Excitement buzzed at the 17th annual Locke Asian Pacific Spring Festival on May 11, 2024. Locke Foundation president Stuart Walthall welcomed the spectators with a host of distinguished guest speakers which included Bruce Blodgett, executive director of Delta Protection Commission; Rosanna Herber, president of the SMUD Board of Directors; Patrick Hume, Sacramento County Supervisor, and Darrell Woo, OCA.

With ear-splitting drumbeats, Eastern Ways lion and dragon dancers kicked off the festival with colorful lions and a 72-ft dragon. The seats under the canopy were packed with spectators. Entertainment chair Eva Chu assembled a spectacular cast of colorful performers. We are grateful to volunteers who helped make this day a success: Boy Scout Troop 8, Honey Lum, Mark Miller, Eugene Chan, Reuben Souza, Eva Chu, Darwin and Lili Kan, Eva West, Betty Louie and Pattie Fong. Photos by Elizabeth Wong and Eva Chu.)
Many who visit the Locke Boarding House Museum are at least familiar with the Kuramoto family. An eye-catching placard, created by California State Parks, is prominently displayed in the upstairs west room of the museum containing the Kuramoto family portrait along with the following brief history of the family. The only information about the Kuramoto family presented to the public, and mentioned by museum docents, is contained on that placard.

"In 1921 Sukeichi and Nobu Kuramoto moved to Locke to operate the boarding house. The Kuramotos rented the second-floor rooms to seasonal farm laborers and used the ground floor as their family residence. In 1942, the Kuramoto family was forced to relocate to an internment camp. After WWII, Shirley and I had many pleasant and informative conversations following that initial phone call. She was more than happy to answer my many questions and provide numerous documents, photos, and related materials. Shirley not only opened the door to the Kuramoto family history but also her own family's heritage - the Nakasora's.

I introduced myself to Shirley and offered my condolences at her husband's passing. I informed her the LF was very interested in the Kuramoto family's story and would like to interview her at her convenience. And as our conversation progressed, I couldn't help but notice the youthful upbeat quality of Shirley's voice and her lucidity. I had done the mental math. Shirley had to be no spring chicken! As it turned out at the time of our conversation Shirley was 92 years old.

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Let's start with her husband Sam and his family's saga. And regarding that often-asked question: "Where did the Kuramoto family go after their internment?" - The short answer: Minnesota! But before discussing that chapter of the family's story, let's take a deeper dive into the Kuramoto narrative - before their internment and before their life in Locke.

THE KURAMOTOS

Sukeichi Kuramoto left Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan in 1889 for Seattle, Washington at the ripe age of 16 years. He found living quarters with a Caucasian family of his same Christian faith. When it was time for Sukeichi to seek a wife, his family in Japan sent him Nobu Kukara's picture. She was the daughter of one of the families in the neighborhood. He in turn sent his picture to his family to present to Nobu. She agreed to marry Sukeichi and left Japan for California. The Locke Rooming House (now the Locke Boarding House Museum) became their home and occupation until the onset of WWII. There, they raised five children, three girls and two boys, living within a community whose population and culture was overwhelmingly Chinese.

The eldest child was daughter Matsue, born in Walnut Grove. Sukeichi soon became the foreman of the ranch's vegetable farm and pear orchard. Around 1921, the Kuramotos moved from Walnut Grove to nearby Locke, California. The Locke Rooming House (now the Locke Boarding House Museum) became their home and occupation until the onset of WWII. There, they raised five children, three girls and two boys, living within a community whose population and culture was overwhelmingly Chinese.

I held the phone to my ear.

"My husband was Sam Kuramoto. His family operated the Boarding House. I wanted to let you know Sam passed away" (Sam S. Kuramoto - April 29, 1928, to March 22, 2022).

The Locke Foundation was aware of Sam Kuramoto, the young boy in the State Parks placard photograph. He was living in the Bay Area. However, the LF had no recorded history of Sam or his family.

"What happened to the Kuramoto family after their internment?" - The short answer: Minnesota! But before discussing that chapter of the family's story, let's take a deeper dive into the Kuramoto narrative - before their internment and before their life in Locke.

