

Hidden History on a Gold Country Ranch

BY JIM MORRIS
HISTORIC PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE GOLD
HILL-WAKAMATSU PROJECT



History books are filled with epic journeys and dreams fulfilled. For the members of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony, their unheralded quest to find a better life in California's Gold Country nearly a century and a half ago carried no such storybook ending.

Today, few people are even aware of the Wakamatsu story. It takes a twisty drive that ends in an elementary school parking lot to find California Registered Historical Landmark number 815 in El Dorado County. There you'll find a handsome sign affixed to a boulder that formally recognizes the colony.

A lack of widespread knowledge notwithstanding, the Wakamatsu Colony saga provides a lesson in perseverance, and carries the distinction as the first Japanese settlement in North America. Their pursuit of the American dream may soon reach a broader audience. More than half of the \$3.3 million needed has been raised in a grassroots effort to purchase the colony site and transform it into a historic park for future generations to enjoy.

"I believe that the Wakamatsu Colony has a message of enduring importance," said University of Southern California History Professor and California State Librarian Emeritus Kevin Starr. "It continues to challenge us not only as a physical place, to be restored and cherished, but as a symbol of human hope and moral courage."

"It's just like a Plymouth Rock for the Japanese Ancestry," said Fred Kochi, a fourth-generation Japanese-American and president of the Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Board of Directors. As a young boy, Kochi would sit enraptured as his grandfather filled him with tales of the Wakamatsu Colony. Subsequent visits provided him a powerfully spiritual experience. Since then, the Sunnyvale resident has joined the effort to spread the word about the colony, including arranging a tour of the site by the Mayor of Aizu Wakamatsu, Japan.

The Wakamatsu Colony story unfolded in the mid 1800s. The colonists sought refuge from

A beautiful 10-acre pond located on the Wakamatsu site



Fred Kochi in front of the historic home that was occupied by colonists from 1869-71 (facing page) Historic house with Keaki tree to the right

a civil war waged between the ruling emperor and samurai lords in their homeland of Aizu Wakamatsu. The group was led by John Henry Schnell, a Dutch immigrant who was so highly regarded as advisor to the feudal lord of Aizu that he was made an honorary samurai.

Schnell, his Japanese wife and seven others endured an ocean voyage via a Chinese schooner to San Francisco, then went by steamship to Sacramento and capped their more than 5,000 mile trek ambling by wagon to California's Gold Country.

They relocated to a rugged, fertile area near Coloma, aptly titled Gold Hill, just one mile from the historic mill where James Marshall discovered the precious metal about 20 years

earlier. Schnell negotiated the purchase of 160 acres from Charles M. Graner to establish their farm, and the colony soon grew to 22 as more immigrants arrived from Japan.

They enjoyed initial success working with crops familiar in their homeland. Included were 140,000 tea plants, 50,000 mulberry trees and silk worm cocoons for silk farming, short grain rice that they planted on nearby hillsides, and bamboo roots to provide food, shelter and material for handicrafts. They even proudly displayed their extraordinary tea at the San Francisco Horticultural Fair and the California State Fair in 1870.

