugoro became an early day pioneer in the Japanese fruit-processing industry, performing experimentation on canning tomatoes in Tokyo. By 1877, he directed the introduction of fermenting equipment for wine in the Prefectural Institute for Wine and was eventually the chief engineer in the winery at the Yamanashi Prefecture.

In 1890, Ofuji Matsugoro passed away at approximately 68 years of age. He was survived by his daughter Sakuko.

In August of 2015, one of Wakamatsu's supporter's, Yoko Ueda Collins and her husband, former ARC Board member Clint Collins, traveled to Tokyo and had the opportunity to spend the afternoon with Naori and her family. Yoko later made a wonderful presentation to the Wakamatsu docents, complete with photos of Naori and her parents, as well as a copy of the much anticipated school report about Ofuji Matsugoro, which had sparked all of this excitement a full year before. The circle was finally complete. It is our fervent hope that Naori and her family can travel to Gold Hill for our 2019 Wakamatsu festival.

We now know with certainty that some of the colonists returned to Japan after the demise of the Wakamatsu Colony, but the question is this: how many of them actually returned? Until recently we didn't believe that any of them did. But thanks to the inquisitive mind of one teenage girl, we now know better. Who would have known that the greatest treasure in our search for the missing Wakamatsu Colony descendants would come to us in the form of a junior high school student from Tokyo working on a summer school assignment?

By the way, Naori received the Gold Award for her school project.



Continued on page 8...

Naori & Toshio

DESCENDANTS OF OFUJI MATSUGORO

OFUJI MATSUGORO

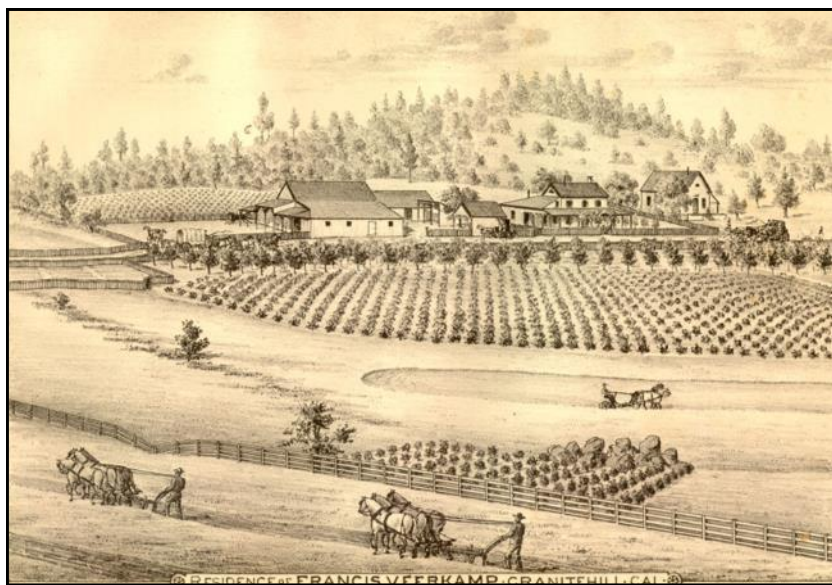
Ofuji, Sakuko (married Shimazaki Hisashigoro)

Shimazaki Motoe (married Namiki Takeo)

Namiki Kyoko (married Shiraishi Katsushiko)

Shiraishi Toshio (married Yuko Iida)

Shiraishi Naori



Placerville studio portrait of a Wakamatsu family from 1870. Possibly Matsugoro, his wife, and daughter Sakuko



Wakamatsu
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By donating to the Conservancy you will join in a vision of tomorrow which so many people share: a healthy, vital environment that supports protecting, preserving and reconstructing a historical area with impact to Japan and California.