

## **Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony at Gold Hill**

**Dr. Kevin Starr, University of Southern  
California History Professor and California State  
Librarian Emeritus**

**The Shintu tradition attaches major importance to the enduring spirit of place. Japanese tourists to California, for example, visiting Sutter's Saw Mill at Coloma on the South Fork of the American River, have been known to bow deeply at the site, paying reverence to what happened there with the discovery of gold on 24 January 1848. In the Shintu imagination, what is past can never be detached from where it happened. From the discovery of gold at this saw mill emerged the nation-state of California.**

**This sense of the past – the relevant past, the enduring past, the shaping past, all of it connected to**

**the present and the future – also reverberates from two places, one large – vast even – and the other little more than a ranch house, a large Keaki tree, and the gravesite of a nineteen-year-old Japanese girl, Okei Ito, buried there 137 years ago, far from home. The first place, to which I shall return at the end of this talk, consists of the vast rice fields of California extending through the heart of the Sacramento Valley from Woodland to Redding through Yolo, Sutter, Yuba, Butte, Glenn, and Shasta counties, and as such a triumph of global agriculture and conservation.**

**The other place, much smaller, is California Registered Historical Landmark Number 815, the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony at Gold Hill: a ranch house, a great tree, a gravesite on a hilltop overlooking a vale where in times past fruit trees**

**bloomed with the promise of even more horticulture to come.**

**The digital age has underscored the fact that we live in a global/local interface. Nowhere is this more true than in California, which is a globalized nation-state, peopled by the races, ethnicities, and cultures of the world, yet localized as well in each and every place that we personally know and love and speaks to us of the promise of California. From this perspective, the rice fields of California are global, nourishing the state, the nation, and the world, creating a staple grain crucial to the cuisines of Asia, Mediterranean Europe, the United States, Latin America, and Africa.**

**And at first glance the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony at Gold Hill, fragilely surviving after little more than two years of operation, in the late 1860s and 1870, might seem to be the essence of localized**

**California. Yet the surviving remnants of this colony – and the spirit of place it emanates – are global as well; for to this colony came the first Japanese immigrants to California, and the culture they brought with them across the vast Pacific was destined, over time, to become not only a way of life for Japanese-Americans but a paradigm, a model, an example of reverence for the land, social cooperation, the struggle for community, and the challenges related to the blending of cultures that would turn out to be, each of them, so important to the past, present, and future of the nation-state called California.**

**I am not an historian of Japan, but I am an historian of California, and one cannot understand the history of California without reference to the history of Japan and the interaction of Japan and the United States in the mid- and late-nineteenth century. When**

**the great black sail-steamships of the United States Navy under the command of Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into Tokyo Bay in July 1853, momentous forces were set in motion. First of all, the 400-year-old self-enforced isolation of Japan was ended. Secondly, it was ended, in part – so stated the presidential letter delivered by Commodore Perry to the Shogunate – because when California became a state in September 1850, the United States had become, by definition, an Asia/Pacific nation, hence interested in opening trade relations with the great empire of Japan.**

**The third and fourth forces unleashed by Perry's visit related to the internal politics of Japan. For hundreds of years the Tokugawa Shogunate had exercised internal control over the feudal lords of Old Japan. The emperor, by contrast, remained a sacred figure in Kyoto, ensconced in court ritual, prevented**

**from the direct exercise of power. The young emperor whom history would later remember as Emperor Meiji – for the emperors of Japan only achieve their lasting name, for themselves and their era, once their reign is complete – had an alternative vision: the reestablishment of the emperor as an active monarch, the reorganization of Japan into a more unified nation-state, and the mastery of western technology by the Japanese people.**

**These changes took time to unfold in the mind of the Emperor and his advisors. Quite interestingly, American culture played its part; for during the 1850s and into the mid-1860s, the young Emperor, moving into his major role, avidly read American history and literature. He was a great admirer, for example, of the poetry of Walt Whitman.**

**He also admired Abraham Lincoln, a leader who had, comparably, led his nation to a more perfect unity, even at the cost of an heroic shedding of blood. So, too, in the late 1860s, did the rapidly developing empire of Japan experience something comparable to the American Civil War, although not on the same scale. The Boshin War of the late 1860s constituted a civil war between the clans still adhering to the Tokugawa-dominated Shogunate and the return of imperial rule. As in the case of the American Civil War, this was, in part, a north-south conflict with most of the resistance to the Emperor located in the north. By November 1868, virtually the only remaining obstacle to the Meiji Restoration was the Tokugawa Castle in Wakamatsu, Aizu, in the northern part of Japan. On 5 November 1868, in the Year of the Dragon, this castle fell to Restoration Forces, with great loss of life, and a**

**scattering of survivors throughout the rest of the country. Two hundred and fifty years of Tokugawa rule had now ended, and the Meiji Era had begun.**

**A Dutchman by the name of John Henry Schnell, married to a Japanese woman, was an advisor to the Daimyo, Lord Katamori Matsudaira – which is to say, the clan leader and feudal lord -- of Aizu, who trusted Schnell and had made him an honorary Samurai.**