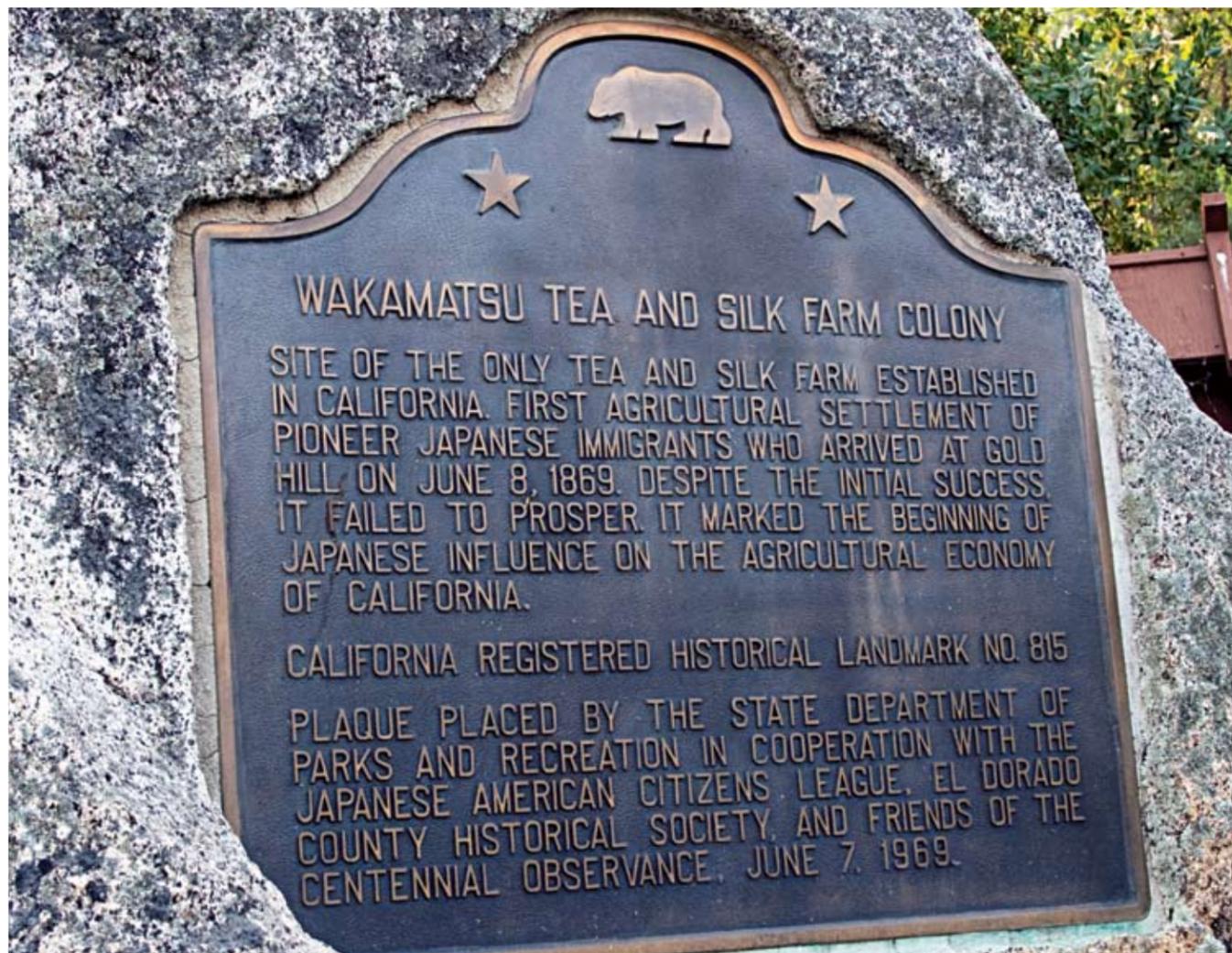
They planted a Japanese Keaki tree near the ranch house, which remains on the site today,

looking pretty spry for being a centenarian.

