

April 23, 2007- Gold Hill Ranch-Wakamatsu Tea Colony renovation project introduced Saturday

By Michael Raffety, Editor
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GOLD HILL - After the Gold Trail middle school chorus sang "Spring has Arrived" in Japanese - "Haru ga Kita" - the deputy consul general of Japan said, "I'm moved to tears."

Hearing the simple Japanese ode to spring "transported me back to Japan 50 years ago when I was in elementary school," said Kazuyoshi Yamaguchi, who traveled from the Japanese Consul's Office in San Francisco Saturday to offer support for public acquisition of the old Veerkamp dairy ranch next to Gold Trail School.



PHIL VEERKAMP, right, tells about a family portrait as part of his talk for the project. Alan Ehrgott of the American River Conservancy holds the photo with Veerkamp. See story "Gold ..." *Photo by William A. Scales*

"I strongly support this project. The Japanese consul fully supports this project," Yamaguchi said.

The project is a fund-raising campaign by the American River Conservancy to acquire the 303-acre Veerkamp ranch at a cost of \$4.6 million. The major impetus for it is the history attached to the ranch. It is not just the fascinating story of how the Veerkamps came to be synonymous with Gold Hill and Thompson Hill but how the acreage now being sought became a touchstone for Japanese and Japanese Americans.

Assemblyman Alan Nakanishi, R-Stockton, whose district includes El Dorado Hills, remembers his father bringing him to Gold Hill as a boy to visit the grave of Okei, a 19-year-old girl who was the first Japanese to die in America. Saturday was the second time Nakanishi had visited the site.

The gravesite and the memorial down the hill by the school are a strong attraction for Japanese Americans and for visitors from Japan. It represents what one Japanese author called the Japanese Mayflower. In 1869 more than 20 colonists from Aizu-Wakamatsu, Japan, came to Gold Hill and established the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony. Their "Mayflower" was a side wheeler called "China," owned by the Pacific Mail Steamship Co.

They brought with them 50,000 3-year-old mulberry trees for silk farming, bamboo roots, tea seeds, wax trees and grape seedlings, according to a history compiled by Henry Taketa. At the 1870 San Francisco Horticultural Fair they displayed their tea plants, paper plants and plant oils. The following summer, however, they had problems with miners damaging their soil and crops and then diverting creek water during a dry year. Short of water and money, the colony was abandoned.

What motivated the residents of Wakamatsu in the Aizu domain to make the long ocean voyage and come to the American frontier was they “were on the losing side of the Meiji Restoration; and like many people who end up on the losing side of political upheaval, they left their country as refugees in search of a new life,” wrote Dr. John Van Sant, a 1977 graduate of El Dorado High School resident and now a history professor at the University of Alabama-Birmingham. Van Sant earlier in his academic pursuits visited Wakamatsu, Japan, and wrote a long article for the Mountain Democrat about the colony on Gold Hill and the town in Japan. He has since gone on to specialize in Japanese history since 1600 and the history of Japanese and American relations. Wakamatsu and El Dorado County have been his academic touchstone.

Since the end of World War II Japanese-American relations have been strong. As Deputy Consul Yamaguchi told the audience of more than 30 Saturday, when Mike Mansfield was the American ambassador to Japan he called that the most important bilateral relationship “bar none.” Yamaguchi, who was in college at the time and didn't have that good a grasp of English, joked “I thought it (bar none) was a drinking place.”

The Veerkamp ranch is owned by two brothers and a sister - Gary, Phil and Evelyn. Phil worked for his father for 18 years before his father suddenly sold the dairy herd and quit.

“I worked the land with my father. It is difficult to let go,” he told the audience.

Phil noted that the ranch represents “the intersection of two cultures. According to oral tradition the Wagoner, Tobener, Graner and Veerkamp families left St. Louis April 11, 1852, at 2 p.m.” What tied the families together was Veerkamp and Graner were married to Tobener girls and Wagoner was a descendant of a Tobener. The Veerkamps established a store on Thompson Hill Road and launched agricultural enterprises.

In 1869 John Schnell purchased the land from Charles Graner that became the Wakamatsu Colony. After the colony failed and its residents dispersed Phil Veerkamp's grandfather moved to the Graner house in 1873 and got the land patent in 1874.

Two colonists stayed on. Okei stayed with the Veerkamps and was treated as a daughter, according to family tradition, Phil said. The other person who stayed on was Sakurai Matsunosoke, who helped run the orchard.

“Matsunosoke managed the place in Uncle Frank's and Uncle Henry's later years,” Phil said.

The conservancy has 10 months to raise the \$4.6 million to acquire the site of the Wakamatsu Colony and what was until 1988 the last working dairy in El Dorado County. The conservancy also hopes to raise enough to fund the operation and maintenance before it is incorporated into the state parks system.

Conservancy plans include restoring historical structures on the property such as the Graner house and then establishing tea plants and a mulberry orchard.

“Our hope is to eventually see the Wakamatsu Colony resurrected and rebuilt as a tribute to Japanese agriculture and the extraordinary contributions the Japanese made to California as a unified society and to California's preeminence as an agricultural leader,” conservancy Director Alan Ehrgott said in a press release.

For more information go to www.arconservancy.org or e-mail Ehrgott at wakamatsu@arconservancy.org.