Ex-Vacan recalls town’s Japanese past

By Kristin Delaplane

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During the heyday of the fruit orchards in Solano County, the ethnic mix of orchardists and workers was astounding. The early arrivals were the original settlers, the Spanish and then the trailblazers from back East. Then came the Chinese.

Closer to the turn of the century, there was an influx of Japanese. In the 1930s, the Filipinos arrived, as did the people from the Dust Bowl. In the 1940s the Bracero program was instituted and the Mexican Nationals arrived. Following is a story of a Japanese family that arrived slightly before the 1920s, as related by Joseph Saito.

‘My father’s name was Chozo Saito. A descendant of a samurai clan, he came from a pretty good family. However, as the middle son, he had nothing to gain from the family fortune, so he came to America.

“He got involved in farming and did quite well. Around 1920 he went back home to Fukushima, Japan, and married. It was an arranged marriage. My mother’s maiden name was Haru Watanabe. He and my mother returned to Vacaville in 1921.

“At that time, aliens couldn’t own property. My father and his partner, Mr. Hayashi, leased the Dickson Ranch, 200 acres in the Lagoon Valley, from Mr. Robbins, a banker in Suisun. My father was the front man, because he spoke a little English. The lease terms were the owner got 40 percent of the income and the renter got the rest. There was no written contract; it was a handshake and good will.

“Our family lived on the ranch. The building we lived in was a mansion with heavy oak doors. Apparently it was a show place built in the early turn of the century. It was two stories and it had a ballroom on the second floor. The ballroom had hardwood floors. There was a stained-glass window on the second floor that was inscribed ‘1892’ so I think that was when the place was built.

“We didn’t use the upstairs. We lived on the first floor. But the first floor had four bedrooms, so we each had our own room. One of the bedrooms had a fireplace. There was a kitchen and something called a sitting room. We had a separate building where some of the workmen lived and Mr. Nakamoto, this old-timer, he had a bedroom in a wing of the house we lived in. The hard part for my mother was any permanent workers; she cooked three meals a day for them and they ate with us.
“The partner, Mr. Hayashi, lived on another ranch nearby. His two sons worked on that ranch and the Dickson Ranch, which my father farmed. The main crop was dried prunes. We had two workhorses and two mules to haul the orchard wagons around.

“We had enough to keep us busy. My dad and some of the workmen were avid fisherman, so my father would take us to Suisun to go fishing. One of my favorite pastimes was to drag a barn door about two miles and go rafting on the lagoon. I also had a neighbor with a horse and he used to let me ride. Maybe once a month, we would walk to town for movies.

“After my regular school hours, I took private Japanese lessons for one hour a day. A widow, Mrs. Obata, taught three of us. I studied vocational agriculture in high school and I had a pig project. I had three sows and at one time I had as many as 20 pigs. For that I received an award called ‘Star Farmer.’

“For sports I played basketball and track and I was learning Kendo, which is Japanese fencing. My dad was an officer in that association.

“We had a little Japanese town in Vacaville. It was a tight little community, maybe 100 families. Most were in farming.

Within this community, I would say 90 percent were Buddhist and they had their own church. I was brought up as a Methodist. Sunday service was an all-day affair. We would have service in the morning for the young people, then the Japanese service in the afternoon.

“It was customary for the young kids to work on the ranches, but my father was quite lenient. I didn’t do much labor out in the orchards until I was about 16. Then he told me that, ‘It is about time you learned how to work.’

“That summer he shipped me out to Mr. Yoshima, who farmed a place 10 miles away. Most of his workers were Japanese. My father said to me, ‘Please, don’t make me lose face by having my son slack off.’ I spent that summer carrying a ladder to pick the fruit and taking fruit into town to be shipped out. The next summer I was put in charge of the cutting shed, where they cut peaches and apricots in half to be dried.

“In 1940, my father bought property in Japanese town; about five shacks. These little units were places the Japanese farm workers would rent during the winter. It was a nice little rental property for the family to have - if it wasn’t for the war. That year I started going to UC Davis. I used to hitchhike home Friday night and help on the farm, sample my mother’s cooking, and bring home my dirty laundry.
“I was at Davis when the war broke out. Five of us Japanese-Americans were renting a house. We heard the news over the radio. I called home and they said, ‘Dad has been pulled in by the FBI. We don’t know where he is.’

It turned out, there was an informant in our community who had been feeding information to the FBI several years. As I said, my father was an officer in that Kendo association. Kendo was connected to the Dragon Society, a very military organization. When the war came, they picked up the prominent leaders in the community and they were taken to North Dakota to a camp for enemy agents. It got to be a joke: If you weren’t picked up, you were nothing in the community. We didn’t see our dad for three years.

“We were first sent to an assembly center in Turlock, the fairgrounds. They asked for volunteers to go to Gila River in Arizona to open up a camp. I volunteered. Finally, three years later, Dad joined us there.

“When I got to the camp, it was known that I had been going to Davis and was majoring in horticulture. Because of that, I was hired for the farming department and paid $19 a month. Here was a young squirt like me, still of college age, and I had these big-time Japanese operators working under me in the farm section. “While I was in camp, there were all kind of job offers. One was from an apple farmer in Ohio. He wanted someone to live in their home and work the orchard, 10 acres of apples. I stuck it out for one winter, then I moved to Columbus, Ohio, and found a job with a veterinarian for a year.

“When my family was able to leave camp, my sister came out to Sacramento and got the folks settled. Fortunately, Mr. MacQuade took care of our banking needs and we had that savings. My mother got a job at the Del Monte cannery. My father had come down with arthritis, so he couldn’t do any work. I joined the family in Sacramento.

“I had good letters of recommendation and went to the School of Veterinarian Medicine Diagnostic Laboratory at UC Davis. I worked for the same supervisor for 35 years and, even though I didn’t have a degree, they let me publish with him. We published 10 papers together.

“I met my wife Pat in Chicago. We met at the Baptist Church. She was living at the YWCA and I was living at the YMCA. She was from Seattle and she decided to go back there. When I came to Sacramento, I went to Seattle to see her. We got married there. It’s just one of those things that worked out. It has been a good life for both of us.”

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