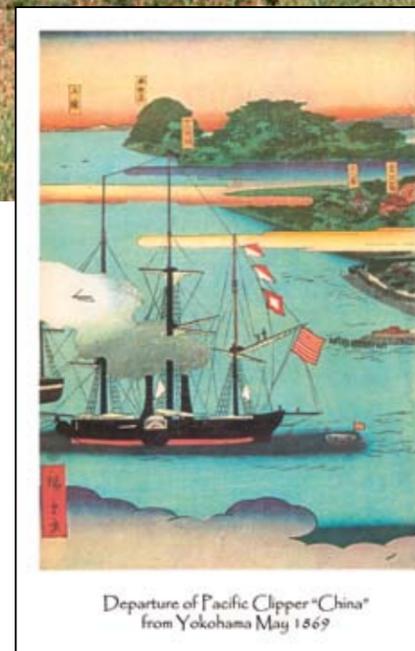
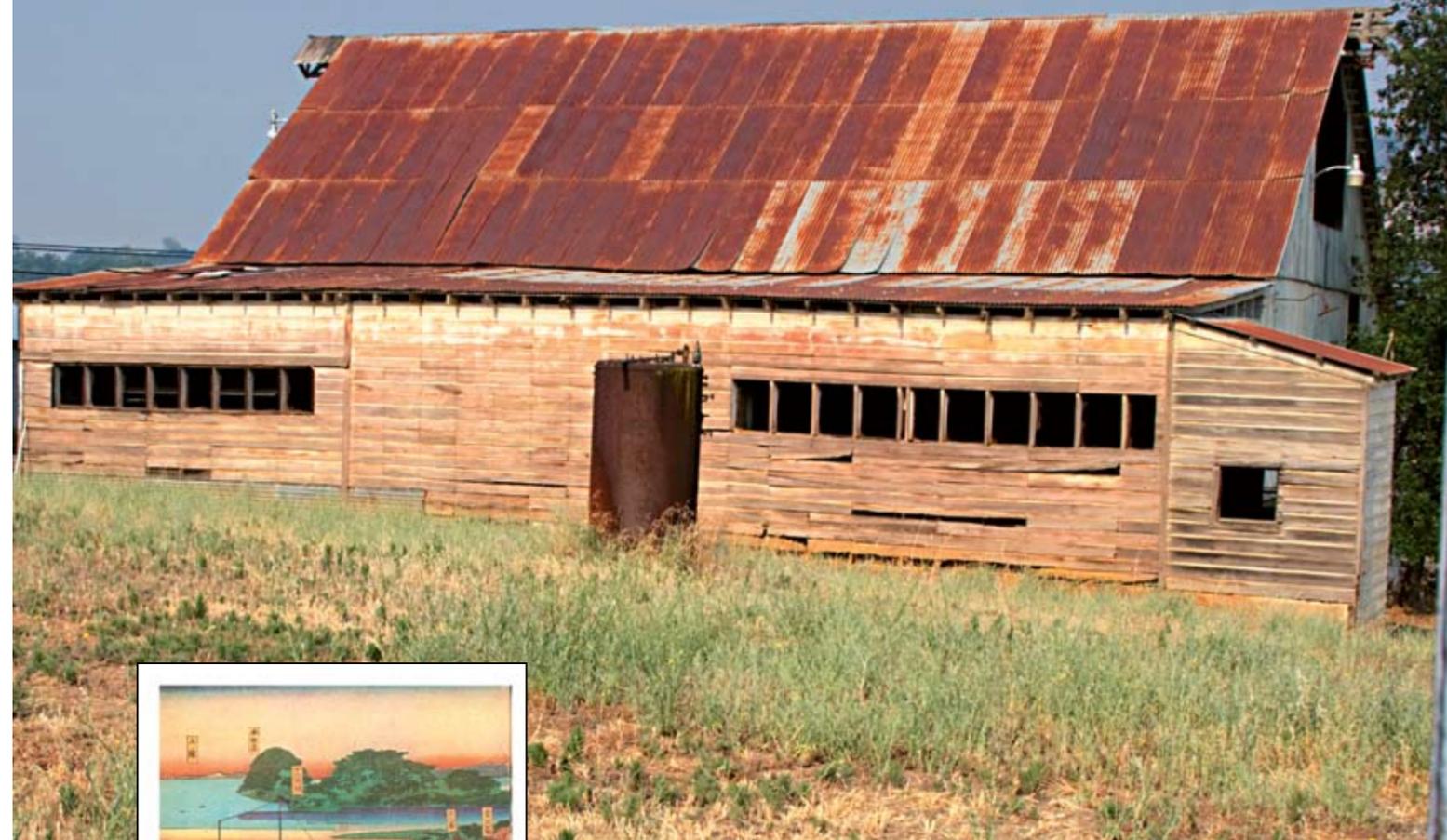
Just two years after the colony's optimistic start, things took a turn for the worse. Drought parched the land and gold miners pilfered their water supply. Their crops withered and their dreams were dashed. Many colonists scattered with little historical record of them afterwards.