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The eldest child was daughter Matsue, born in Walnut
Grove, followed by sister Kikue, born in Sacramento, California. Eldest son Eimi was born in Japan. Sister Haruko and youngest child Setsuo (Sam) were born in Sacramento. Sukeichi and Nobu, along with their two eldest daughters, took a trip to Japan in 1918. It was on this trip that brother Eimi was born. Many years after WWII, Eimi Kuramoto resided in Richfield, Minnesota. He later lived in Kensington, California, near Berkeley.

Haruko attended the Walnut Grove Oriental School, located one mile down river from Locke, through the eighth grade. The entire student body was comprised of Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos. Caucasian students had their own school in Walnut Grove where they were bussed daily. Students attending the Oriental School had to make the trek on foot. Later, the Oriental School was deemed a “firetrap” and was replaced by a new school in 1937. It remained segregated until 1942 when all Japanese Americans were interned, leaving Chinese and Filipino students in the Oriental School. Financial considerations were apparently the deciding factor in desegregating schools in 1943.

Haruko and her brothers Eimi and Sam also attended Japanese language school to learn to speak and write their parent’s mother tongue. Located in Walnut Grove, Gakuen Hall was a Japanese language school built in 1927 by Japanese immigrants to offer an alternative to state-operated schools. The school was part of the Japanese American community’s attempt to maintain their language and culture in America. The school offered one-hour classes after grammar school. It was at the Japanese language school where the Kuramoto family befriended Dr. Terami, an instructor who later moved to Minnesota to teach mathematics at Macalester College in St. Paul.

Walnut Grove and Locke are farming communities. They were the heart of the asparagus growing district, and Bartlett pears were the principal product of the region. Mother Nobu and eldest daughter Matsue augmented the family income by working during harvest season at the nearby Boathouse Marina. The Kuramoto family also attended the Walnut Grove Japanese United Methodist Church, founded in 1915 by Isseis. Other future Minnesotans, including Dr. Terami and his wife, attended the church.

INTERNMENT

Quote from Setsuo (Sam) Kuramoto: "My mother Nobu, my brother Eimi, my sister Haruko and I were eating our Sunday pancake breakfast together on December 7, 1941, when we were jolted by the radio announcement ‘The Japs invaded and bombed the Pearl Harbor, U.S. Navy Shipyard in Honolulu.’ We were stunned by the news and the first thing my mother said was ‘I think we are going to be in trouble’.

‘Stay inside the house and don’t go to school!’ Fear in my mother’s voice made me obey her without hesitation. I soon learned the segregated Oriental School had a large sign posted in front of the building that read: JAPS NOT ALLOWED ON SCHOOL PROPERTY”.

Nobu and Sam began burning letters and documents in the downstairs furnace. Sam found an old gun and threw it in the river. "I was 13 years old, and my carefree days while growing up and living in my mother’s boarding house in the small town of Locke would change dramatically overnight. We abandoned our boarding house with everything in it, as we prepared ourselves to bring one suitcase in each hand, to be incarcerated in camp.”

Family patriarch Sukeichi had died in June of 1936 before the outbreak of the war. The remaining Kuramoto family members were detained in a temporary evacuation camp called Turlock Assembly Center in Turlock, California. It was located on the fairgrounds where evacuees lived for over a month in small barracks of black tar paper. In July 1942, the Kuramoto family and other Japanese deportees were transported aboard trains with covered windows to the Gila River Relocation Camp in Arizona. The camp was located on the Gila River Indian Reservation about 50 miles southeast of Phoenix, near the town of Rivers. The average summer temperature was 104 degrees and had been known to reach 125 degrees. By December 1942, Gila River had a peak population of 13,348 and was Arizona’s fourth largest city.

Meals were prepared by Japanese cooks and served in the mess hall. Daughter Haruko worked as a waitress in Mess Hall No. 9 earning $16 a month. Government issued army cots and blankets were provided in the rudimentary sleeping quarters. Communal bath-rooms with showers were spaced too far apart to make chrysanthemum flowers with paper. The Kuramotos were members of the Canal Christian Church in relocation camp.

The following are some events which Sam Kuramoto found challenging during his internment: “Living and sleeping in one room with my whole family; Hunting for scraps of wood to make furniture while trying to avoid being bitten by rattlesnakes and scorpions; Taking a shower for the first time; Eating lots of livers and tongues; Dealing with many sandstorms, cold winters and hot summers; Learning to live inside a barbed-wire camp, patrolled by military guards”. Sam and his camp schoolmates pledged allegiance to the flag every morning. They played basketball and baseball. They listened to Glen Miller and Tommy Dorsey music while sitting in dugout holes under the barracks where it was cooler. Sometimes they would crawl under the barbed wire to look at the surrounding desert. Sam: “The desert was a certain death sentence. No one could have survived outside the camp”.

