

Foreign labor lifeblood of agriculture

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Japanese workers filled void Vacaville's orchardists toward the end of the 19th century relied heavily on foreign labor to run their orchards, harvest and pack the fruit and ship it to the East Coast.

Chinese formed the first large ethnic group - nearly 10 percent of Vacaville Township residents - according to the census of 1870. Soon, their large numbers led to anti-Chinese sentiments, culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which forbade all immigration from China.

The effect on California agriculture was felt immediately. A new group of workers was needed and Japanese immigrants filled this void.

After centuries of being closed to Western contacts, Japan took up diplomatic relations with the U.S. Government in 1853. By the 1860s, American and European experts were invited to help modernize the country. Starting around 1868, many Japanese, interested in visiting Western universities or to acquire western skills, left their country to work in the United States. Most arrived through San Francisco.

While Mili Shimonishi-Lamb's father, Yojiro Kubota, one of the three co-founders of Vacaville's ABC Store, came to the United States years later, his experience was representative of many young men.

"Father's grandfather, Goemon, was a prominent village doctor and landlord of one of the largest estates in the county. Father was expected to follow the grandfather's profession and become a doctor, but that was not his choice. He had read and heard about a country called America, where opportunities to develop whatever career one chose were there for the asking. After much thought and consideration, he made his decision. He approached his parents, bowed solemnly, and expressed his desire to go to America to pursue a career of his choice, which shocked and disappointed his parents. He left his home and came to the United States under the businessmen's quota sometime in the early part of this century, around 1906."

Typically, these first immigrants were young men in their 20s or 30s. Those with Japanese government scholarships went on to study at Ivy League schools on the East Coast. Others became 'schoolboys,' working as cooks or houseboys while going to school. During the summer months, after school ended, they migrated to the orchards

surrounding the Bay Area.

One of the earliest pieces of information on Japanese help in the Vacaville area comes from an article in the Winters Express of May 12, 1888: "Since the estoppel of Chinese immigration, small though the decrease in number has been, this class of labor has been getting scarcer and higher priced each season, until now the question, How shall we gather our fruit, stares our producers directly in the face. A number of growers - notably the Brinck Bro. and G. W. Thissell - have employed Japanese help, and are satisfied with the experiment as far as they have gone."

By 1890, the U.S. Census listed around 30 people of Japanese ancestry in Solano County. Only 10 years later, their number rose to 850. Once families began to arrive, the numbers grew quickly, until the Japanese population made up 11 percent of Vacaville's inhabitants in 1940. A small section on Dobbins Street developed into "Japantown" with grocery stores, confectionery stores, boarding houses, a sumo ring, the Buddhist Church, the Methodist Church and other institutions.

Learning English became the first challenge for all newcomers. The effort to pronounce technical terms used in the orchards led to the development of a language of its own. Pruning turned into "pu-ru-nin-gu," thinning, "shinin-gu" and hoeing, "hon-nin-gu." These pronunciations became so common that many second-generation, the Nisei, believed them to be Japanese words.

Trying to make oneself understood often led to situations fondly recalled in family lore.

Louie Nishimoto remembered a story about his mother. "I don't know whether it was her or her friend, but one of them went to the neighbors to buy eggs, but she didn't know how to say 'eggs.' She thought ... and then squatted down and acted like a hen. She got the eggs."

Another story tells of a farmhand who tried to inform his employer that the horse had demolished the pig pen. "The farmhand ran helplessly to the boss, pantomiming like a horse: 'Ho-su kicked the fence,' he cried, 'and bacon boy run.' "

While many picked up the language during their daily work, others tried to learn it in a school setting. Tatuo "Terry" Nakatani's father was among those. He was 17 when he arrived in California in 1918. To learn English, he enrolled in public school. "Here he was, 5-foot-6 and fully grown, and sitting in a class with 6- and 7-year-old Caucasian kids. He just dropped out," remembered Nakatani.

Mili Shimonishi-Lamb recalled another often-told story: "Postage at the time was one cent for domestic mail, and two cents for foreign mail. As he was ready to place the

stamps on the letters, the man at the window noticed the letters were to be sent to Japan. He said, "I'll exchange the one-cent stamp for the two-cent stamp for you."

"The Japanese man understood and immediately recognized the situation as an opportunity to add a few new words to his growing vocabulary.

"At a later date, the same man went to San Francisco with a newcomer from Japan. At the ticket window of the train station he said, 'One-cent stamp, two-cent stamp, change car Vacaville.'

"After repeating it a few times, the man at the ticket window gave him two tickets. The newcomer said to his friend, 'You amaze me. How well you have mastered the English language in such a short time.'

" 'One-cent stamp, two-cent stamp, change car Vacaville' was pitifully hilarious to the elders. It was repeated again and again for many years."

For many immigrants, the English language remained an insurmountable obstacle, hindering them from full integration into their surroundings. Their children, the American-born Nisei, would form the bridge between Japanese and American lifestyles.

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