**Schnell convinced the Daimyo that some kind of refuge should be established in California for the refugees from the north, should the cause of the Shogunate meet defeat. Of course, this necessitated that the Daimyo agree to the possibility that he might meet defeat, which underscores Schnell's diplomatic abilities, since he was able to convince the Daimyo of that possibility.**



**When the American Confederacy fell, incidentally, some Confederates left to establish agricultural colonies in Mexico and Latin America. Many ex-Confederates moved to California to restart their lives and became leading citizens of the state. Over the decades, in fact, refugees from violent conflicts in China, Turkish Armenia, Iran, Vietnam, Ethiopia would – in the model fragilely established by the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony – come to California in groups and restart their lives.**

**Schnell enlisted some twenty-five people in his colonization enterprise. They sailed for California in three separate groups on the side-wheel steamers of the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. The largest group sailed with Schnell on the side-wheeler China across the Pacific, arriving in San Francisco on 27 May 1869. The very fact that such a developed steamship trade**

already existed between Japan and the United States is in and of itself interesting. A few years earlier, Mark Twain had sailed on a Pacific Mail steamship to Yokohama. And we all remember the voyage taken by the Army captain played by Tom Cruise in the film The Last Samurai at a slightly later period. Almost from the beginning, Japan and California were connected, which is to suggest the important role California played as a matrix and warehouse, a shipping center, a crossroads, for the absorption of western technology already underway in Japan.

From San Francisco, the colonists took a steamship to Sacramento, then went by wagon to Placerville and nearby Gold Hill where Schnell had arranged to purchase 160 acres from Charles M. Graner. As in the case of other class immigrant voyages before them – the Mayflower to Plymouth

**Colony, the Ark and the Dove to Maryland, the Brooklyn bringing Mormon colonists to California in 1846 – the members of the fledgling Japanese colony brought with them practical and symbolic luggage. On a practical level the colonists brought with them thousands of three-year-old mulberry trees and silk worm cocoons for silk farming, together with bamboo roots, tea seeds, wax trees, and grape seedlings. Of equal practicality were the cooking utensils they brought with them as well. More symbolic were the swords and a large banner bearing the crest of the Aizu Wakamatsu clan; for these objects embodied the cultural identity of a small group of Japanese immigrants, crossing the vast Pacific, facing the unknown.**

**At first, things went well for the fledgling colony. Some 50,000 mulberry trees for silkworm farming and**

**140,000 tea plants were established. Of great importance to this occasion, the colonists also planted short-grain hill rice. Yet before any silk could be spun, disasters began to afflict the colony. These disasters – especially the lack of water and the lack of working capital – were typical of California agriculture in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Unfortunately, the lack of water had a human dimension to it, in that nearby American miners were diverting creeks away from the Wakamatsu Colony property and – although the record is not that clear at this point – perhaps vandalizing it as well.**

**Still, through 1869, 1870, 1871, the settlers held on, led by the Schnells, who brought with them their two daughters, Frances and Mary, the first children of Japanese ancestry to live in California, and the children’s governess and nursemaid, Okei Ito, only**

**seventeen when she arrived. Other colonists included a middle-aged Samurai by the name of Matsunosuke Sakurai and a carpenter by the name of Masumizu Kuninosuke.**

**Here, then, were the pioneer Japanese immigrants to California, struggling – as the English settlers at Jamestown in Virginia had struggled hundreds of years earlier – to keep their colony going. The 1870 federal census documents fifty-five Japanese then in the United States. Thirty-three of them were in California, and within California, twenty-two of them were in El Dorado County at the Wakamatsu Colony. Thus, in its brief existence, the Colony represented the most important foothold established by Japanese immigrants to the United States in terms of the sheer number of people settled in one place. This was prophetic of a Japanese population to come. And the ages-old**

**agriculture being established by the Wakamatsu colonists – especially the rice they planted on the hillsides – was also prophetic of an agricultural era to come and received wide recognition when its tea plants, paper plants, and plant oils were in 1870 exhibited at the annual Horticultural Fair in San Francisco.**

**Still, the Colony continued to flounder. Capital was desperately necessary, and at some point in 1871, after two years, John Schnell left with his wife and two children for Japan, saying that he would try to secure re-capitalization. Schnell never returned, and the Colony went out of existence. The Japanese carpenters attached to the Colony had a tradition from Japan of wandering the countryside in search of work, and so they drifted away, to be integrated, one hopes, into local economies. One carpenter, Masumizu**

**Kuninosuke, one of the few colonists we know by name, married Carrie Wilson, a woman of mixed Cherokee and African-American descent, and went into farming. The eighteen-year-old nursemaid, Okei, and the middle-aged Samurai Matsunosuke Sakurai went to work for the neighboring Veerkamp family. Matsunosuke Sakurai seemed to make a good adjustment as an orchardist in the Veerkamp family employ, where he lived on until February 1901, tending fruit trees, and was buried in the Vineyard Cemetery at Coloma.**

