

Hard-working Japanese find Vaca a magnet

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, May 14, 1995

Information for this story comes from the Vacaville Museum and Vacaville Heritage Council

First of two parts

In 1885 the Japanese government officially allowed emigration. In 1887 the first Japanese arrived in Vacaville, willing to work for very low wages. By 1896 there were 30 Japanese in Vacaville. Arichika Ikeda was born in 1864 in Niigata, Japan and was educated in medicine and agriculture. When he came to Vacaville, he worked as a farm hand and cook and was then responsible for organizing the Japanese farm workers in the 1890s. He also organized a church group among the Japanese Christians and in 1897 a Japanese Methodist Church was built in Vacaville and the minister and his wife taught school in the church as well.

By 1900 Solano County had the 4th largest Japanese population of all California counties with 570 living in the Vacaville area. Over time a substantial business area developed, with the heart of "Japtown" on Dobbins between Kendall and Monte Vista consisting of buildings that had once been Vacaville's Chinatown. A.B.C. Co. was the general merchandise store. Miya's Garage and Repair Shop was established. There was a fish market, a service station, a barber shop with a lady barber and Mishi's Beauty Shoppe. There was also a Japanese doctor and Japanese dentist in town. Midwives handled births.

In 1905, Arichika Ikeda formed a local branch of the Japanese Association to "promote social and friendly relations and especially to uphold the dignity of the Japanese people."

In 1909 Vacaville's Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church, a two-story building, was erected, as the original church had burned down. The new structure cost \$2,850.00 and was fully paid for by the community. The auditorium was on the upper floor and the pastor's residence and meeting rooms on the first floor. The pastor was Rev. H. Tanaka. His wife was referred to as an "enlightened" woman, who spoke English fluently and sang well.

In 1912 a Buddhist Temple was built adjacent to the Methodist Church. Most of the Japanese Buddhist women belonged to the Japanese Buddhist Club and they ran Sunday school and cooked for banquets.

The Japanese population in 1902 owned or rented more than a third of the orchard land in the Vaca Valley. Tsuyako Nakamura Ichimoto was born on her family's farm on Pleasant Valley Road. Her mother and father worked the farm together. Her mother had been a picture bride, arriving from Japan in 1910. Japan was a poor nation then and she thought it would be easier in America. She found life just as hard here working in the field, cooking and doing "housewife stuff." It was noted that the family had very little furniture.

The success of the Japanese caused some resentment here and in other California communities where the Japanese had settled. Following is an example of how this resentment was fueled and how history becomes distorted. This article appeared in the Fresno Tribune in 1907. "Vacaville is within a short ride of San Francisco, yet you could easier imagine yourself in a suburb of Tokio. Opponents of Japanese exclusion find Vacaville extremely interesting, as it has reached a more advanced state of Japanization than any other town in the U.S. Ninety percent of the people met walking or driving about Vacaville are Japanese.

Fifteen years ago the Japanese began quietly gathering in this beautiful valley, made up of California's most fertile fruit farms. Today the Japanese control everything. They are as much a power in the valley as they are in the land of the mikado.

Vacaville has 1200 inhabitants, the majority of whom are Japanese. Extensive laundries, large general merchandise stores and employment agencies elbow each other at every turn in Japtown. There are six billiard saloons, ice-cream parlors and the ubiquitous Japanese bank.

Japtown - it is in the center of Vacaville - is built in true oriental style. The rooms are tiny and dingy. One building contains twenty-six rooms and houses twenty-six families. All the members, except the very small children, work in the fruit fields and live, eat and sleep in the same room.

The post office does a money-order business approximating \$80,000 a year, 75 percent of which goes to Japan. A local bank paid \$10,000 to Japanese laborers in two weeks. Most of it went to Japan to enable uncles and brothers and cousins to make the trip to America.

'What wages are paid the Japanese fruit-picker?' was asked of one of the few American ranchers near Vacaville.

'We now have to pay them from \$1.50 to \$1.75 per day' was the answer. 'Five or six years ago they were willing to work for \$12 a month and find their own food.

'The Japs run the valley now, however. One rancher was employing 500 Japanese fruit-pickers. One morning they refused to go to work unless the few remaining white pickers were discharged.

'The rancher had to let the white help go. The fruit was ripe, and if it hadn't been picked at once would have rotted on trees.' "

In 1907 a "Gentlemen's Agreement" between Japan and U.S. effectively excluded Japan laborers from immigrating to the U.S. By 1913 the legislature passed an Alien Land measure which prevented Japanese from purchasing agriculture land or getting long-term leases. In 1924 the Immigration Act prohibited further immigration. In spite of this, community relations in Solano County seem to have been cordial.

Masako Minamide Ichimoto never noticed any prejudice as a child. Maybe their houses were not so good, but they didn't feel deprived. Everyone was busy. Many didn't know their area was called "Japtown." Life during this time was described to Carol Mita by her father through a family oral history. His father had studied law, but could not practice in the U.S., so in 1916 he established a fruit farm in Vacaville. He and his wife grew plums, grapes, figs and walnuts. Horses and mules pulled the plows and cultivators. They made their own wooden crates and hauled their fruit with horse and wagon to be shipped back east.

There was no electricity or indoor plumbing. Dead trees were cut for firewood to fuel the kitchen range, the only source of heat. A teakettle provided the family's hot water. They had a separate "bath house." The tub was wooden, with a metal bottom. A fire underneath heated the water. They washed outside the tub and got in to rinse and warm up. The water was changed about once a week.

The neighbors were a mixture of Mexican, Portuguese, English, Spanish, Scandinavian and Chinese. Carol's father learned to speak Spanish and Portuguese fluently from playing with the neighboring children. At home he spoke Japanese.

(Next week: A look at community life - education, recreation and social activities. The effect of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, relocation centers and the returning detainees.)

Downloaded from the Solano History Database

<http://www.solanohistory.org/508>

<http://articles.solanohistory.net/508/>