Yamato Colony: A Japanese Presence in South Florida

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Florida has been most often identified in the popular mind with oranges, sunshine, and tourism. What is perhaps less well known is the fact that land development and settlement have also been prominent characteristics of the state's colorful history. Land promoters and colonizers of every stripe competed with each other throughout Florida's past in their efforts to dispose of millions of acres of land. Particularly at the turn of the present century was the peninsula state the scene of incredible diverse and widespread settlement activities. No colonizing venture during this period, however, was more ambitiously conceived or vigorously carried out than a 1904 effort to establish a Japanese colony in south Florida.

The impetus to bring Japanese settlers to Florida was supplied by Joseph Sakai, an American educated expatriate who dreamed of establishing agricultural colonies composed of his countrymen throughout the state. These centers were to serve not only as outlets for ambitious Japanese who were increasingly feeling the pressures of Japan's growing population and limited resources, but also were to provide, if successful, profit and investment opportunities for Sakai himself. To bring about these objectives the energetic developer arrived in Jacksonville in late November, 1903, bearing letters of introduction from the dean of the New York School of Finance and other prominent persons. He presented the Jacksonville Board of Trade with a scheme to import forty or fifty Japanese families and establish them in small colonies of ten or so apiece. These groups were to engage in agricultural experiments, emphasizing the growth of silk, tea, tobacco, pineapples and rice. Sakai

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further announced that he intended to purchase a total of 67,000 acres of land for these projects.[1]

Floridians gave an enthusiastic welcome to Mr. Sakai and pledged substantial help for those to follow. Sakai received an official endorsement from Governor William Jennings, and, in a subsequent trip to Washington, he obtained similar encouragement from the U.S. Commissioner of Immigration and the Secretary of Agriculture. More substantially, the Florida East Coast Railway, along with several private investors, donated one thousand acres of land in Lee, Leon, and Manatee counties, with promises of more to come. One such speculator, retired Professor E. Warren Clark of Tallahassee, predicted that the Japanese would "revolutionize farming in this state."[2]

Sakai returned to Japan in January of 1904 to recruit the necessary agriculturists and make arrangements for passage. In this task he was aided by Count Okadaira, a member of the royal household. Like Sakai, the Count was a graduate of an American college and had a deep interest in efforts to colonize Japanese farmers.[3] The Russo-Japanese War caused some unavoidable delays, but on November 14, 1904, an advance guard of five hardy souls landed in San Francisco from the decks of the steamer *Manchuria* and announced their intentions of proceeding to Florida.[4]

After reviewing several possible sites for his first settlement, Sakai chose a section of land just north of present day Boca Raton, near the

Joseph Sakai, founder of Yamato Colony. Original picture in possession of authors.

tracks of the Florida East Coast Railway.[5] The inhabitants christened their new home "Yamato," the ancient name for Japan itself. Sakai continued to talk of locating additional colonies elsewhere in the state, mentioning frequently a site near Delray to the north, but no other settlement was made. The settlers planted heavily in pineapples for the first season and devoted lesser acreages to experiments with other crops such as silk and tea.

Initial farming work was slow and exceedingly difficult. Virgin land had to be cleared laboriously by hand with grubbing hoe, rake and shovel — an acre or so per season was all that even the most working settler could reasonably expect to finish. The tropical climate added to the hardships that the Japanese endured, and many immigrants found their first experience with Florida to be a severe disappointment. Seventy years later, one of the original residents still spoke of the rain that each season flooded fields and ruined precious crops, of the mosquitoes and flies that forced everyone to wear head-nets before going out during the summer months, and, above all, of the heat that bore down upon everyone as they worked with heavy grub hoes to clear small plots.[6]

So disgruntled became one of the settlers, a man named G. Inchinose, that he wrote to the Georgia State Department of Agriculture for information regarding the silk industry in that state. Inchinose indicated that he would leave Florida and bring several expert silk culturists with him if proper arrangements could be made. In response Georgia's Commissioner of Agriculture referred the matter to Mr. Louis B. Majid, the state's largest silk processor. Majid replied to the unhappy Florida Japanese with an offer to supply them with homes, land, and "all the mulberry leaves they need" in return for one third the eventual crop.[7] Presumably the details of the proposal failed to please the petitioners as there exists no record of their leaving.

