

IWAO KODAMA

This is a statement by Mr. Iwao Kodama who was born June 15, 1897 (Meiji 30) in Japan. Mr. Kodama is from Hiroshima-ken, Yamagatagun, Tsutsugamura. Mr. Kodama is one of the living pioneers of the Biola area and has written this history of the Biola area.

#### MINI-HISTORY OF THE JAPANESE AMERICANS IN THE BIOLA AREA

An area generally known as the Biola-Kerman District is the area about 20 miles west of the city of Fresno along the San Joaquin River to the area on the opposite side of the river in Madera County. It is believed that this district was the last area in Fresno County to attract Japanese migration. One of the reasons for this was because this area did not serve as a main connection route, geographically-speaking, to other towns and villages from Fresno. And another reason was that, economically-speaking, the district was composed of farms owned and operated by farming families themselves and required little outside labor. We have heard that the Kerman area was composed mostly of Russian immigrants whose lifestyle was different from others, having their own religion and speaking their own language. The Biola area was settled mostly by Russians of German heritage. Both areas were developed by these people. They have succeeded in laying the foundation for developing the production of Thompson Seedless grapes, one of the main agricultural products in the Central California Valley.

About 63 years ago, in 1917, the Japanese people began to settle in this district. As stated above, the early settlers had owned and operated their farms by family tradition, just like the Japanese people. But the Japanese newcomers had difficulties moving into the district, because of the traditional family set-up of the earlier settlers, and because the land prices were high. However, when the Japanese newcomers began to settle in the district, they discovered that the earlier settlers had something in common with the Japanese. Like Japanese, the earlier settlers were industrious and devoted to cleanliness and group living. The Japanese also discovered, pleasantly, that they were candid, open-hearted, and unassuming--not prone to being provincial like many of the Japanese themselves.

The first Japanese family to move into this district was the family of the late Noriaki Morita who came from the Herndon area and bought 40 acres of vineyard on the outskirts of Biola town. The following year, the late Konai Ogawa brothers and the late Mr. Masaroku Sakomoto acquired, in partnership, 80 acres of peaches and grapes near the Skaggs Bridge along the San Joaquin River. It took them one full day from Sanger to move to their new property by horse-drawn wagon. There were some spots on the present Shaw Avenue that could not be negotiated even by wagon at this time. There were beavers and salmon in the river at that time, and we are told that coyotes roamed in the bushes in the countryside.

Within the next two or three years, in the 1920's, the following Japanese settlers from the various Central California areas moved into the district and acquired acreage. It took great pioneering effort and hardship by both men and women to turn the undeveloped land into the successful agricultural land that one sees today. Except for two or three people, all of these Japanese pioneers have passed away after successfully achieving their goals, both socially and economically.

Those that are gone are Mr. Morita, the Ogawa brothers, Mr. Sakamoto, and Messrs. Shojiro Kono, Tatsutaro Kodama, Seiichi Kubo, Asataro Sakata and his brother, Kahei Kaneichi, Katsujiro Sanwo and his brother, Masaji Emoto, Mitsutaro Kakimoto, and Yoshiyasu Arakaki. Iwao Kodama of Biola and Tsutomu Kondo, who resides in Japan, are the two remaining pioneers today.

Later, the late Mr. Kumahiko Yamanaka moved into the district in 1933 and acquired a vineyard; the late Mr. Eiyo Nishimura and Mr. Masataro Kubo (still alive) moved into the district in 1937 and acquired a vineyard as partners.

In the postwar period, Mr. Nobe Miyamoto and Mr. Jack Mori have acquired vineyards and in 1972 Mr. Toyoshi Asanuma purchased land and planted fig trees which reportedly, are producing abundant crops at the present time.

Aside from Mr. Kondo, who sold his property and returned to Japan before the war, all the other Japanese American families have retained their holdings, and the Nisei have followed in the footsteps of their parents. With the understanding help of their wives, they are successfully engaged in their agricultural enterprises in this area. They are well aware of the fact that their holdings were inherited from their parents.

Meanwhile, it may be well to record the past activities of the Japanese American farming community here. A small group of newcomers who settled in this area around 1920, got together in the fall of 1921 at the homes of Mr. Kataoka and the Ogawa brothers for a social meeting. There were 10 persons present at this meeting. They decided to form an organization, called the Biola Kyowa Kai, to promote their mutual welfare. In the following year, 1922, the Biola Kyowa Kai acquired two acres of land on the outskirts of Biola town to construct a meeting place. For this purpose, the entire membership of the organization participated in this community activity. The community hall being used even today was built at that time. The property has a baseball diamond and playground for Kibei and Yobiyose young people. The hall came to be used for various community gatherings. With the increase in Japanese American population, the hall has been used for Buddhist Sunday School, Buddhist services, and the showing of Japanese movies. In September of 1924, the Japanese language school saw its inception with Mrs. Toshimi Kodama as teacher. Two years later, the hall was expanded to hold two classes to accommodate the increasing number of language students. (The teaching staff was increased by a principal Mr. Iawo Kodama.) There were more than 80 students in this school at one time. The school was thus in operation until wartime evacuation.

Seven of the graduates of the Biola Japanese Language School, who were interned at the Jerome, Arkansas WRA concentration camp during the war, served in the military service; five of them as intelligence personnel, most of them in Japan. One of them Takio Kaneichi died in action on the Italian front as a soldier of the famous 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Isao Kodama was in Tokyo as interpreter-translator for the United States Armed Forces. The others are Lieutenant Yeiji Kono, Sergeants Takashi Morita, Yutaka Kobori and brothers Nariyoshi and Narihiko Yamanaka.

It is also interesting to note that the Biola Kyowa Kai took active part in the annual Raisin Day celebrating the autumn harvest season and was awarded special prizes for its elaborate float every year. The Kyowa Kai

was requested at one time by the VFW, Biola Chapter, to participate in the former Armistice Day Celebration sponsored by Fresno County. The Biola Kyowa Kai accepted the invitation with pleasure and entered a float with Japanese and white girls of the local veterans' families aboard. This unique float attracted much attention and was applauded warmly by officials and people alike.

In 1925, or thereabouts, a Japanese Kangyo Ginko (bank) was established on the former site of the then Bank of Italy at the corner of "F" and Tulare Streets in Fresno. The bank closed business several years later. However, a branch of this bank saw its days next to the present grocery store in Biola town. No one seems to know much about this bank now.

In retrospect, it may be said that there was much expectation entertained by Japanese to develop the area, before the war, as a promised land. But, aside from ordinary farm workers, there was little space for Japanese to move into the area to settle here. Consequently, only a small number of Japanese, about the same number as before the war, came back from evacuation camps for resettlement after the war. These were the people who had owned property before evacuation. In spite of it, the Kyowa Kai was reactivated and has come to be the focal point of our community activities. It took the combined efforts of both Issei and Nisei men and women to refill the four years of community vacuum created by wartime evacuation. It is now the era of the Nisei, who are blessed with their generous parental legacy and the fortunate trend of the times. Nisei are now in the position to pour their energy and economic stability for the good of their children and community. Nisei are now able to enjoy a lifestyle far surpassing that of their Issei parents. It is devoutly hoped that they, and their children, will not forget their parental legacy and will forever be thankful for what they enjoy today which was built on the past.