

Placer's Japanese struggle, triumph

First of a two-part series — Editor

By Linda Holderness
Neighbors staff writer

Not all California pioneers crossed the Plains in covered wagons. From the east, young Japanese men also followed their dreams to this new land of opportunity at the turn of the century.

These first-generation Japanese men — known as Issei — came seek-

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ing land and riches and stayed through hardship and severe discrimination to win a place for their grandchildren.

"I'm amazed at the Issei's ability to persevere," said Rusty Uratsu, a Loomis farmer and the son of Issei

pioneers. "It would have been easy for them to say, 'Phooey, to hell with it.' It would have been easy for them to go back, but they didn't. They felt this was the place for them and their offspring."

In Placer County, the Issei's toil

helped build the deciduous fruit industry from a few fledgling farms to the major fruit-production center in the state before World War II.

It wasn't easy to work the land that

produced the sweet, juicy fruit that became the area's trademark. The rolling hills that create just the right growing conditions were hard to cultivate, said James Makimoto of Loomis, the son of an Issei farmer. In time, the industry moved to the flat central valleys, and the Issei's grandchildren found opportunities elsewhere.

In recognition of the Issei's hard work and sacrifice, their children and grandchildren are working to build a heritage center near Penryn — with low-cost housing for the elderly and shops and a museum — to preserve the Japanese culture for succeeding generations.

Japanese immigration to the United States began late in the 19th century. After 200 years of isolation, Japan accepted overtures of friendship from Commodore Matthew Perry on behalf of President Millard Fillmore. A treaty was signed in 1854, and in the next 50 years Japan moved from an almost medieval land to a modern, industrial nation.

As Japan began issuing its first passports, Japanese men were welcomed in America to replace Chinese laborers excluded by law in 1882.

Loomis' Roy Onga, at 78 a fairly young Issei, sailed from Japan in 1920 on the boat that carried the last "picture brides" — women coming to meet husbands they had seen only in photographs. Before Onga could leave Japan, he said, "I had to show to immigration that I had \$75 in cash so I could live here without help. That was a lot of money in those days."

He sailed for 24 days, he remembered, from Osaka to San Francisco. Like many other young Japanese men, Onga, then 16, came to go to school and expected to return. But, after 62 years, he has never even been back for a visit.

Onga, like many Isseis, found work on farms picking fruit. Others worked on the railroads or as domestics, but nearly always they were saving money to buy or lease land.

"Isseis were recruited mainly to do menial work," Uratsu said. "With

language difficulties and job discrimination, farming was the only area that was open for most Japanese."

Many Isseis found their way to the young deciduous fruit industry in Placer County. They worked first as farmhands, then bought their own orchards, said Makimoto, now an insurance agent in Loomis.

"They stuck it out through sweat, blood and tears," he said. "I believe the Japanese helped build up south Placer County."

Kay Miyamura, a retired state employee, said his father, who came here about 1900, worked on many farms in Placer County. "There was a group of Japanese people," he said, "who went wherever they were welcome to work." As the deciduous fruit industry grew, more and more

Japanese

Japanese workers were welcome there.

In 1910, Japanese landowners and tenant farmers controlled half the fruit acreage in the south Placer area. Though statistics for later years are scarce, many residents think that proportion grew much higher.

Makimoto and Herb Tokutomi, a Nisei — second-generation — retired farmer in Newcastle, estimate that 80 percent of all the fruit grown in California in the early part of the century was grown in Placer County.

"And Japanese people operated 90 percent of the fruit orchards," said Tokutomi.

The impressiveness of this agricultural achievement belies the struggles and setbacks every Issei had to face.

A serious blow was dealt by the state of California in 1913. Japanese immigrants had already been declared ineligible for citizenship in the United States, though their native-born children were citizens. The California Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited such aliens from buying property.

Many Issei circumvented the law by buying land in their children's or friends' names. Others remained tenant farmers.

"That law said something to the Isseis — that they're really discriminated against," said Uratsu. "But they made a commitment to stay."

