

Tea and history

An effort begins to preserve the land that housed America's first Japanese settlement

By M.S. Enkoji - Bee Staff Writer

Published 12:00 am PDT Saturday, April 21, 2007
Story appeared in METRO section, Page B3

[Print](#) | [E-Mail](#) | [Comments \(10\)](#)



Phil Veerkamp stands in an upper-floor room of the home on Gold Hill Ranch in El Dorado County that housed the Japanese immigrants of the Wakamatsu Silk and Tea Colony. Veerkamp, who owns the land with his two siblings, is willing to sell the property to the state so it can be turned into a historical site. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.

[See additional images](#)

Not even 20 when she died, Okei Ito embodies a spirit as intimate as her fellow Japanese pioneers settling in the green folds of El Dorado County, yet as expansive and enduring as the American Dream.

In 1869, Ito's father decided the 17-year-old should leave behind Japan's civil turmoil and a family who could offer no future. He sent her to America.

She sailed through the Golden Gate, then traveled onward into the foothills to join the new Wakamatsu Silk and Tea Colony.

Ito, a nursemaid to the colony's founder, and later, a worker on a neighboring farm, died from fever in 1871, the first Japanese woman to die in America. She is buried on a hilltop overlooking a vale where fruit trees once bloomed. She would hike the hill in the evenings, and there, standing on the crest, she would sing a lullaby as she gazed toward the setting sun -- toward home.

"She died of a broken heart. I'm sure it was a broken heart, not just fever," said Sally Takeda, the widow of Harry Takeda, a Sacramento lawyer who compiled years of research on the unusual settlement.

Ito's tale of pioneering perseverance along with her profound youthful longing for her homeland is the crowning story of the first Japanese settlement in the continental United States.

Today, she will be remembered with the launch of an effort to preserve the land where she and her fellow pioneers cultivated mulberry trees and tea along with hopes and dreams.

The American River Conservancy and supporters, including U.S. Rep. Doris Matsui, the granddaughter of Japanese immigrants, will gather today next to the lone, pale marble headstone of the woman more commonly known as just Okei. The land conservancy wants to raise \$4.6 million to buy the 303-acre Gold Hill Ranch, which includes the original colony.

It will be turned over to the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

"This is the first step," said Alan Ehrgott, the conservancy's executive director.

Walking the colony homesite on Friday, he explained how the wooden farmhouse, falling into decay, and the pastureland, long cleared of its fruit trees, would be restored at some point and open to the public.

Besides the birth of Japanese American agriculture, the colony's history represents other cultures, such as American Indians, the Gold Rush and other early farmers, he said.

Phil Veerkamp, 63, along with his two siblings, own Gold Hill Ranch and are willing to sell it now. Their family history on the land reaches back further than the tea colony and intertwines still today.

"I made a promise to Sally and Harry (Takeda) that when, and if, the day came and I had any stand or influence on how the property went, I would give recognition to this underappreciated gravesite," he said, standing in the lush, but overgrown grass of the farmhouse's yard.

He pointed out the pasture across the road where the 20 or so pioneers planted 50,000 mulberry trees for silkworm farming. They also planted 140,000 tea plants.

The industry of the pioneers from the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu hardly paid off.

"In two years, they barely got the thing going," said Wayne Maeda, a professor of Asian American studies at California State University, Sacramento.

The tea rivaled what was imported from Japan and was exhibited at the State Fair in Sacramento and an exhibition in San Francisco.

But before any silk was spun, nearby miners pushed onto the property, soaking up the water supply. A drought finished off the colony. The settlers dispersed, except for Ito, who went to work for the Veerkamps next door, along with a middle-aged samurai named Matsunosuke Sakurai.

Sakurai eventually managed the family's farm and rejected the Veerkamps' offer to return him to Japan, Phil Veerkamp said.

He died in 1901 and is buried in the Gold Country. He was the one who made sure Ito was buried where she wanted and had a headstone placed.

Efforts to trace any descendants of the colony have produced only one family.

Masumizu Kuninosuke, described as a carpenter by some accounts, married Carrie Wilson, a woman who was Cherokee and African American, according to historians.

Some of their descendants live in Sacramento.

Outside her Oak Park home, Clara Burgins talked of the spare, but proud family history of her great-great grandfather, "Kuni," as she calls him.

A retired state worker, Burgins, 73, has researched the colony and is eager to see it restored.

"It is my hope that the Japanese community will come together to help in any way they can to preserve the memory of those brave men and one young woman," she said.

She hopes to venture up into the hills when it's a more public place.

Visitors from Japan often trek to this site where they've heard of Ito's longing -- a replica of her headstone is in Aizu-Wakamatsu today.

In the Gold Country, a stand of oaks shadows Ito's grave today and the squeals of schoolchildren rise from a playground below. Yet, looking westward, even now, to the blue horizon, any visitor can see for miles.

About the writer:

- The Bee's M.S. Enkoji can be reached at (916) 321-1106 or menkoji@sacbee.com.



The rough remains of a chair sit on the porch of the Gold Hill Ranch home. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



Preservationists want to restore the Gold Hill Ranch house where the Japanese colonists lived. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



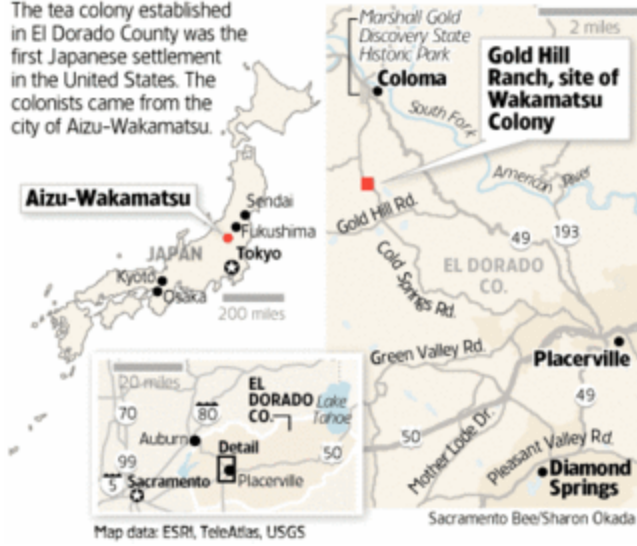
Okei Ito is buried under the Gold Hill Ranch headstone. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.



Clara Burgins is a descendant of the colony's pioneers. Sacramento Bee/Paul Kitagaki Jr.

Wakamatsu tea and silk colony

The tea colony established in El Dorado County was the first Japanese settlement in the United States. The colonists came from the city of Aizu-Wakamatsu.



[View larger version of graphic](#)

The Sacramento Bee