In all probability Inchinose and his group remained in Yamato and gave over their lands to the production of pineapples. By 1906 "pines" were bringing upwards to $5.50 a crate at produce markets and the colony's future prosperity seemed assured.[8] News of this prosperity flashed back across the Pacific and sparked a small but steady flow of Japanese adventurers who were willing to make the long trip to America. One of these travellers was a penniless, but ambitious twenty year-old man named George Morikami.

As with thousands of other young Japanese in 1906, Morikami was caught in the economic dislocation brought about by the war with Russia. Although Japan won the conflict, the nation was financially

prostrated by the war and economic growth virtually ceased. A friend told Morikami of the pineapple fields in America and asked if he would be interested in going there to make a fresh start. He quickly accepted the offer. Since he lacked the money to finance such a venture, Morikami accepted an indenture contract from his employer, a Mr. Oki. In return for transportation and living expenses (300 yen or approximately $150.00) Morikami bound himself to work for three years. At the end of this term, he was to receive $500.00 as a bonus and a small grant of land. His secret desire was work three years, obtain the cash bonus, and return to his homeland where he could buy land and raise fruit trees.[9]

Morikami arrived at a settlement that showed every sign of becoming a prosperous, permanent community. By 1907 the Florida East Coast Railway had established a rail station at Yamato where all but express trains stopped. The importance of this development would be hard to overestimate as it provided the Japanese with an easy access to outside markets for their products. In this same year Sakai commissioned regular agents in Japan to direct fresh immigrants to Yamato. Obviously with an eye to native American sensibilities, Sakai took special pains to point out that these agents selected "only the pick of the Japanese agriculturists." As a further indication of economic and social stability, Sakai received permission to open a branch of the United States Post Office at Yamato.[10]

Apparently all was not work at Yamato during these early years, for the residents were reported to have visited Miami and other communities to give exhibitions of judo and other Japanese arts. One such event was Miami's tenth anniversary celebration, held in 1906. By invitation of the managers of the anniversary celebration, Mr. Sakai brought a group of his countrymen to entertain the crowd. In return, the host committee paid all their expenses incurred in the trip from Yamato.[11]

In a move to enhance his own personal power and to make the colony's operations more efficient, Sakai petitioned the state government in 1907 for permission to incorporate the settlement under the name of the Yamato Colony Association. The corporation charter stressed the mutual benefits that increased settlement could bring to Florida and the Japanese. In the words of the document, the Association would "improve local farm work, and ... introduce Japanese industries which we can adapt to the place and which may tend to advance the industries of Florida." All members of the group had to be of Japanese ancestry and agree to be governed by the constitution and rules of the Association. Elected officials, who were chosen each year during an October ballot-

ing, ran Association affairs. Proceeds from a plot of land cleared by the membership and planted in pineapples provided an operating fund. Any violation of the constitution or "any act or acts contrary to the spirit of a true Japanese" were punished by expulsion from the Association and payment of damages "to be estimated at a meeting of the members."[12]

Whether incorporation would have served to provide a firm and enduring organizational base for the Japanese settlement was never to be known. The Yamato pineapple fields were struck by a blight in 1908 and that year's production was severely reduced. Before the colony's fragile economic equilibrium could be reestablished, competition from Cuban pineapple plantations dealt a fatal blow to this cash crop.[13] Many settlers grew disillusioned with farming in Florida and booked passage for a return to the homeland. Others found themselves financially prostrate and were forced to remain and seek whatever employ was available.[14] Although Yamato survived for a number of years afterward, and many settlers stayed in the area, the dream of a flourishing agricultural community of Japanese did not survive the events of 1908.

Circumscribed economic opportunities alone cannot explain the diminished flow of Japanese immigration to Florida. Though Floridians accepted the first Japanese colonists with seemingly little overt discrimination, by 1912 an ugly strain of anti-Japanese sentiment became noticeable. The issue that engendered native misgivings centered on alien ownership of land. California had earlier passed a statute forbidding the purchase of land by non-citizens—a measure directed primarily against resident Japanese. The example of California, plus the highly publicized fact that the California law was allegedly causing numerous Japanese to leave that state for Florida, underwrote the outcry.[15]

The business dealings of former governor William Sherman Jennings gave concrete form to many latent fears. As head of a large land corporation, Jennings issued a public invitation to all Japanese in California to come and "till the Florida soil."[16] When a wealthy Japanese farmer from Los Angeles actually began recruting his countrymen for the trip to Florida, the possibility of substantial Japanese settlement seemed imminent.[17] At this juncture, deeper and potentially more disturbing concerns surfaced. Natives worried about the fact that Japanese were unable to become United States citizens, and hence would forever be an unassimilated group within the state. It was also an object of note that the newcomers manifested a deep reverence to their Emperor and many residents believed that they could never give loyalty to their new homeland. Miscegenation law prevented Japanese from intermarry-

ing with whites and excited further fears as to the ability of these people to ever move into the mainstream of American society.[18]