Onga bought his first farm in his son's name. Uratsu's father bought the orchard Uratsu still operates in his older brother's name in 1938. His brother eventually became a military officer, and Uratsu stayed in Loomis to farm.

In 1924, a federal law prevented Japanese aliens from immigrating to the United States. Other laws passed during the following decade restricted employment opportunities for Japanese aliens.

Most Isseis and Niseis remember discrimination as intensifying during the years leading up to World War II.

Many businesses refused to serve

them. Japanese boys "really had to excel in sports to be on a team," said Uratsu, "and Japanese team members weren't always included at team parties in Caucasian homes."

Tokutomi still won't buy oil from a company in Auburn that wouldn't sell it to his family because they were Japanese. He also remembers being refused haircuts in barbershops he had once patronized.

But, he added, "people in Newcastle who knew us were very nice people."

The ultimate discrimination for all Japanese residents — even American citizens — was their confinement in internment camps during World War II. Though not a single act of disloyalty to the United State by Japanese residents was discovered, more than 100,000 Japanese on the West Coast were sent to 10 relocation centers beginning in early 1942.

Isseis who were uprooted often had to give up their land and incomes at the peak of their earning power.

The internment for Uratsu's father came "just when Dad had really started to make some progress on this place," Uratsu said in the front yard of his orchard.

With only two weeks' notice to evacuate, Japanese families had to sell what they could and find friends to take care of their property. Each person could take to the camp only what could be carried in hand.

For three years, until the end of the war, interned Japanese Americans lived in compounds fenced in barbed wire and guarded by soldiers. Some were released to eastern locations to work on farms. Many Nisei men served in the military.

When the war was over, the evacuees returned to what was left of their homes. Some had lost everything. Others still owned their property but found it in shambles. A few returned to farms well maintained by caring Caucasian friends.

"Quite a few people helped," said Makimoto. "There were many very honorable people."

But discrimination didn't end with the war. The Japanese returned to find signs warning "Japs" to stay away. Fences were burned and property was vandalized, said Tokutomi.

Not until the Korean War, when Japan became an American ally, did prejudice against Japanese begin to ease. In 1952, the government made acceptance official by allowing Japanese aliens to become citizens. Most quickly and eagerly accepted.

"Prejudice now," said Makimoto, "is almost negligible."

As the fruit industry in Placer County has declined — yields in the valleys are higher and production costs

lower — the Japanese American population has diminished as well. In 1930, 1,874 Japanese residents lived in the county. Today, the area has only about 950 Japanese Americans.

Isseis are dying, but their grandchildren, the Sanseis, better educated and well accepted, find opportunities open to them everywhere. They do not have to farm to survive.

Sanseis are leaving, but, said Jay Kajimura, they are not going far. And some are coming back. Kajimura is home in Lincoln using his business background to help build his father's farm. Uratsu's son has completed a different kind of circle. He is a professor at an international university in Tokyo.

In appreciation of the rich heritage

left by their parents and grandparents, Niseis and Sanseis in Placer County have undertaken the Japanese American Heritage Center Project.

Supporters have bought a 15-acre site near Penryn, obtained the necessary rezoning, and had preliminary architectural drawings prepared. They are pursuing various funding sources.

The center will provide 100 housing units, a community activities building and a commercial center for elderly Japanese Americans. It will also include a museum to house traditional social, educational and recreational programs and exhibits.

Next: Pearl Harbor attack sends Japanese to internment camp.

WWII hysteria

Japanese remember the camps

Second of a two-part series — Editor

By **Linda Holderness**
Neighbors staff writer

"How would you feel," Rusty Uratsu asked, "if you were told you had two weeks to sell everything you had and were being rounded up and taken to a camp?"

Not waiting for the obvious answer, he added: "It's hard to describe that feeling."

Uratsu was 18 when President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Feb. 16, 1942 signed the order to evacuate Japanese residents to internment camps.

