

State of California – The Resources Agency
DEPARTMENT OF PARKS AND RECREATION
PRIMARY RECORD

Primary # _____
HRI # _____
Trinomial _____
NRHP Status Code _____

Other Listings _____
Review Code _____ Reviewer _____ Date _____

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*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) Site of the First Vacaville Buddhist Church

P1. Other Identifier: O-tera

*P2. Location: Not for Publication Unrestricted
and (P2b and P2c or P2d. Attach a Location Map as necessary.)

*a. County Solano

*b. USGS 7.5' Quad _____ Date _____ T _____; R _____; ¼ of Sec _____; B.M. _____

c. Address 300 East Monte Vista Avenue City Vacaville Zip 95688

d. UTM: (give more than one for large and/or linear resources) Zone _____; _____ mE/ _____ mN

e. Other Locational Data: (e.g., parcel #, directions to resource, elevation, etc., as appropriate)

APN: 0130-094-0190

*P3a. Description: (Describe resource and its major elements. Include design, materials, condition, alterations, size, setting, and boundaries)

The Vacaville Buddhist Church (1912) site now has a retail business constructed on it (Pearson's Florists). Some of the surrounding vegetation may be remnants from the Church and Nihon Gakko (Japanese Language School). Otherwise, there is no evidence that the Church was ever there, other than a local point of interest marker that has been placed between the parcels with a brief description of the significance of the site. The creek that once ran across the south side of the two parcels has since been covered with fill dirt and is no longer visible. (See Continuation Sheets)

*P3b. Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes) HP39

*P4. Resources Present: Building Structure Object Site District Element of District Other (Isolates, etc.)



P5b. Description of Photo: (View, date, accession #) Camera facing west, historic photo (n.d.) from the Vacaville Museum, Tagani Osugi Collection

*P6. Date Constructed/Age and Sources:
 Historic Prehistoric Both
1912– Determined by deeds and newspapers from the period and personal experience

*P7. Owner and Address:
Charles B. Rickets
618 Cougar Court
Vacaville, CA 95688

*P8. Recorded by: (Name, affiliation, address)
Takashi Tsujita
1267 Nevis Court
Sacramento, CA 95822

P9. Date Recorded: January 28, 2007

P10. Survey Type: (Describe) N/A

*P11. Report Citation: (Cite survey report and other sources, or enter "none.") California Point of Historical Interest Nomination

*Attachments: NONE Location Map Sketch Map Continuation Sheet Building, Structure, and Object Record Archaeological Record
 District Record Linear Feature Record Milling Station Record Rock Art Record Artifact Record Photograph Record
 Other (list) _____

BUILDING, STRUCTURE, AND OBJECT RECORD

B1. Historic Name: O-tera
B2. Common Name: Vacaville Buddhist Church
B3. Original Use: Church, School, Community Center, Residence B4. Present Use: N/A
*B5. Architectural Style: N/A
*B6. Construction History: (Construction date, alteration, and date of alterations) 1912

*B7. Moved? No Yes Unknown Date: _____ Original Location: _____
*B8. Related Features: Cherry trees, pine trees, and shrubs planted in front of Church with a San Gal Ben Rel (inscribed stone). This inscription of the stone is "Past, Present and Future." This stone is the last remaining feature of the Church and it was moved to the present location at the Vacaville-Elmira Cemetery, next to a monument stone inscribed with "E Ko Jo Sho" (E "Compassion" Ko "Light of Wisdom" Jo (Always Sho "Shine"). The two parcels for the church and school were separated by a low rock wall, which served among other things a bench for the students. There were two walkways between the parcels. The school playground was surrounded by a 15 foot wire fence.