In a paraphrase of the immortal "Mr. Dooley," one Florida newspaper gave clear evidence of the weight of public opinion. Dooley's faithful friend, Mr. Hennessey, addressed him as follows:

> "What do ye think ef th' Japs settlin in Floriday?" "Well, said Mr. Dooley, "I've nothin' again th' Japs in particular, and I'd loike to see Togo find th' place he wants, but I don't want to see any great hordes ef Japs comin' into Floriday, an' I thinks there is the greatest danger from et. Let me tell ye, Hennessey, th' Japs ez a smart people; they's good farmers, live on next to nuthin' and saves their money fer to buy lan'. Ef'course thet's not again'em, except that they never makes good neighbors fer white payple, an' just as soon as a few ef theim get settled in wan community, property in that section ez not worth as much as it was befoor they came, because no wan but a Jap will buy et." Tis just th'same as ef th'niggers wuz thrifty, saved their money an'bought property. Ef ye had a farm an' twas surrounded by farms of niggers, how much could ye get fer et an'wouldn't you be tryin' to sell et? In Californay whole towns ez near spoilt be th' Japs; th'white farmers all wantin to get out, but no wan to buy their farms fer what they is worth. Bineby they'll be selling'to Japs but at th' Japs own price." "Ye've heared th'story ef the lad thet picked up a frozen snake an'warmed it, an'when et got thawed out et bit him. Ef we welcome th'Togos now they'll bring other Togos over here an'soon conditions will be loike they ez in Californay, an' I thinks the toime fer to stop et ez roight now... fet I belaves they ez comin."[19]

For a time in 1913 Governor Park Trammell considered calling a special session of the Legislature to make laws that would prevent aliens from owning land. Throughout the discussion, anti-Japanese sentiment surfaced repeatedly and clearly underlay the move to pass such legislation. As one writer viewed the matter, "As workers they are valuable to the white growers who would employ them, but as property owners they are not desireable."[20] Many residents felt that the answer to the problem rested in an agreement only to lease land to the Japanese. In this manner, land would bring in revenue and become developed, but the Japanese would still be subject to removal at the will of the native population. Once the land had been cleared and made productive, an uncommonly honest citizen explained, "and the industrious Japanese had demonstrated what can be done, then land can be sold to white colonizers."[21]

These developments had an immediate impact upon the Japanese

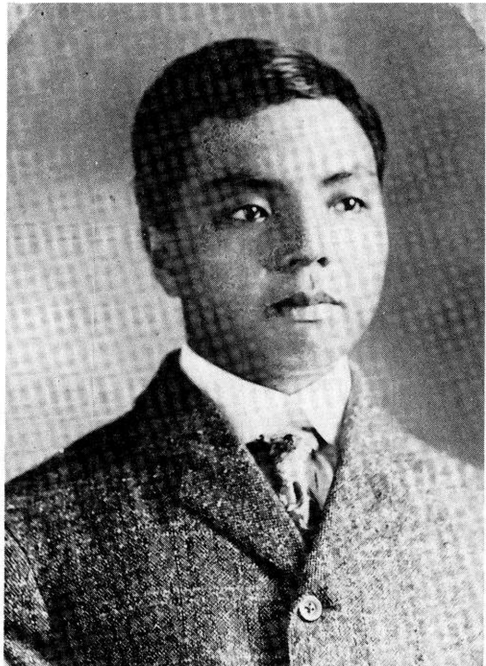
movement. Though no discriminatory laws were actually passed by the Florida government and Japanese continued to purchase land throughout the decade, new arrivals virtually stopped.[22] Indicative of the declining fortunes of the colonization venture was the decision of the United States Post Office Department to close the Yamato post office on June 4, 1919, and reroute all mail through Bocaratone (not spelled "Boca Raton" until later).[23] Thereafter, families gradually drifted away from the area or died off and the group dwindled in numbers. By the 1930s there were about thirty remaining Japanese tilling their fields and living quiet lives.

