

TO HENRY

THE PURPOSE OF THIS PAGE IS TO HONOR
ALL
WHO CAME BEFORE US.



link to . . .

New photographs of the
colonists were
discovered in March,
2007

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Wakamatsu ¹⁸⁶⁹ ¹⁹⁶⁹

This is how we came to America, three parties of us fleeing the war which spread chaos through Dai Nippon in the Year of the Dragon (1868).

Those of us who came in the third party brought the seeds of *keaki*. The wood of this tall tree which the western world calls Zelkova was esteemed by our carpenters, although some said it made poor planks, warping and cracking. Perhaps it was because *keaki* was

not one of the *goboku* which we were forbidden to cut in our homeland; thus, our people were familiar with it. There was the fact, as well, that the *keaki's* shy blossoms, barely visible among the leaves, carried- the symbol of what our lives had become.

It was the hope of those who planned our exodus to transplant a bit of our homeland into this strange new world. None of us felt we could ever return to the places of our birth.

Those were evil times. Unrest gripped our native land. It had been only several years since the American black ships had returned to force their commercial treaty upon the Shogun. The treaty, so it was said, was signed on a warship of the foreigners in Edo Bay. Many saw this as reason to overthrow the Lords of Edo who had ruled us since 1600, by western counting. A strong force banded around Emperor Meiji to restore the autocracy

In Aizu Wakamatsu, our Daimyo, the Lord Katamori Matsudaira, supported the Tokugawa against the followers of Meiji.

One day, a great force of Meiji warriors stormed around Lake Inawashiro and overwhelmed Tsurugajo Castle. They burned everything - the shops of the *sakaya*, the *fudeya* and *sumiya*, the *nunoya*, the *chashitsu* ... they burned the boats of the cormorant fishermen, the poorest huts and the fine houses of the *hatamoto*, and even the castle of our Lord Matsudaira.

All was a great blaze of tall flames and smoke which blew toward the west full of brightness like the moon on a cloudy night. Our whole valley became a giant *kamado* with ashes dancing on the air like flakes of our lost gohei. Not one stone was left upon another, not one roof beam remained in our town.

Some of our Samurai made a stand about ten *cho* (1200 yards) from the eastern gate of Aizu and permitted others to escape into the hills where many of us had fled earlier.

In that one day then, we of Aizu Wakamatsu became pariahs in our homeland.

Some said this was the Fates retaliating for the Battle of Sekigahara in which Tokugawa Ieyasu seized power.

Whatever it was, this battle and the others like it marked the end of that period lasting almost four hundred years in which our island kingdom had maintained its isolation from the rest of the civilized world. Our island sanctuary had been breached. We were to emerge from the time of handcraft and agriculture into the era of industrial revolution and world commerce.

For those of us who were refugees from Aizu, though, none of these facts were apparent. We were lost in the wave which swept everything before it... 'like the fisherman at Ise whose boat has gone adrift.'

That night after the battle, many pitiful cooking fires joined the flickering watch fires in the mountains. Rumors sped among us. It was said our Daimyo had died in his castle, whether in battle or in honorable *seppuku* no one could say. Others maintained that he had been wounded and was in hiding.

Those in the household of Schnell san wept bitterly. There was a story among us that Lord Matsudaira had dreamed of a cuckoo crying in the night - a certain death omen. And some said this fate had fallen upon us because we had not expelled the barbarians. Black looks were cast at Schnell san. But *he* had been prepared for this moment.

Some days before the battle, a messenger had brought a note in a split pine bough (thus it was from the Lord Matsudaira). It was on gray *kanyagami* (official paper) and folded formally - so we knew it was important. My mistress ordered us that day to begin packing. The way we packed was significant. It was the packing of *naibun*, for those who flee in darkness. There were many tearful decisions - whether to take the lacquer *karabitsu*, how many robes for the children, how to pack the scroll from the *tokonoma*, which outer garments would be best against the cold of the mountains...