By 1945, when Japan was defeated by the Allies, all remaining Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated at Gila River Relocation Camp were released. Many Japanese Americans suffered harshly after leaving the internment camps. But after years of captivity, it was time to rebuild new lives as (truly) American citizens.
NEW BEGINNINGS

Sam: "At the end of the war, after we were released from the Gila River camp, my mother Nobu, sisters Setsuo and Haruko, and I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota. My mother was compensated a small amount for the boarding house she owned in Locke. She never did go back to live in Locke. We never found out whatever happened to everything we abandoned in the house."

The Kuramoto family left for Minnesota and took up residence at 1605 Third Avenue, Minneapolis by December of 1944. They gave up their West Coast home, family and friends and started anew in Minnesota. Here they felt there was an atmosphere of friendliness and would encounter less discrimination and prejudice.

Setsuo graduated from North High School in Minneapolis. Haruko possessed sufficient dressmaking and tailoring skills in 1945 to get a job at Winget-Kickernick’s in downtown Minneapolis. Mother Nobu also worked at Kickernick’s which was a manufacturer of rayon-nylon undergarments.

Sam attended high school in 1945 for his senior year. “I was very apprehensive in attending an all-white school for the first time in my life. But all the students were very welcoming to me. I never had any problems from other students”.

Sam enlisted in the U.S. Army at age 18 in 1947 and served for six years. His training included Japanese language studies at the Military Intelligence Service Language School at Presidio of Monterey. He was then assigned to live in Tokyo for further intense Japanese language studies for six months.

“I did not mingle among the civilians in Tokyo. I felt they had a defeatist attitude and I had a feeling we were not welcome. In the summer of 1948, I reported to the 7th Infantry Division in Camp Crawford at Sapporo, Hokkaido. I was assigned as an interrogator to the G2 Intelligence Section at Division Headquarters. We interrogated Japanese prisoners-of-war who returned from Siberia in a Russian Army camp. We were interested in finding out if there were any Communist infiltrators among them”.

“We lived comfortably. We took furo baths (steep sided wooden bathtub filled with very hot water). "We had a Japanese cook and driver. We had no curfews. We dressed in civilian clothes to eat out since the military police could not distinguish us niseis (1st generation American-born Japanese) from the native Japanese. At an orphanage at a Catholic convent, I met children who begged for gum and lifesavers. Meeting these orphaned children led me to be thankful to have a home where I could someday return safely to loved ones”.

“When the Korean War began in 1950, I trained at the base of Mt. Fuji and was shipped out of Korea for combat duty as a rifleman. After serving in Korea, I returned to Osaka, where I worked at the US Army 382nd General Hos-

Sam Kuramoto was discharged from the Army as Sergeant in 1958. He moved to California and worked at FMC Corporation for 35 years as an electrical designer in the engineering of Bradley Army tanks.

In 1959 he married Shirley. They lived primarily in San Jose, California and were married 63 years before Sam’s passing. They had two children, Stuart and Susan, both still living in the greater Bay Area. Shirley will be the subject of Part Two - A Remarkable Family and a Mystery Solved. You’ll like Shirley.

EPILOGUE

And what of the final chapters for the rest of the Kuramoto family? Mother Nobu passed away in Minnesota. Oldest child (daughter) Matsue and second-oldest child (daughter) Kikue both lived beyond the age of 100 years and died in a San Mateo, California care facility. Brother Eimi, ten years Sam’s senior, became a watchmaker and passed away in Berkeley, California. Youngest daughter Haruko lived in Minnesota and died of MS in 1980.

Historic Artifacts get Proper Treatment

By Stuart Walthall

By Stuart Walthall

― A Remarkable Family and a Mystery Solved. You’ll like Shirley.

Dee Kan putting finishing touches on newly constructed stand for Chinese gong stolen by Sacramento Union reporter during a 1935 police raid in Locke, then returned to the The Locke Foundation Boarding House Museum in 2013 by the reporter’s daughters,
Commemorative Bricks

The Asian American Heritage Park project located at 27 Main Street in Isleton, CA is now taking orders for commemorative bricks to circle the water fountain and art piece designed and constructed by artist Yoshio Taylor.