Perhaps archetypical of those hardy Japanese farmers who remained was George Morikami, the last survivor of the Yamato experiment.[24] At age 90 he still operated a farm west of Delray Beach, not far from the site of the original Japanese colony where he came in 1906. Unfortunately, shortly after he arrived in Florida a typhoid epidemic swept Yamato, and the silk merchant Mr. Oki who was his sponsor died. Young Morikami never did receive the $500.00 bonus that he had counted on for his return to Japan. At the end of three years he had no money, spoke no English, and there was little choice but to remain at Yamato and work as best he could.

It soon became apparent to Morikami that he would have to learn English to survive and prosper in this country, and he believed the best way to acquire the language was to hire out to an American family. He placed an advertisement in local newspapers offering his services, and was hired by an Eau Gallie family for room and board plus $10.00 per month. After moving to Brevard County he worked for the family just one month, finding that they wanted long hours, hard work, and offered little opportunity to learn English. Thus at age 24, George decided to seek a formal education.[25] To support himself during this time Morikami rented a small piece of land and began growing vegetables. He vividly recalls carrying 200 lb. sacks of fertilizer on his back and walking the miles of sandy road out to his garden plot. On Saturdays he would fill the sacks with produce which he sold door to door around town. Throughout 1910 he attended the local elementary school in order to learn to read and write English. The year of classes which he attended with children of the community was the extent of his formal education, but it was enough to give him the rudiments of the language.

Following the disastrous 1908 season the remaining farmers at Yamato turned to a trade in tomatoes and other vegetable crops for northern markets. Morikami returned to the settlement in 1911 and lived

with the Sakai family in their big two story house. A friend let him clear a half-acre of land and keep the proceeds from that year's harvest. The local storekeeper loaned Morikami tools, seed, fertilizer, as well as groceries on credit until he could bring in a tomato crop. As it turned out, there was a bumper yield that year and he sold his tomatoes for $4.00 a bushel-and-a-half at the Yamato packing house. At the end of the season he had erased his debts and made a $1,000.00 clear profit for his labors. With this capital the young Japanese began to buy land in the south end of Palm Beach County, primarily in the area between Boca Raton and Delray Beach.[26] With his own land, Morikami began to plant larger crops and took on five or six Negro sharecroppers. He also continued to acquire parcels of land, and at one point held title to about a thousand acres, though non-contiguous, in the area. Some of it he bought for as little as $15 to $17 per acre from the Lake Worth Drainage District, although he paid an "exhorbitant" $31 per acre for his last farm in 1941. Much of his land was lost for taxes during the depression years of the 1930s, but the resiliant farmer's spirit never broke.



George Morikami, last survivor of Yamato Colony, taken one year after arrival in Florida (1907). Picture given to authors by Mr. Morikami.

One of the most interesting aspects of Morikami's ventures was his foray into the mail order produce business. In the 1920s he noticed that many farmers were selling their crops to "commission men" who handled the shipping and marketing for a percentage. Some farmers had shipped their crops north on consignment, but they were never sure what they would make. However, the "commission men" began to send out weekly quotations to their northern customers; they would then buy produce from local farmers to fill orders at the quoted prices, often reaping handsome profits in the process. Morikami, always an astute businessman, saw no reason why he could not enter this business also— especially after he figured out that the "commission men" were making approximately $1.00 on each basket of produce! He went to a local bank and borrowed their Blue Book of individuals and firms who were preferred credit risks, and made a list of 300 names throughout the southeastern states. He then had a double perforated card printed, one side quoting produce prices and the other serving as an order form, and mailed them each week for 1c each. His first order was for five crates of tomatoes, part of which he bought from a neighbor and shipped out by railroad. As his mail order business grew he was shipping to such distant points as Washington, California, and once even to Alaska. Within three or four years he had become a wealthy man and by his own admission "I stayed in a hotel, best hotel in town. And live there and eat there." Yet the tensions of success also took their toll: "... trouble was can't sleep when you want to, see? And I got so much responsibility." His health broke and Morikami was hospitalized for ulcers. Nevertheless, during the "Boom Years" of the 1920s he amassed a fortune of close to $250,000, but this was lost when the banks failed during the depression. Morikami philosophically recalled, "I lost everything. Every cent I had in the bank. So had to start all over again."[27]

When war broke out with Japan in 1941 those few residents still left at Yamato came under suspicion. Rumors of alleged espionage activities circulated about the community, but, unlike their brothers on the West Coast, the Japanese at Yamato were not removed to relocation camps in the country's interior. They were, nevertheless, subject to restrictions on their movement. During the war years, for example, the Japanese were not allowed to leave the borders of their home county. Their success as farmers evidently served to reduce excessive discrimination as the United States needed all its agricultural production to support the war effort. Indeed, the state agricultural extension bureau regularly assigned migrant Bahamian workers to the Japanese to aid them in their farm

work.[28] Yamato aided in the fight against Japan in other ways. In the early years of the struggle, the War Department purchased the remaining Japanese holdings in the area and used part of the land to complete a United States Army Air Force complex. The old homes and barns that still stood were razed and the wreckage was used as a training site for soldiers.[29] When the war ended, all physical evidence of the Yamato colony vanished. The name, however, survives in Yamato Road which runs through the original settlement area.