We fled eastward then, across the mountains, past crude farm huts with mud and wattle fences. We hid by day among the friendly poor, sleeping often on mats over the earth floor. We traveled by night in rough *ajiroguruma* with sides of woven reeds.

All this time, terrified, I did as I was commanded. I had never been farther from Aizu than the hill temples. I was not yet eighteen years old and I believed every terrible story the frightened whispered to the frightened. If we stayed too long in the high places, it was said, we would suffer *mononoke*, possession by unfriendly spirits. Some said *Oyamatsumi*, the god of the mountains, had turned his face away from us, that we went against his direction and would be attacked by the horrible winged *tengu* which inhabited these regions.

There were many *sakudoka*, frightened mischief-makers who spread such stories. I may have been guilty myself of some of this. Finally, in my terror, I retreated into my own thoughts - walking, riding, working. There were more things to do than there are weeds in a garden.

One day, we reached a place where the sea was visible. I did not know the place, of course, but it was said that this was Niigata in Echigo where Lord Matsudaira had relatives and friends. For a time, we remained in the hills above the sea looking down on the port. I thought it a strange port for there was no harbor, only an open roadstead broken by a river.

Here, Schnell san housed us in a great helmet-roofed farm building which belonged to friends. And here, he informed us that he was splitting the party which now numbered some twenty-six, counting the two children we had brought and the six women.

The morning of departure came. Taking his wife and the children, Schnell san left, accompanied by some farmers and carpenters, and a *Samurai* friend. The others of us were to follow later. Our route was to be the same as that of the first party - down the river in small boats and out to a black ship which would stop in the roadstead.

How I hated to be left behind. I should live only with my fears, I thought, with no one to care for, nothing to do.

As I wept, my mistress gave me a poem -

*'Noisy insect singing in the grass,
What sorrow makes you cry out so
When I bear mine in silence?'*

It was an old poem and I knew that it chided me because she had lost more than I. Most of her *Samurai* family was dead, their fine homes burned. The survivors, like ourselves, were hunted through the land. But one of her lady friends gave me another old poem to answer with and I sent it the day we parted –

*'Do you know how slow the dawn can be
When you wait alone?'*

I do not like to recall our days of waiting or the days, later, on the ship. The stomach sickness overtook me as it did many of my *doshu*. It felt strange to commit myself to one of these *smoking teapots* which had caused so many sleepless nights in my homeland. I feared the ship, yet I was hopeful. I feared the new land ahead, yet I dreamed of it.

For a long time after the gleaming hills of my homeland had vanished into the mists of the horizon, I imagined I still could see them. It was like visions of the Isle of Mimiraku where the dead are to be seen in the distance, but vanish if you approach too near.



The day came, finally, when we entered a narrow passage from the sea. Some said this passage was the *Kimmon Kaikyo*, but I saw no gate and it did not look golden -only waving with yellow grass on the hills.

The first group of our migration had crossed the sea on a big side-wheeler, the "China" of the Pacific Mail Lines. This, I learned later. They had arrived on the 27th day of the Fifth Month in 1869. From San Francisco, they went by riverboat to Sacramento, thence by wagon to Placerville and Gold Hill.

How strange the names sounded. How difficult for us to pronounce.

We, arriving shortly after the first group, followed the same course. As we went up the river, I thought how familiar the reed-lined watercourse would appear if it only had fish traps and cormorant fishermen. There were fishermen in small boats, but they used long poles which waved in the air like pothooks.

At Gold Hill, Schnell san had arranged to purchase 160 acres (about 640 *tan*). The land was to be bought from a Charles M. Graner. We thought the region looked much like our homeland. It had green trees in the hills and it was often cold at night. And, too, there were many families in the vicinity who came from the homeland of Schnell san.