B9. Architect: Unknown b. Builder: Yoshiaki Okita, Gen Contractor
*B10. Significance: Theme Development of Japanese-American Communities Area Vacaville, CA
Period of Significance 1912-1951 Property Type Site Applicable Criteria 1

(Discuss importance in terms of historical or architectural context as defined by theme, period, and geographic scope. Also address integrity.)
The site of the Vacaville Buddhist Church meets the registration criteria for designation as a Point of Historical Interest because it was the first and only resource of its kind in Vacaville, Solano County. The Japanese played a pivotal role in the growth and development of the fresh fruit industry and its boom in the late 1880s. Originally, the Japanese who came to Vacaville were migrant workers who followed the harvest cycles; but soon they began to settle in Vacaville and establish a community of their own. One reason for this transition was the inadvertent consequence of the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, which prohibited the immigration of male Japanese laborers, in order to curb the influx of cheap labor as a means to protect jobs for native workers. However, under the agreement, wives, parents and children of resident immigrants could still immigrate to the United States. Thus, the provision resulted in an influx in the female Japanese population and a substantial increase in the birth rate for Japaense Issei (first generation) couples. (See Continuation Sheet)

B11. Additional Resource Attributes: (List attributes and codes)

*B12. References: See Continuation Sheet

B13. Remarks: Site is recognized as significant by the City of Vacaville and is marked with a commemorative plaque

*B14. Evaluator: Elissa A. DeCaro, BA History, Minor, Art History, for the Vacaville Heritage Council, PO Box 5477, Vacaville, CA 95696-5477; 707-447-0518

*Date of Evaluation: January 28, 2007

(This space reserved for official comments.)

(Sketch Map with north arrow required.)

See Separate Sheet

P3a. Description (continued)

Unlike a typical Japanese Buddhist Temple in Japan which generally consisted of seven individual structures: the pagoda, main hall, lecture hall, bell tower, repository for sutras, dormitory and dining hall, the Vacaville Buddhist Church incorporated all these elements within one two-story structure. In addition the Vacaville Buddhist Church merged Japanese and American architectural styles to create a unique form. The building has a shiplap sided structure of a Greek Revival vernacular style, with a Queen Anne influence of fish scale shingled gables and gingerbread ornamentation on the lower porch eaves. The building then incorporated Buddhist design and a "kirizuma yane" style roof, veranda, and Buddhist influenced porch railing and ornamentation. There was a wrapped veranda around the second story that could be accessed via a wide outside staircase.

The upstairs of the building housed the Hondo (worship area), an office for the minister, and a guest bedroom for visiting ministers. Downstairs was a kitchen, dining room, two bedrooms for the minister's family, and a multi-purpose room for church functions. A projection room for Japanese films was added under the stairs in later years. Outside behind the kitchen were a furo (Japanese bath) and an open area.

The interior also melded Japanese and American influences. For example, the Hondo had pews instead of the traditional mats found in Japan. There was a center nave that split the seating sections with additional aisles along the sides. The pews faced an altar area that was built atop an 18-inch-high dais where there was a gold-plated shrine. The shrine was built in Japan and shipped to Vacaville. A statue of Amida Buddha stood at the center veneration, flanked by two smaller shrines. The main altar stood in front of the shrine and there was an incense burner and a gong in front of the altar. Further, the windows had curtains instead of the traditional shoji screens. Although, for the tenth anniversary the Hondo's purple velvet curtains were removed and replaced with shoji screens.

B10. Significance (continued)

On March 22, 1908, a delegation of Japanese Issei (first generation) businessman from Vacaville went to the Buddhist Mission of North America in San Francisco to seek the permission from Reverend Koyu Uchida, Bishop, for the establishment of a Buddhist Mission of Vacaville. During that meeting the delegation was introduced to Reverend Jitsuzen Kiyohara, who was very supportive of their request.

In response to the delegations, two weeks later on April 4, 1908, the Reverends Uchida and Kiyohara came to Vacaville to provide a series of Buddhist services held at the Clarence J. Uhl Ranch. The services were given to elicit support for a church building and to promise the formation of a Buddhist community. The services were a success and with the approval of forty attendees, the Japanese Buddhist Mission of Vacaville was established. In addition Rev. Kiyohara was entrusted with the task of collecting donations for the building fund and asked to conduct services at the local labor camps until a building could be raised. To assist Rev. Kiyohara with fundraising a ten member committee was created to initiate a fundraising drive to build the church. The fundraising goal was set at five thousand dollars.