During World War II the government had placed Morikami "on parole," and he remained on his farm throughout the hostilities. After the war he acquired additional parcels of land until his farm reached 150 acres. As Florida began to grow and develop in the post war years the value of his holdings soared, although the old Japanese continued to live a frugal existence. His financial future was secure and Morikami, after 61 years of residency in this country, turned his toughts to becoming a United States citizen. The McCarren-Walter Act of 1952 made it possible for orientals to become naturalized citizens. With the assistance of Ms. Virginia Snyder, a local newspaper reporter who became his close friend, he learned that he was automatically eligible for citizenship under provisions of the Act. On December 15, 1967, George Morikami at 82 years of age, took the oath which made him a citizen of the United States. This event did not go unnoticed by the citizens of Delray Beach. At a City Council Meeting on January 2, 1968, Mr. Morikami was presented a plaque designating him Honorary Mayor of Delray Beach.[30]

Several years earlier Morikami had determined to try to repay this country for the opportunity that it afforded a penniless immigrant. He donated 40 acres of land to the State of Florida for use as an Agricultural Experiment Station, and when authorities were slow in taking action he offered $30,000.00 to get the enterprise going. He made a similar offer of acreage for a city park in Delray Beach, but the city failed to accept due to lack of funds for development. After three years of delay, Morikami withdrew his offer to the city. However, in 1974 the commissioners of Palm Beach County accepted a 35 acre tract for a south county park. On March 15, 1974, official dedication ceremonies were held for Morikami Park, with numerous city and county dignitaries in attendance.[31] George Morikami was so pleased that he went down after the festivities and deeded an additional five acres. The beneficence of the last survivor of Yamato had insured a lasting memorial to the Japanese role in the settlement of the southeast coast of Florida.

NOTES

1. Jacksonville *Florida Times Union*, December 31, 1903. Also see, Walter L. Fleming, "Immigration to the Southern States," *Political Science Quarterly*, XX (June, 1905), 285.

2. Jacksonville *Florida Times Union*, December 31, 1903, January 9, 1904; West Palm Beach *Tropical Sun*, June 10, 1905.

3. "Yamato — A Japanese Colony," *Florida East Coast Homeseeker*, X (November, 1908), 363; Jacksonville *Florida Times Union*, March 9, 1906.

4. *New York Herald Tribune*, November 14, 1904, clipping found in Florida East Coast Railway Records, St. Augustine Historical Society, St. Augustine, Florida.

5. The colony was located on the extreme northern edge of present day Boca Raton, near NorthWest 51st Street. As with earlier grants of land, this section was provided by the Florida East Coast Railway. See Henry M. Flagler to Parrott, August 15, 1905, Florida East Coast Railway Records, St. Augustine Historical Society, for evidence of Flagler's interest in the venture.

6. Interview with Mr. George Morikami, the sole Japanese survivor of Yamato, June 11, 1974. Transcript in University of Florida Oral History Archives, Florida State Museum, Gainesville.

7. West Palm Beach *Tropical Sun*, September 20, 1905.

8. West Palm Beach *Tropical Sun*, October 17, 1906, November 28, 1906.

9. Morikami Interview.

10. Jacksonville *Florida Times Union*, November 2, 1906; "Yamato," *Florida East Coast Homeseeker*, X (July, 1908), 225; A.G. Bradbury, *A Chronology of Florida Post Offices* (Florida Federation of Stamp Clubs, 1962), 91.

11. Hawkins Diary, 1905-1906, July 10, 1906, Henry M. Flagler Museum, Palm Beach, Florida. In 1911 the Miami Board of Trade and the Merchant's Association united for a program celebrating the 15th anniversary of the city. Again, the Japanese were invited and part of the proceedings included "Jiu-Jitsu exhibitions (the Japanese performers came from Yamato, an agricultural settlement between Miami and West Palm Beach)." See, Isidor Cohen, *Historical Sketches and Sidelights of Miami* (Miami, 1925), 83.