One colonist whose story has endured began as a minor player in this drama. Born in Japan, Okei Ito was only 17 when her father decided she should find her destiny in America. There, she served as nanny to Schnell, and then worked on a neighboring farm when Schnell and his family returned to Japan. Okei desperately wanted to return to





State Historic Monument dedicated by then-Governor Ronald Reagan in 1969 at the Centennial Celebration of the Wakamatsu Colony (facing page) View of the Wakamatsu site from the dairy facing the barn that was occupied by the colonists (facing page inset) Representation of the type of ship that brought the Wakamatsu Colonists from Japan to San Francisco (19th century Japanese publication)



her homeland, but illness prevented her from making the trip.

Each night, homesick and lonely in a foreign land, 'Okei-san' would walk to the top of the tallest hill on the ranch and tearfully sing children's lullabies, looking toward her native Japan as the evening sun set in the West. She waited for Schnell to return and take her home, which never happened. Broken-hearted, she came down with fever that quickly claimed her life.

Okei's marble headstone and gravesite is now the lone sentinel on the very hill she made her solemn nightly walk. Her headstone simply

reads "In Memory of Okei. Died 1871. Aged 19 years. A Japanese Girl."

Stories about Okei's determination and courage have traveled far and inspired people for generations. Sacramento resident Henry Taketa penned "Okei's Lullaby" which chronicled her struggle, including the excerpt:

"In the lonely sunset, her heart searched afar, Only in her dreams could she return home, Toward her beloved Aizu, she watched the stars."

News of Okei Ito and other colonists is

spreading. El Dorado County apple grower and author, Joan Barsotti, has written the book *Okei-San: The Girl from Wakamatsu*. An excellent account of the Wakamatsu Colony is available in the book *Pacific Pioneers* by John E. Van Sant.

Also gaining ground are efforts to purchase the 272-acre ranch property from its longtime owners, the Veerkamp family, and transform it into something that tells the Wakamatsu Colony story to the public.

"We have supported this effort because it is a valuable part of our history," said California Rice Commission President & CEO, Tim

River Conservancy, which is shepherding efforts to purchase the land and make the story of the Wakamatsu Colony come alive once again. "The history of Wakamatsu is, in part, the history of us. It helps define who we are, where we have come from, and to a large part where we are going."

Ehrgott said the ultimate goal includes restoring the house occupied by the colonists, designing and constructing an interpretive center that would feature the Wakamatsu story, as well as the Native American occupation and the history of the Veerkamp family on the Gold Hill site. A small agricultural village is also envisioned, which would show how these Japanese settlers grew their crops. Also included could be a farm stay program, where visitors would stay within the village and study traditional Japanese agriculture and cultural arts.

"The ranch also has beautiful oak woodland and wetland areas and I hope these will be enjoyed by future park visitors who take the time to walk on day-use trails and utilize

picnic areas," Ehrgott said. "I truly believe that this park will be a popular destination for American residents and international tourists alike. It will complement El Dorado County's Farm Trails program, the nearby James Marshall Gold Discovery State Park in Coloma and the historic town of Placerville to the south."

While success proved elusive, the inspirational saga of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony serves as an underappreciated nugget of history in the Golden State.

"So many groups have made our state and nation among the most culturally diverse and richest places in the world," Ehrgott said. "The Wakamatsu Colony is one of the most compelling and historically significant story of them all." ^{SH}

Those interested in learning more about the Wakamatsu Colony, including how to contribute to the project, can visit arconservancy.org and click on Gold Hill-Wakamatsu Project.