The Park will honor the families of Chinese and Japanese ancestry who once resided on Main Street, preserve their history and their contribution to Isleton and the Delta. We welcome family, friends, businesses and individuals to be part of the Isleton and Delta history and the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta National Heritage Area.

Please visit the website (www.deltaecs.org) to purchase your commemorative brick.

Groundbreaking March 2024

Other Projects funded by Delta Education Cultural Society:
- Revisiting Isleton’s Forgotten Nihonmachi - California Civil Liberties Public Education Grant
- City of Isleton Grant - California American Water Foundation
- Asian American Heritage Park - Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta Conservancy Grant

Contact for more information:
Contact: Jean Yokotobi
Phone: (209) 765-5216
Email: info@deltaecs.org
Address: DECS, P.O. Box 1171, Isleton, CA 95641
Website: www.deltaecs.org
Soon Saer Choy, born in 1889, was likely in his mid-20s when he left his home village of Sha Bin, China. Standing tall and full of optimism he left for America. Like so many other young men seeking opportunity for a better life, he eventually arrived in the Delta and settled in Locke. Much of Saer Choy’s story and exact details have been lost with the passage of time. But one thing is most evident…he was committed to providing for his family and giving them a better life in the U.S.

From those who remembered, Saer Choy took on whatever work was available, including laboring in the nearby farms and construction of the Delta levees. He made several trips back and forth to China. It was there that he married and eventually left again, leaving his wife to care for their daughter, Yin Kwan, born in 1923.

Returning to the Delta where there were more opportunities for employment, he was frugal enough to save and send money back in support of his family. He was also frugal enough to save enough money to return home to his family years later.

On his return, his daughter, Yin Kwan, then about 7 years old, had no memory of the stranger who walked into their house and made himself at home. Yin asked her mother who this strange man was, to which mom replied, “This is your father”. Saer Choy eventually had two more daughters, the last daughter named Lin Sun (Lillian) was born in 1930.

As a teenager, Lillian immigrated to the U.S. to join her father. When the two were reunited in Locke, Lillian moved in to join her father in one of the rooming houses located on Revee Road. The conditions were not suitable for a young lady 16 years old. Ultimately, Louise Jang Suen offered Lillian more appropriate lodging at her home in Walnut Grove. After all, her husband Robert Suen and Saer Choy Gong Gong. Connie had never arrived in San Francisco they were greeted by Auntie Lillian, Uncle Stephen and Saer Choy Gong Gong. Connie had never met these “relatives”, but Yin Kwan had been anxiously awaiting the reunion with her father and sister Lillian. After a temporary stay with Auntie and Uncle in Castro Valley the new immigrants relocated to Locke where Saer Choy lived.

In Locke they settled into the same boarding house that Auntie Lillian had stayed in when she first arrived. However, by 1969 the times had changed as the Chinese residents were aging out and the town was in decline. But for the newly immigrated Chan family, Locke was the ideal place. The supportive community of new friends spoke the same Zhongshan dialect as well as sharing the same culture, traditions and experiences that truly helped to ease the challenges of transition and assimilation.

The Chan family was the last family to immigrate and settle in Locke. Their presence provided the residents with new energy and the amusement of a second group of youngsters. Connie and Wayne played freely in the building they now called home. Their upstairs residence was filled with small rooms previously used to house farm laborers, many of whom were the old "bachelors" found passing their time on Locke’s Main Street benches. Downstairs, at 13944 Main Street, was the location of a business that had long been closed. The huge empty floor space made for great fun to
play, climb, explore and express their imagination. There was the footprint of where a pool table once stood. Along one wall was a long counter and behind it some equipment for dispensing soda and some stacked boxes. All remnants were a hint of the business’s previous life.

Venturing out onto the main street, residents passed by leisurely. Greeting the mostly elderly Chinese neighbors per Chinese custom, everyone was an “auntie” or “uncle” in Locke. Everyone was protective and watchful of Connie and Wayne because Locke’s residents shared the innate and prevalent thought of a vested and caring community, of collective members in support of each other. These residents and elders were the pillar of wisdom, quiet strength and resolve. They embraced the newcomers and created a sense of stability and refuge after a tumultuous family life in China and Hong Kong.