On March 18, 1911, the committee purchased a parcel of land from Thomas S. Wilson for the sum of five hundred dollars. The parcel was on the corner of Dobbins and North Street (now Monte Vista Avenue). Of note, is the fact that the committee was introduced to Thomas S. Wilson by Clarence J. Uhl, an Ohio native who settled in Vacaville in 1889 and whose ranch was the site of the first meeting referenced herein. Clarence Uhl was one of the five investors who formed the Vacaville Fruit Company and he also owned one of the most prosperous and influential tracts of land in the area. In addition, Clarence J. Uhl served as Mayor of Vacaville for twelve years and served as a Council member for fifty-three years. Mr. Uhl would have been heavily reliant on the Japanese labor during the period of the Vacaville orchard boom.

By early 1912 the fundraising goal was achieved and the committee retained Yoshiaki Okita as General Contractor to build the church. Construction began on March 28, 1912, and the framing work was complete by April 19, 1912. Prior to construction being finished, the first service was held on September 8, 1912. Following completion of the Church, a special dedication service was held on November 3, 1912. The Board of Directors of the Japanese Buddhist Mission of Vacaville registered the official statement of completion for the Vacaville Buddhist Church with the State of California on July 13, 1913. Although formally registered as the Vacaville Buddhist Church, the congregation members referred to the church as "O-tera" (Japanese for "church").

On December 8, 1912, the Vacaville Buddhist Church established a Nihon Gakko (Japanese Language School) which met downstairs in the multi-purpose room. The school was established in order to assure continuity among the generations. In particular to ensure that the Nisei (second generation) could converse with their parents and grandparents and would know and understand the Japanese culture and customs. Japanese language schools were important social and cultural institutions in California, particularly after 1902. Virtually every Japanese community had a language school. As enrollment of the school increased and various clubs and organizations were formed, a separate building became necessary. On October 10, 1927, the church purchased the neighboring parcel from Mr. and Mrs. Chong Quong Fong so that a building for the Nihon Gakko could be built. The school was constructed by a Mr. Kunichika (first name unknown) and was completed in April of 1928, for a cost of \$6,000.

The establishment of the Vacaville Buddhist Church epitomized the transition that was occurring among the Japanese Issei immigrants who had settled in Vacaville. The Vacaville Buddhist Church became the center of the Japanese community and provided for all the religious, educational and recreational needs. The Church also provided a connection to the homeland, while incorporating American influences. For example, from the inception the Vacaville Buddhist Church was never called a temple, it was always known as a church. There were many social organizations associated with the Church. Rev. Kiyohara helped members of the community form the first Fujinkai (Women's Association) on January 22, 1913. The Fujinkai were church members who provided all the food preparation and cooking for celebrations. The Church started a Lotus Club for its young people in April 1926. Membership grew large enough that two years later there were separate clubs for girls and boys. The Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) was advised by the Church elders. The organization provided entertainment, food on Mother's Day, and sponsored activities and sporting events. The Vacaville Young Women's Buddhist Association (YMBA) – known as the Lubmini Club after 1929 – sponsored the Northern California Young Women's Buddhist Conference in 1930 and 1934. Three years later in 1937, the Vacaville Buddhist Church hosted a regional conference for both youth organizations.

The Vacaville Buddhist Church became the cultural center for the Japanese community. The church hall regularly hosted operas, plays, and concerts that often featured visiting performers from Japan. Young girls learned traditional Japanese dances at the recreation hall. Young boys joined baseball and basketball teams sponsored by the Buddhist Church youth groups.