**To the remaining figure of Okei Ito is attached highly charged imaginative reverberations. The Veerkamp family took in Okei and treated her kindly; yet the young woman would not survive long. Malarial fever, perhaps compounded by tuberculosis, would carry her off in 1871 at the age of nineteen. But Okei was suffering from something else as well, something**

**that many Japanese immigrants would also experience in the years to come: a longing, a homesickness, and a sense of dislocation of being detached from the religious, cultural, and family protocols of an ancient civilization patiently crafted to meet the deepest of human needs.**

**Local report has it that Okei would ascend a nearby hill, where she was soon to be buried, and gaze to the west in the direction of Japan. She reminds us, in fact, of the tragic heroine Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's opera Madama Butterfly (1904) dreaming of the return of Lieutenant Pinkerton, just as Okei was dreaming of the return of the Schnell family and their little daughters whom she cared for, and new Japanese colonists to reestablish Japanese culture and community in the faraway place. Okei died in 1871, aged nineteen. Her gravesite atop the hill from which tradition says she**



**looked west reads very simply: “In Memory Okei, died 1871, aged 19 years, a Japanese girl.”**

**This is a very simple gravestone, yet like so many nineteenth-century gravestones in the Gold Country, it bespeaks volumes. Today the simple nursemaid Okei is remembered more formally as Okei-san, and this honorific is truly deserved; for Okei-san was, most likely, not only the first Japanese immigrant woman to die in the United States, she was also in her own unpretentious way in the vanguard of thousands of Japanese women who would migrate to the United States in the decades that followed and, especially in the early 1920s, help to create Japanese-American California.**

**That’s why, even before the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony became a California Registered Historical Landmark in 1969, the grave of Okei, the**

**first Japanese woman to be buried in America, became a place of pilgrimage, tended each year by a few visitors, who pulled up the weeds and planted fresh flowers. That is why the Veerkamp family donated the swords and banner of the Colony to the state of California, as historical objects to be cherished and preserved. And that is why the American River Conservancy and other groups are working so hard to acquire the 303-acre Veerkamp property at Gold Hill and have it incorporated into the California state park system.**

**A colony does not have to be successful in the material sense of that word to be important historically. The English colony of Jamestown proves that. It failed some 400 years ago. Yet Queen Elizabeth recently visited it as the symbol beginning of English-speaking North America. And so too does the**

**Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony continue to challenge us not only as a physical place, to be restored and cherished, but as a symbol of human hope and moral courage, as the founding site of Japan in America.**

**As someone who has written a lot about California agriculture, I also revere the Colony because of the subtlety it sought to introduce into the agriculture of a developing state by trying to prove that such delicate crops as silk and tea and rice could be grown with success in this Far Western state. Of course, as the failure of the Colony underscored, the irrigation of California would have to be organized according to a grand scheme of water law and public works, and that took almost a century to accomplish.**

**Yet today, as we think of the Japanese colonists planting the hillsides with rice, as well as think of the**

**Chinese immigrants who brought their love of rice with them during the same period, we look with satisfaction to the great rice fields of the Sacramento Valley first planted 100 years ago from Japanese rice seed, and we see that at least one product of the Wakamatsu Colony has taken firm root in the great state of California.**

**Rice, of course, was second in line for major development after wheat, which began its expansion in the 1860s. But certainly, by the late 1900s California agriculture had recognized what the Wakamatsu colonists recognized from the beginning: namely, that rice could be grown with great success in California – this ancient and nurturing grain, the staple support of so much of the human race in Asia in times past, and the staple of a global diet today and in the future.**

**There is an almost mystical quality to rice, as there is to the water essential to its growth. The rice fields of**

**California, in fact, have reestablished the long-vanished interior wetlands of the Sacramento Valley over which the migrating birds of the Pacific Flyway come and go each season. More than 235 species of wildlife, in fact, depend upon the rice fields of California for their continuing existence. We know rice as an everyday food, and we know it through its gourmet and haute cuisine possibilities. Yet we Californians must also know rice, as well as the other products of our great agriculture, as containing within itself the paradigm of meeting world hunger with sustainable agriculture.**

**The colonists of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony came to California in the wake of deep conflict in their homeland. They came because they wanted to survive. They wanted life, and they wanted life more abundantly. Today, so much conflict abroad relates to a developing food shortage as well as to chronic world**

**hunger. I believe that the Wakamatsu Colony has a message of enduring importance, one especially appreciated by the rice growers of this great state. From the earth, from agriculture, from the land properly watered and cared for, from technology, and above all else, from loving human attention, comes forth that which we need to sustain life. Yet this process so flourishing in our great Sacramento Valley is embattled in so many other places across the planet. The spirit of the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Farm Colony has entered the spirit and culture of rice cultivation in California. It is time to take this spirit – this alleviation of hunger, this regard for the proper needs of everyday human life – to the rest of the world. The Wakamatsu colonists crossed an ocean to come to a new place and make the resistant, non-irrigated land yield forth silk, tea, fruit, and rice. In doing this, they**

**had a message for California. And in our agriculture,  
we Californians have a message – and a helping hand –  
for an embattled world.**