Immediately upon our arrival, we set out to clear the land and plant our crops. Some times, the natives of the region were to be seen. They appeared poorer even than we. Often, the neighboring landowners came to look at us as we labored. They were booted men, women in long garments with parasols. Many of the men were bearded and looked like giants to us. The truth is, they frightened us. We did not know what strange powers they possessed. Their tongue was harsh to our ears. Yet - many of these people, we learned, could be kind. It was just the strangeness of everything.

For more than a year we worked and it appeared we would be rewarded for our sacrifices. But a combination of many things defeated us-the dry climate, scarcity of irrigation water, the lack of money, the failure of promised funds to arrive from our homeland.

One day, Schnell san left us, taking his wife and daughters. He assured us he would return with the money we needed so desperately, but he failed and did not return.

We were abandoned in a strange and often hostile land. In that nearby collection of wretched and untidy buildings which our neighbors called a town, it was said they thought us Chinese and they had been known to kill Chinese for no apparent reason.

Winter came and we thought we had been lost in the

abode of Isonokami who thrives on rain. There was snow and cold. We sold most of our belongings to buy food while awaiting Schnell san's return.

When it became apparent that he would not return, our people began to drift away. The carpenters were the first to go. They were used to wandering the countryside in search of work. Finally, only the *Samurai*, ([link](#)) Matsunoke Sakurai, and I, the lowly nursemaid remained. But I was ill, having contracted the wasting fever in this place.

On those days when I felt strong enough, I climbed to a nearby hill and looked across the land toward the west from whence I had come. Homesickness was a pain in my chest... never again to see my friends and the familiar mountains.



This place was the abode of the dead, I thought. Matsu tried to rally me. "Spring renews everything," he said. "Wait for the spring."

In this time, we both were befriended and employed by the family of Francis Veerkamp, countrymen of Schnell san and pioneers in the land here.

When I grew certain that I would die here, I asked only that they bury me on the hill where I had gazed toward my homeland. The fever was very bad then. At times, I imagined that all these things had never happened, that I was back in my familiar bed at Aizu. I could hear the children scampering about on a frosty morning, blessing themselves against the cold. I thought I heard the sunset bells and the choruses of small bells from the hill temples, the chanting of sutras.

Once, Matsu told me I would be like Takenouchi and live 350 years, but it was not to be in the way he said, for this was truly *Shide no Yama* for me.

In the spring, in the Fourth Month, they carried my body to the hill where I had requested. Over the grave, they placed a headstone inscribed in both English and Japanese: "In memory of Okei, died 1871, aged 19 years, a Japanese girl."

Nearby, the *keaki* continued to grow.



EPILOGUE

These things are known - Matsunosuke Sakurai faithfully served the Veerkamp family until his death on February 23, 1901 ([link](#)). He now lies at rest in Vineyard Cemetery at Coloma, the historical site of John Marshal's first gold discovery and a few miles from Gold Hill. Descendants of Francis Veerkamp still live in the area, engaged in farming and business.

For many years, the tragic fate of the Wakamatsu Colony drifted into oblivion, its very existence lost and forgotten until after World War I. Rumors persisted, though, that a Japanese girl who died in the Gold Rush period was buried at Gold Hill. Several Sacramento residents took up the search.

Perhaps they were guided by the spirit of Okei. The first person they interviewed was Henry Veerkamp, then 75, son of the pioneers who had befriended Okei and Sakurai. Veerkamp was a year older than the Japanese girl he had known as "Okei San." Vividly recalling the past, he retold the story of the Wakamatsu Colony. He pointed out the site of the settlement and the location of Okei's grave.

The 1870 Census gives names, family status and other data on the Wakamatsu Colonists, information supplied by Schnell, according to the census taker's marginal notes. The group is identified as "Japanese Colony," but the names of Okei, Sakurai and Kuninosuke Masumizu, three already known to researchers, do not appear on the census rolls. A possible conclusion is that they did not arrive until after the census month, June 1870.