The beginning of the end for the Vacaville Buddhist Church was the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and the subsequent Executive Order 9066 signed by the United States President Franklin D. Roosevelt for the evacuation and internment of 120,000 Japanese on the West Coast. All of Vacaville's Japanese immigrants as well as Japanese-American citizens of the United States were forced to leave on May 2, 1942. There had always been an undercurrent of pervasive and deep-rooted prejudice on the part of the Anglo community, but the Japanese immigrant community thrived despite these underlying tensions. Nevertheless, the forced internment of the Japanese community during World War II brought a swift and immediate end to Vacaville's Japanese district and to the Vacaville Buddhist Church and Nihon Gakko.

As part of the Executive Order 9066, individuals were told to "take only what you can carry." The Vacaville Buddhist Church hall served as a storage facility for many Japanese families' treasured keepsakes. However, the church was not secured, nor was it respected by the Anglo residents; thus the church was vandalized and the possessions stolen or destroyed. A further affront was the haphazard storage of urns of family ashes entrusted to the care of the local cemetery. The ashes were placed in a wooden shack and could not withstand the weather; the water seepage from the rain caused the ashes of loved ones on the bottom layers of urns crumbled and broken and washed away.

Once the West Coast Exclusion Act was lifted on January 2, 1945, the interned Japanese were free to return to their former community. However, many found that it was either too painful or simply not feasible to return. Further, the Anglo community was still very hostile towards the Japanese community, as evidenced by the petition that was signed by fifteen-hundred local residents in an attempt to prohibit the Japanese from returning to Vacaville. Thus the Vacaville Japanese community was never able to fully recover and attain the prosperity of the pre-war years.

With the influx of Vacaville's returning evacuees, there were insufficient housing and employment and most had to relocate elsewhere. They moved to places in Santa Clara County, Placer County or Southern California. Others moved to Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles or wherever there was housing and employment. It is unknown which family returned to Vacaville first but the partial list shows there were more than thirty families returned to Vacaville before moving on. Today there are but a few families who elected to remain in Vacaville after they returned. There were few other families relocated to other counties but later returned to Vacaville and farmed.

For those families who did return to Vacaville, the Vacaville Buddhist Church and Nihon Gakko provided shelter and assistance. Both structures were used as a hostel for families and single people alike. In addition, Clarence J. Uhl offered shelter and employment on his ranch to some of the families who returned. By cooperation by all and taking turn to use the kitchen, bathroom and laundry facilities and made the best of it. When the first Internees returned to Vacaville the hall was occupied by transient workers and the evacuees could not move into it. The Japanese squeezed into other parts of the church the best they can. The upstairs Hondo was never used as a bedroom but the rest of the church's hall, the minister's office, minister's living quarters, classrooms and every available space were occupied. After the transients left the downstairs hall was partitioned for some privacy to each family.

The school age children enrolled and attended Vacaville schools and graduated like their older brothers and sisters did some three years earlier. When the evacuees came back to Vacaville the life we left behind farming was on limited scale. Consequently, most moved on to other occupation such employment as civil service, grocery stores and many pursued self-employed Gardner. Total maybe ten families remained in Vacaville after the evacuation.

The church never formally re-opened with a resident minister (although it technically remained a sub-church of the Sacramento Buddhist Church). The last formal service held at the Vacaville Buddhist Church was the funeral service for Shinichi Okabata on February 18, 1948. Many of the Vacaville Buddhist people became members of Sacramento Buddhist Church Sacramento being the closest Buddhist Church. Today a total of 30 from nearby community visit Vacaville on Memorial Day for a Memorial Service held at the Elmira-Vacaville Cemetery with the Sacramento Betsuin Ministers officiating. Before the fire there were few services held at the Vacaville Buddhist Church with minister from Sacramento Buddhist Church conducting the services.

On November 23, 1951, both structures burned to the ground due to a fire. The *official* cause of fire was a kerosene stove being used by two residents as a heater exploded. The fire severely injured one resident and killed another, both of whom were fighting the fire. On June 5, 1956, the Vacaville Buddhist Church and Nihon Gakko property was sold and the church itself formally dissolved on December 23, 1958. On June 2, 2001 a stone monument was placed at the site in dedication of the Vacaville Buddhist Church.