His family, along with 1,800 other residents of Placer County, was sent to Tule Lake in the northeast corner of the state. All but 22 of the county's Japanese residents were interned in the vast, drab center that was a temporary home for 16,000 Japanese residents. Most were United States citizens.

Under Roosevelt's order, signed during the anti-Japanese fervor that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor, only Japanese residents living on the West Coast were interned. The government said it feared fifth-column activities in case of an invasion of the mainland, though no case of disloyalty by a Japanese resident has ever been uncovered.

Uratsu's father owned his farm only four years when they were forced to leave.

"Just when Dad had really started to make some progress on this place and we were getting a little comfortable financially, we had to leave it," Uratsu said. "I think it was really tough on Mom and Dad."

Uratsu's family was luckier than some. Their orchard was still theirs when they returned to Loomis three years later.

"I had taken ag classes in high school, and we asked two of my

teachers to run the ranch for us," Uratsu said. "We didn't hardly get any money. We just asked them to take care of it."

It was run down a little when the family returned, Uratsu remembered, but they built it up again. He and his wife now run it.

The Issei — first-generation Japanese — and their children, the Nisei, who were plucked from homes, schools and jobs to live in barracks surrounded by barbed wire, speak with remarkably little bitterness about the internment experience.

"The third generation can't understand why we didn't oppose it," said Masako Nekoda, Nisei wife of a Buddhist minister in Penryn. "But when you're in that situation, you just don't."

More than 100,000 Japanese residents, aliens and citizens, were rounded up at "assembly centers" — often racetracks — where they sometimes were kept two or three months before being boarded on trains to one of 10 camps in the western United States. Residents of South Placer County were assembled at Walerga, near Rio Linda, and Arboga in Marysville, while the camp at Tule Lake was being constructed.

Ellen Kubo of Penryn, a college student when she was interned, remembers the lack of privacy at Arboga. Whole families lived in one room, she said, and the public latrine had no doors.

Evacuees were allowed to take with them only what they could carry, and they were forbidden from having cameras and other items containing metal.

Japanese in South Placer County and elsewhere sold everything for 10 cents on the dollar before they left for the camps, said Kay Miyamura. Now 63, Miyamura had just graduated from Placer High School when the order came.

"Most of us just used to burn our possessions instead of giving them to somebody else," said Thomas Dairiki, a Sacramento stock broker who was evacuated from Placer County. "It was pride," he said.

Herb Tokutomi, who lived in Newcastle, "boarded and padlocked" his possessions in a garage but still lost just about everything, he said. Only an old piano he had stored with a friend survived his internment.

Camps

Life in the camps was dismal, with five families in each tar paper hut, but "we weren't really ill-treated," said Dairiki, who spent four years of his childhood at several camps. Dairiki's family was one of the last to be sent home because his father was a camp cook. "If the cook leaves," Dairiki explained, "nobody eats."

Nekoda remembers the camps as being "like a regular prison."

"They had towers with watchmen," she said, "and we lived in shacks, the whole family in one room. We curtained off the bedroom and the living room." Meals were eaten in a "mess hall."

Workers at the camps were paid according to their skills, but the wages of \$12 to \$19 a month were a fraction of what they could have earned on the outside, Nekoda said.

Because only Japanese on the West Coast were interned, some evacuees were able to leave the camps to find work in other parts of the United States.

Uratsu went to North Carolina after one year at Tule Lake. "I was more adventurous than anything else," he said. "I felt I could do better on the outside."

Many families were released from the camps to work on farms in eastern states. Miyamura said he "got impatient" and left Tule Lake to pick apples in Idaho. "A farm in another state had to sponsor us before we could go," he said.

Dairiki had cousins living in the East who didn't have to go to camp, he said, but he didn't envy them.

"We used to write back and forth, and they said it was miserable on the outside, too," he remembered. "They couldn't go to school or to the grocery store because nobody would sell to them. I didn't know if it was worse being in the camp or being out. It was bad both ways."