It is interesting to note that the census records the births of the two infant daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Schnell as having taken place in California. It could be explained by the Japanese custom of dating birth from conception. As of the census taking, Frances Schnell is recorded as age 2, her sister, Mary, as age 2 months

(April birth). Either or both of the Schnell children could be recognized as first-born of Japanese ancestry in America. The colony *had* been in existence for one full year at the time of the census.

A Swiss "wine-maker," And Dielbol, is listed as one of the colonists. His presence may account for the importation of grape cuttings from Japan.

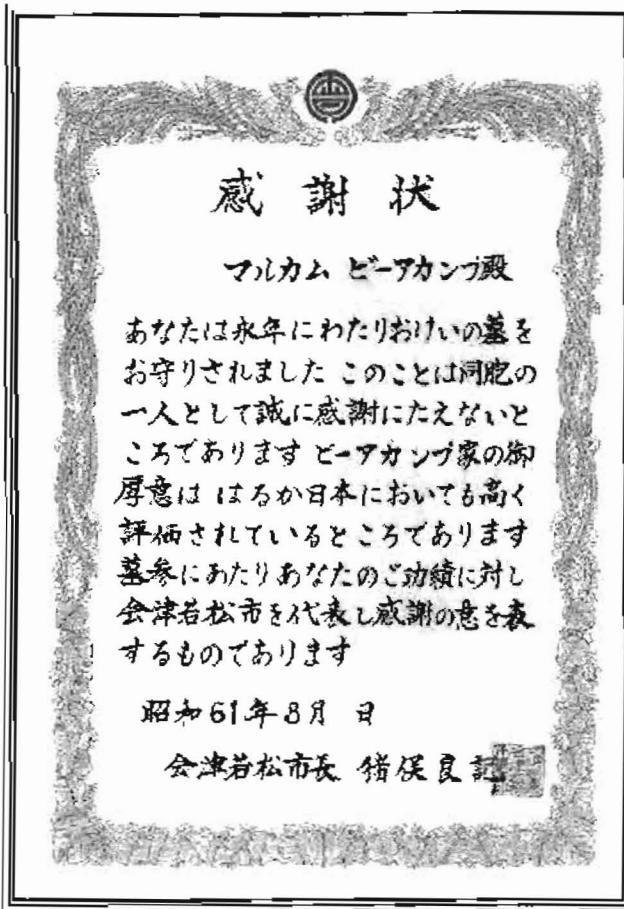
One of the colonists is recorded by his family name. "Nishijawa" (Sampei) appears immediately after the Schnell family on the rolls. His surname, his youth (18 years) and listing ahead of the other colony males may indicate high caste status, perhaps a princely family. It was not until a few years later that commoners were required to adopt patronyms for the purpose of family registry in Japan.

The 1870 Federal Census total of Japanese people in the United States, and records compiled by the Japanese American Research Project sponsored by the Japanese American Citizens League and the University of California at Los Angeles show 55 Japanese then in the U.S. (excluding Hawaii and Alaska). Of that number, 33 were in California, 22 in El Dorado County. This is checked by research showing as of June 1870, the Wakamatsu Colony of Gold Hill had 22 Japanese, including Mrs. Schnell.

Newspaper accounts of the period suggest the colonists were traveling, however, infrequently between Gold Hill and Japan. Because of this, there may have been other colonists whose home was Gold Hill on June 1, 1870.

THE TEXT AND GRAPHICS ABOVE
WERE BORROWED FROM THE
WAKAMATSU COLONY
CENTENNIAL
BOOKLET THAT WAS PUBLISHED BY THE
JAPANESE AMERICAN CITIZENS
LEAGUE
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENNIAL
CELEBRATION IN JANUARY, 1969

CLICK ON PICTURES FOR FULL VIEW.