12. West Palm Beach *Tropical Sun*, November 3, 1906.

13. Morikami Interview.

14. *Ibid*. Morikami himself was forced to accept a variety of job situations. At first he went to Eau Gallie and worked for a shipbuilder. After one year Morikami returned to the Boca Raton area where he took up farming. Another Japanese, E.M. Ohi, moved his family to Eau Gallie and bought land—eventually he called over his family and several cousins to work with him. He even imported a Japanese carpenter to build his home. See, *Facts About Florida That You Should Know* (Land Department of the Florida East Coast Railway, ca. 1911),15.

15. The *Miami Metropolis*, October 17, 1912; Jacksonville *Florida Grower*, October 11, 1913; March 21, 1914.

16. Jacksonville *Florida Grower*, October 11, 1913; *Fort Myers Daily Press*, July 31, 1913. A small group of California Japanese did respond to Jennings' promotions. They purchased land in Clay County and made plans to move families and belongings to Florida. When they demanded to make on-site inspections of the property before making final payments, the real estate agents resisted their appeals. Most of the prospective settlers then withdrew their offers and remained in California. Those few that came were not successful in their agricultural pursuits and within three years, all had left Florida. For more information see, Arch Fred Blakey, *Parade of Memories: A History of Clay County, Florida* (Jacksonville: Drummond Press, forthcoming).

17. Numerous reports also surfaced indicating that a Seattle lawyer had purchased 80,000 acres of land in Florida and was planning to sell this land to Japanese. Editorials theorized that this amount of land would provide sufficient space for 100,000 Japanese settlers. See, *Kissimmie Valley Gazette,* July 11, October 13, 1913; *Fort Myers Daily Press,* July 21, 30, November 6, 1913.

18. Jacksonville *Florida Grower,* October 11, 1913. During these years it was widely assumed that Japanese could not become naturalized citizens. Several test cases worked their way to the Supreme Court until the Ozawa Decision in 1922 confirmed that Japanese were not eligible for citizenship.

19. Jacksonville *Florida Grower,* September 27, 1913.

20. Jacksonville *Florida Grower,* October 18, 1913, November 15, 1913.

21. Jacksonville *Florida Grower,* November 22, 1913.

22. The Plat Book records of the Model Land Company, the principal land sales agency of the Florida East Coast Railway, clearly show that Japanese continued to buy considerable acreages of land throughout the second and third decades of the present century. These records are located at the Henry M. Flagler Museum, Palm Beach, Florida. See in particular Plat Book 6, Sec. 33/Tp 46s/R 43E and Sec. 5/Tp 47s/R 43E.

23. Bradbury, 91.

24. In December, 1974, Shiboh Kamikami died at his home in Boca Raton. He was the last survivor of the Yamato colony who actually remained within the boundaries of the original settlement. Kamikami was a brother of Joseph Sakai, but had been adopted by another family during his youth. The two were reunited briefly at Yamato. Following Sakai's death his wife and family returned to Japan, and one of his daughters still lives in Kyoto. Morikami, Sakai, and Kamikami all came from the town of Miyazu, a seaport on the northern coast of the island of Honshu, Japan.

25. There were apparently few educational opportunities available to the Japanese settlers of Yamato during the early years. A public school was not established at Boca Raton until 1915. However, a Professor Rehbinder is reported to have "inaugurated a private evening English language school for the Japanese colonists at Yamato" in 1908. See "Boca Raton," *Florida East Coast Homeseeker,* X (November, 1908), 360. One of the families at Yamato was the Kamiya's who owned a grocery and gas station. In 1936 a Frank T. Kamiya was in the first graduating class at Palm Beach Junior College but records do not reveal if he was related to the Yamato family. *Palm Beach Post,* December 30, 1973.

26. Morikami Interview.

27. Morikami Interview.

28. Interview with Mr. Norman Rose, retired agricultural extension officer, January 16, 1975. Notes in the possession of the authors.

29. *Miami Herald,* February 6, 1964; *Palm Beach Post Times,* December 30, 1973. Army officials gave the training site the colorful name of "Blitz Village."

30. *Fort Lauderdale News,* December 17, 1967. *Delray Beach News Journal,* January 4, 1968.

31. *Delray Beach News Journal,* March 21, 1974. *Palm Beach Post,* March 16, 1974.