

California man, who saved Japanese farms during WWII, turns 100

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More than 150 relatives, friends and neighbors filled Florin Community Center on Sunday to celebrate a true American war hero. Bob Fletcher — who officially turns 100 on Tuesday — didn't see combat in World War II. But he was shot at for being a Japanese sympathizer when he quit his job to save three local Japanese American farms whose owners were sent to internment camps.

Most of Sacramento's 3,000 Japanese Americans who were shipped off to barbed-wire camps from 1942 to 1945 lost everything — even though most were U.S. citizens. Their farms and homes were stolen or foreclosed on by the banks. But Fletcher, a UC Davis-trained agricultural inspector, knew many Japanese farmers throughout Northern California and hated to see their hard work and life savings disappear. "They were the same as everybody else — it was obvious they had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor," Fletcher said.

At his neighbors' request, he agreed to work three farms — 90 acres of flame Tokay grapes on Florin-Perkins Road — while the Tsukamotos, Okamotos and Nittas were locked up. Fletcher was called a "Jap lover" and dodged a bullet fired into the Tsukamotos' barn. A local business posted a sign reading, "We don't want Japs back here — EVER." One of the many celebrants who gave Fletcher a big birthday hug was Doris Taketa, who was 12 when she was sent to Jerome, Arkansas, with her father and mother, Joichi and Shizuko Nitta, and two sisters.

"We owe you everything," she said, bringing a smile to Fletcher's face as he finished off a slice of coconut cake, his favorite. "We had 40 acres of flame Tokay grapes and we would have lost it if Bob didn't take care of it," recalled Taketa, 81. That's what happened to the farm belonging to her husband's family. His mother, a widow, had paid off 85 percent of her 32-acre farm, "and she didn't have anywhere to come back to because they took it," said Bill Taketa, 85. He was sent to the Manzanar internment camp, then joined the U.S. Army to fight the Japanese. "We stayed in the Florin Methodist Church hostel for a few months," he said.

About 80 percent of the 2,000 Japanese living around Florin didn't return, Doris Taketa said. "They all scattered to New Jersey, and all over the country." But Fletcher worked the three farms, paid off the mortgages, took 50 percent of the net profit and gave the balance to the owners when they returned. "My mother called him God, because only God would do something like that," said a moist-eyed Doris Taketa. "I was born on that land. He took really good care of it."

The crowd applauded when they heard the story of Fletcher's heroism.