Ironically, Japanese men of draft age often eagerly served in the U.S. military when they could. Uratsu and Miyamura both had brothers in the military. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a Hawaiian unit of Niseis, was one of the most decorated combat units in the war.

When the fighting ended in 1945, the Japanese people returned to what was left of their homes and possessions. Those who still owned property often found it in disrepair. Others no longer had property to return to.

Dairiki's family went to live with

relatives of his mother in Fresno until his father could build up a business again.

The end of the war didn't mean the end of hostility toward the Japanese. Many local businesses still excluded them, and Japanese property was vandalized.

Public sentiment didn't change substantially until Japan became a U.S. ally during the Korean War, said Miyamura. In 1952, Congress passed an Immigration and Nationality Act allowing Japanese aliens to apply for citizenship.

In the 1970s, 30 years after the internment, the Japanese American Citizens League asked Congress to

financially compensate the Japanese who were interned.

Their proposal, called the "redress," was studied by a special commission, which reported to Congress last year. Congress has not yet acted on the proposal.

Money is not the real purpose of the proposal, Uratsu said.

"Dollar value?" he asked. "There is no value on two weeks' notice and being sent to these camps. It's priceless."

The redress is more for "history's sake," he said. "It's for the future politicians who vie for various positions, I think, that should know about these things so they won't make the same kind of mistakes again."

On dock, picture became a husband

By Linda Holderness
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When Masumi Miyamura met her husband for the first time — after two years of long-distance courtship and a marriage by proxy — she felt a little bashful.

Recalling the scene last week, she giggled softly and added: "I imagine it was mutual."

Miyamura, now 88 and living in Penryn, was a 24-year-old "picture bride" that day in February 1918. She had come from Japan to begin a marriage arranged by her parents to a man she had seen only in a photograph. Her husband, Kazuma, was a Japanese farm laborer in Placer County.

Miyamura met Kazuma on a dock of

San Francisco Bay. She and about 200 other picture brides stood on the deck of the ship, Miyamura remembered, and the men they were to meet waited on the dock below.

"We would look at each other, and when we recognized the right person we would holler," she said, speaking through her son Kay, acting as interpreter.

She was not disappointed in the man her family chose for her. Her uncle lived here, too, and knew Kazuma Miyamura. "He had vouched for him," she said.

For some brides, though, "there was dissatisfaction. Some of them have gone back. And sometimes the man sent the woman back," she said.

For that reason, every bride who

came from Japan had to bring enough money for a return fare — about \$80 in 1918. The only belongings allowed were her clothes.

After spending three days in San Francisco, Miyamura and her groom were married by a judge in Sacramento. They were already legally married in Japan, where proxies had recited the vows for them.

In Placer County, Miyamura found life on the farms difficult, not at all like the work she had learned on her parents' rice farm in Kumamoto Ken.

"We didn't expect to struggle like that," she said.

"In Japan, we were told stories that the (United States) was so wealthy that

you never had to work. You just picked money up off the streets," she said.

But life here wasn't that easy. As a laborer and a Japanese alien, ineligible to become a citizen or own land, Kazuma moved his family often from farm to farm to find work. Kay, the oldest of Miyamura's four sons and one daughter, jokes that he "probably went to every grammar school in the county."

Just as life was starting to become more comfortable for the family, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. With the area's other Japanese, the family was evacuated to the internment camp at Tule Lake, said Kay, who is now 63.

"The only part (about the evacuation) that really hurt," said Masumi Miyamura, "was that my younger son was serving in the armed forces."

Kazuma Miyamura died of leukemia in the camp. Kay eventually married there, and his first son was born before the family returned to Penryn.

Since coming back to Placer County, Miyamura has lived comfortably with her son and his family. Kay is a retired engineer with the state Department of Water Resources.

For first Japanese, the dream came hard

By Linda Holderness
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The lure of land brought Charles Nitta to America 79 years ago.

Nitta, now 95, learned about the United States as a schoolboy in Japan, and he knew before he was 12 that he wanted to come here.