GRATITUDE
TO MR. MALCOLM L. VEERKAMP

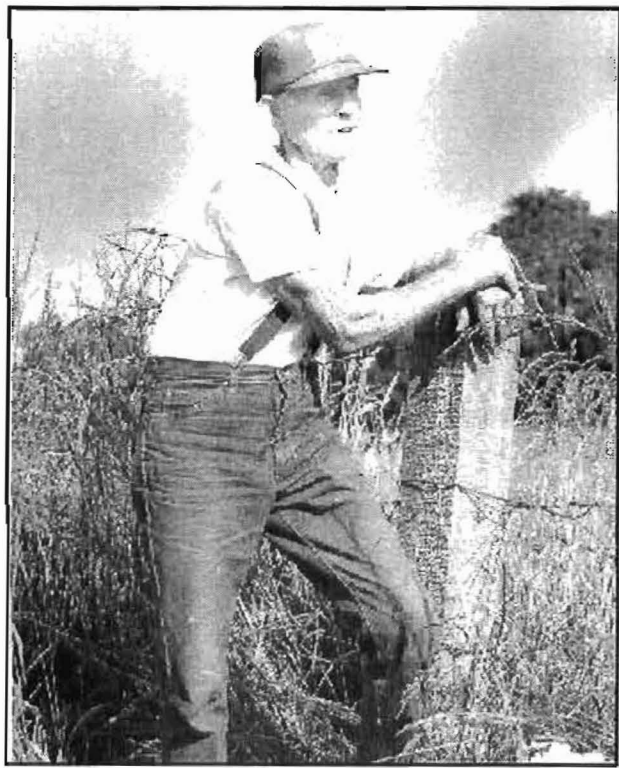
For many years you have kindly kept Okei's grave, for which I can never thank you enough as one of her fellow countrymen.

The kindness of the Veerkamps is greatly appreciated in Japan.

On the occasion of visiting Okei's grave, I would like to express my gratitude for your meritorious deed as a representative of Aizuwakamatsu City.

August , 1986

Yoshiki Inomata
Yoshiki Inomata
Mayor of
Aizuwakamatsu City

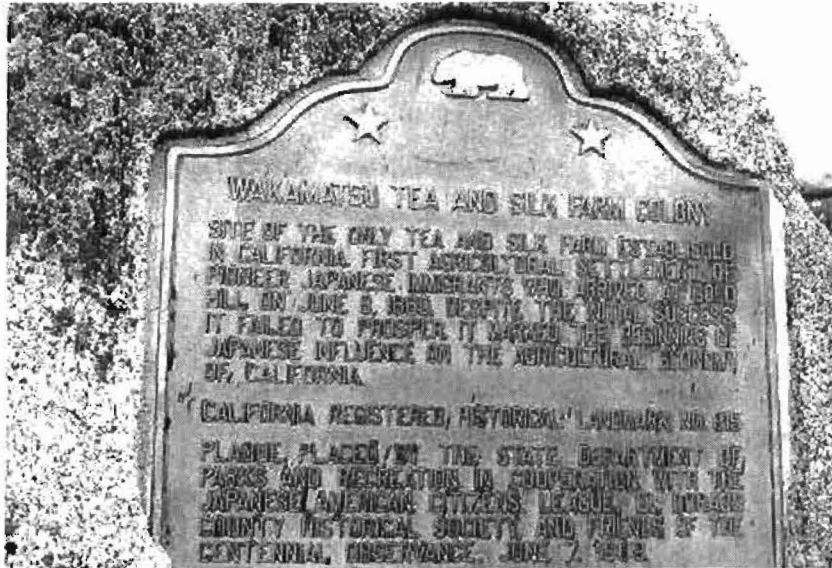


MALCOLM VEERKAMP
1912 - 1992

Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony

California State Historic Landmark 815

Plaque Photo:



02/29/96

#815 Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony

Site of the only tea and silk farm established in California. First agricultural settlement of pioneer Japanese immigrants who arrived at Gold Hill on June 8, 1869. Despite the initial success, it failed to prosper. It marked the beginning of Japanese influence on the agricultural economy of California.