Connie recalls Grandpa Gung Gung and Mom set out to work each day. Mom worked outside the home at whatever jobs were available, including clearing fields, picking grapes, canning work, and cleaning. After work each day, Mom continued her work maintaining the household. Additionally she tended her two prolific plots in the community garden, producing enough vegetables to feed the family (and often the neighbors) through the year. Within a year of hard work and frugal living, Saer Choy and daughter Yin Kwan pooled their resources, enabling them to finally purchase a home of their own on Key Street. Saer Choy’s daughter Lillian and son-in-law Stephen would come to visit with grandchildren in tow. Stephen loved to improve their family home with new cabinets and other handyman projects. Connie remembered Auntie Lillian and Uncle Stephen as kind and industrious people, devoted to family and eager to help.

The family settled into their house in the back portion of Locke, considered as the residential zone. Connie and Wayne found playmates across the street with the Ng family, the only other family with school-age kids. At school the other students were all non-Chinese. Navigating between the world outside Locke and the world of her Chinese elders Connie often felt conflicted, confused and frustrated. Comparing herself and her family’s limited resources with the lifestyle of her friends at school was challenging.

The disparity was significant. By age 10, Connie had learned enough English to translate when sister Sylvia made frequent medical visits to address her declining health. But neither Yin Kwan nor Connie felt prepared or adequate an advocate for Sylvia. Of note, surrounded by the wisdom, resilience and kindness of the Chinese residents of Locke and nurtured by their support Connie grew up inspired by their work ethic, independence and ingenuity. Never more profound was this than when Connie collaborated on what would become one of the most intimate and insightful books about Locke and its residents. In 1987 author Jeff Gillenkirk and photographer James Mollgow published Bitter Melon, Inside America’s Last Rural Chinese Town. Connie was the translator and confidant who bridged the gap that revealed these residents to the world. The depth and breadth of her role impacts her still.

When asked how Connie was influenced by Locke and its residents, she recounts her work in public health. Connie was deeply affected by her inadequacy as a child of 10 having to translate and advocate for her sister Sylvia’s chronic health conditions. Sylvia would eventually succumb to her illness at the young age of 28.

Today Connie serves as the Executive Director of the Center for Collaborative Planning (CCP), a program of the nonprofit organization, the Public Health Institute (PHI). She “works with communities across California to understand the root cause of poor health and develop solutions to strengthen health and well-being”. The residents of Locke taught her “courage, resilience and the commitment to family...the importance of looking to each other for mutual support and assistance...the social connections and bonds that tie us together through culture, language, traditions...Locke’s residents struggled and didn’t have much choice in their lives, but made sure future generations had choices.”

Connie strives to honor those elders and the life lessons they shared, to help others and communities thrive. After years of hard labor, Saer Choy’s stooped body showed the struggles and sacrifice of his years. He retired as a Master Gardener for the Wheeler family ranch, but continued to garden the outside of his house and work his own garden plot in Locke. As content as life may have been for Saer Choy, he and Yin Kwan doubled-down on the efforts to reunite Yin’s remaining children in Mainland China and in Hong Kong. Soon Saer Choy left China as a young man in his mid-20s with a dream and very little else. He passed in Locke in 1980 at the age of 91 having persevered and sacrificed to realize his dream. A life well-lived, Saer Choy’s legacy continues through his many grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great great-grandchildren.
Locke Foundation Membership Application/Renewal

Last Name ___________________________________ First Name __________________________________________

Mailing address ____________________________________________________________________________________

Email address __________________________ Tel (      )____________________ Cell (      )________________________

I would like to volunteer for the following activities:

Guided tour docent _______________________ __ Boarding House Volunteer _________________

Contributor to newsletter _______________________ Media contacts _________________ Landscape maintenance _________________

Donation: __________________________ Designated purpose (if any) __________________________________________________________________________

Membership Dues: circle one

_____ $25 Individual Annual/$200 Lifetime

_____ $50 Family or Non-Profit Organization Annual/$300 Lifetime

_____ $100 Business Annual/$500 Lifetime

Make check payable to Locke Foundation. Please return this form with check to Locke Foundation, P. O. Box 1085, Walnut Grove, CA 95690. Contributions are tax deductible to extent allowed by law. Tax ID: 20-0364281.

Office use only:
Date application received ______________ Membership Year __________ Renewal ______________

Locke Foundation
P. O. Box 1085
Walnut Grove, CA 95690

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