On June 5, 1956 the four parcels of land belonging to the Buddhist Church of Vacaville were sold to Walter C. Hansel for total sum of Twelve thousand dollars \$12,000. On December 23, 1958 a special meeting was held by the church's officers and directors in order to dissolve and distribute all cash from checking and savings account and moneys received from the sale of the property for the Corporation of Vacaville Buddhist Church. All the monies were donated to Buddhist Church of America, San Francisco to Sacramento Buddhist Church and to Florin Buddhist Church.

B12. References

Deeds:

Grant Deed from T. S. Wilson to J. Kiyohara Trustee for the Japanese Buddhist Mission of Vacaville, Dated March 18, 1911, and Recorded at the Office of the Solano County Recorder on March 21, 1911 in Book 183 at Pages 273 and 274 of Official Recorder.

Grant Deed from Fong, Chong Quong, also known as Fred Q. Fong, a native born Chinese citizen, and Yee Quce Fong, his wife, to William Okubo, a native born Japanese citizen. Dated October 10, 1927 and Recorded at the Office of the Solano County Recorder on October 17, 1927, in Book 4, at Page 303, as instrument Number 3584 of Official Recorder.

Grant Deed from Property Control Board of Vacaville Buddhist Church, a corporation, to Walter C. Hansel, a married man, Dated June 6, 1956 and Recorded at the Office of the Solano County Recorder on June 14, 1956, in Book 834, at Page 227 of Official Recorder.

Grant Deed from Property Control Board of Vacaville Buddhist Church, a corporation, to Walter C. Hansel, a married man, Dated June 6, 1956 and Recorded at the Office of the Solano County Recorder on June 14, 1956, in Book 834, at Page 229 of Official Recorder.

Grant Deed from BT Properties S, a California general partnership, to Charles B. Ricketts and Jackie A. Ricketts, Husband and Wife, as Joint Tenants, Dated March 10, 1995, and Recorded at the Office of the Solano County Recorder on October 12, 1995, as instrument Number: 1995-00063571 of Official Records.

Books:

Limbaugh, Ronald H. and Payne, Walter A. *Vacaville, The Heritage of a California Community*, Vacaville, California: Fremont Litho, 1978.

Tsujita, Takashi and Nolan, Karen, *Omo I de: Memories of Vacaville's Lost Japanese Community*, Vacaville, California, Alphagraphics, 2001.

Tsujita, Takashi, *Vacaville Buddhist Church 1980-1951*: Sacramento, California, Tom's Printing Co. January 2006

Internet:

Historical: Articles of Solano County, *Uhl Family's Peachy Start in Vacaville*, Sunday September 14, 1997:
<http://www.solaoarticles.com>

Five Views: An Ethnic Historic Site Survey for California, A History of Japanese American in California
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online.books/5views/5views4.htm>.

JAANUS: Japanese Architecture and Art Net Users System. www.aisf.or.jp/jaanus/deta/k/kirizumayana.htm.

Japan Guide.com, www.japan-guide.com/e/e4007.html

Obituary:

Clarence J. Uhl, <http://63.192.157.117/specials/Century/1960/news13.html>

Personal Source:

Charlotte Ver Vaeke, 213 Peach Tree Avenue, Vacaville, California 95688

Minamide, Masako (Ichimoto), 9658 Clipper Cove Place, Elk Grove, California 95758-1962, (916) 684-0369

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*Resource Name or # (Assigned by recorder) Site of the First Vacaville Buddhist Church

*Recorded by Takashi Tsujita *Date January 28, 2007 Continuation Update

Photographs (continued)



Historic Photo of Nihon Gakko, from *Vacaville Buddhist Church 1908-1951*
by Takashi Tsujita, January 2006.