"I learned it was a bigger country, bigger land, with gold mining, even oil wells," he said. "I learned that I wanted to see that kind of country."

At 16, Nitta — whose given name was Chiochi — got the passport that would fulfill his dream. His father, he said, "was very against I come to America. He wouldn't pay the money for me, so I can't go. Almost suicide I feel like, you know."

Nitta's mother, like mothers everywhere, talked to her husband. Nitta remembers the morning she told him his father had changed his mind.

"She said he's going to give me America fare so I better get ready," Nitta said. He clasped his hands under his chin and bowed his head lightly as he remembered the moment. "I was so happy."

Before he could go, his mother made him promise to come back in three years. It was a promise Nitta was never to keep.

Nitta, who easily recalls every important name and date from his long past, is one of only a few Issei — first-generation Japanese — to speak English.

While still dreaming of traveling, he studied the language for four years in Japan. After arriving, he took English courses at the YMCA in San Francisco for two years, then moved to Watsonville where he studied four more years. He left school to pick fruit and hops for pennies a box to save money to buy his land.

In four years, on wages of less than \$4 a day, Nitta had saved nearly \$3,000.

"I thought U.S. have big country and big land, and I can buy the land and farm and work hard, and I would be a success I was sure," he said.

He didn't want to go back to Japan to farm. "I didn't like Japanese farming," he said. "They were poor farmers, and they never wore shoes to work. Now maybe it's different."

He heard there was farm land in Loomis and caught a train from Sacramento to Rocklin — about a 40-minute ride — to see it. "At that time, there were few autos. Most people had a horse and buggy," he said.

Eventually, Nitta bought a 50-acre farm in east Loomis from another Japanese man with whom he had studied English in San Francisco. The price of \$6,000 — \$2,000 down — included 20 acres of deciduous fruit trees, three horses and one cow.

"The land was all right, but winter frost always killed the fruit," Nitta said. "I had a hard time."

In 1918 he sold the ranch and bought the property west of Loomis where he lives today with his oldest son and daughter-in-law. The property belonged to an English family that had tried to plant oranges and fallen on hard times, he said.

The English lived west of Loomis, Nitta remembered, and the Danish lived to the east. The English attempted

to grow citrus fruit, but the cold climate destroyed their crops. Many of the English returned home.

As soon as he moved to the new farm, Nitta pulled out the oranges and planted acres of peaches, pears and plums.

By this time, he had married. His wife, Tane, had come to the United States to be his bride in a marriage arranged by mutual friends. The wedding was performed by proxy before they met.

By this time, too, the United States government had passed the Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibiting aliens ineligible for citizenship — a group that included the Japanese — from buying land or leasing it for longer than three years. Land already owned by aliens, however, was not confiscated.

"I couldn't buy land in my name, but I have this boy from Hawaii I take care of," Nitta said. "He worked here a couple years, and when I bought this ranch I bought it in his name."

After Pearl Harbor, Nitta and his family, along with most other Japanese in south Placer County, were sent to Tule Lake, the internment camp in northeast California.

Nitta was more fortunate than most. After one year at Tule Lake, Nitta, whose oldest son, Alfred, was in the Army, was able to take his family to Idaho to pick apples. There he discovered that the wife of the farm's manager — a Caucasian woman — had been a close school friend of his daughter in Loomis.

Nitta became foreman of the apple orchard, lived in a nice home and earned some money. After three years, the war was over and the American government said he could come home.

His ranch and house were still there, but many fruit trees had died and all his equipment had been stolen.

"It took five years to get it built up again," Nitta said. With little money, he managed to "just pay the mortgage and the taxes — that's all," he said.

In 1961, soon after his wife died, Nitta retired and turned his farm over to his son Alfred. Alfred's son, in turn, is setting up a nursery on part of the property.

"I'm retired," Nitta said, "but I still work." With a little help from a cane, Nitta spends most of his time on the grounds of his farm.

"I don't pay anything, but my daughter-in-law cooks and I'm just eating. Free living, you know," he said.