

A Pioneering Japanese Colony to be Resurrected



Local JA groups and the American River Conservancy are working together to purchase land where the Wakamatsu Colony - the first Japanese colony to settle in North America - was established.

By Caroline Aoyagi-Stom, Executive Editor

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In four weeks time during the first Saturday of May, Tom Fujimoto, 81, will get into his car and drive about 40 miles east of his home in Sacramento, taking an annual trip that he hasn't missed since 1970. It's a trip he feels an obligation to make.

He is going to clean Okei-san's gravesite.

For the past 36 years Tom and a dedicated group of Japanese Americans have traveled to Gold Hill Ranch near Coloma, Calif. to take care of and clean the gravesite of Okei Ito, better known as Okei-san, a pioneering Japanese colonist who immigrated to the United States in 1869 and passed away in 1871 at the young age of 19.



Although Okei-san's story had long been lost until after World War I, details have slowly emerged about her life. We now know she was a part of a group of 22 colonists who made the long journey from their home in Aizu Wakamatsu, Japan in the late 1860s to become the first Japanese colonists to settle in North America and California.

"I was kind of curious to learn that a Japanese girl was buried at Gold Hill. It is very historical," said Tom, noting that his friend Henry Takeda first told him about Okei-san in the 1950s. "They were the first Japanese agricultural community to start up there."

He has dedicated himself to taking care of Okei-san's grave for a simple reason.

"Nobody else does it. It needed cleaning up so we volunteered. I haven't missed a clean-up since," said Tom. "I enjoy the comradeship; the same group goes up every year."

Now a group of JAs - including the Sacramento, Placer, and Florin JACL chapters - are working with the American River Conservancy (ARC) to preserve the site of Okei-san's gravesite and restore the surrounding area that was once the pioneering Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony.

The ARC recently signed a purchase option agreement for the market price value of \$4.6 million for the 303-acre Gold Hill Ranch that is currently owned by the pioneering Veerkamp family, the same family who befriended the Wakamatsu colonists in the late 1800s.

"Here is an opportunity to interpret multiple phases of our culture and history and how they all interacted with each other," said Alan Ehrigott, ARC executive director.

"To me, this is a fascinating story."

The First Japanese Colony

In the late 1860s residents of Aizu Wakamatsu, Japan were forced to leave their homeland due to an ongoing civil war between the ruling emperor and the various samurai lords. They were led by John Henry Schnell, a Dutchman married to a Japanese woman, who purchased 160 acres of California land to establish an agricultural settlement.

Schnell, along with the 21 other Japanese colonists, established a tea and silk farm colony at Gold Hill. At first they experienced much success but several factors would lead to the colony's ultimate demise a few years later. Soon after their arrival, vandalism from some local miners, a drought that soon followed, and little monetary support from Japan led to the colony's collapse.

Although very little is known about what eventually happened to the Japanese colonists, Okei-san's gravesite with the marker - "In Memory of Okei, Died 1871, Age 19 Years, a Japanese Girl" - still sits on top of Gold Hill. It is rumored that Okei-san would often go to this area to watch the setting sun and look towards her homeland.



This large keaki tree, Okei-san's gravesite and the Ranch House are all that remain of the colony.

Local documents indicate that fellow colonist Matsunosuke Sakurai died in 1901 and is buried in the Vineyard Cemetery at Coloma, a few miles from Gold Hill, although a headstone does not exist today.

"Growing up I had heard of the Wakamatsu colony and especially Okei-san," said Yonsei Fred Kochi, 60, who is working with the ARC to help raise funds to purchase the site of the former colony.

Raised in Sacramento and currently residing in Sunnyvale, Calif., Fred's parents and grandparents would share stories of the pioneering colonists, stories likely passed down from his great grandmother who immigrated to the area just 10 years after Okei-san. Last February while visiting his own grandmother's gravesite, he decided to visit Okei-san's grave.

"I had always wanted to find my way to Okei-san's gravesite," he said. "There is so much history behind here. Preserving this area is one of the things that must be done."

Gold Hill Today

Okei-san's gravesite, a large keaki tree, and the Ranch House where the colonists used to reside are all that remain of the Wakamatsu colony today; they are located on private property beside the Gold Trail School. The 303-acre Gold Hill Ranch is now largely open pastureland and no one lives on the land any longer.

Over the years, local JA and Japanese groups have worked to preserve the former colony. In 1969, on the centennial of the Japanese colonists first arrival in the United States, a commemorative marker was dedicated at the site. Today this area has been established as California Historical Landmark No. 815.

The ARC and local JA groups hope to purchase the land and build a tourist friendly landmark including a restored tea and silk farm which would be open to the public. The site will feature the historic introduction of silk making, tea production, papermaking, and bamboo crafts imported by the Japanese colonists to California.

Phil Veerkamp, 63, of Diamond Springs, a descendant of Francis and Louisa Veerkamp who first befriended the Japanese colonists - along with his siblings Gary and Evelyn - are glad to see the property will be preserved and the story of Okei-san and the Wakamatsu colony will continue to be told.

"My mother's gone, we have this huge asset, and we thought, how do we handle this responsibly?" said Phil who had lived and worked on the site of the former Japanese colony from 1970 until 1991. "None of us wanted the property developed and turned into hobby farms. The prospect of selling to a developer was not appealing.

"We were aware of the historical context of the land," he said. "It's an underappreciated story."

A Lasting Legacy

Those involved with the Gold Hill - Wakamatsu Project fundraising efforts hope that once monies are raised to purchase the land, more people will begin to learn about these pioneering Japanese colonists and their contributions to American history.

"We want to make it a real historic site. It really is a pilgrimage," said Fred, who has developed a close friendship with Phil and the Veerkamp family. "Many Nisei and Sansei are not familiar with this but we would not be here if it weren't for them. They are the pioneers."

"We are happy, absolutely. It's private property and access is very limited. If the ARC buys it the gates will be opened and everyone will have access to it," said Tom.

Tom, who will soon turn 82, hopes younger JAs will take an interest in the area's history. Today, the youngest persons to attend their annual cleaning trips to Okei-san's grave are in their 50s and 60s.

"There is no interest, the help is not coming. But one of these days I won't be able to make it. We need the younger people to go up there," he said.