

Bob Fletcher Dies at 101; Helped Japanese-Americans

By WILLIAM YARDLEY June 6, 2013 http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/07/us/bob-fletcher-dies-at-101-saved-farms-of-interned-japanese-americans.html?_r=0

The New York Times

Bob Fletcher, a former California agriculture inspector who, ignoring the resentment of neighbors, quit his job in the middle of World War II to manage the fruit farms of Japanese families forced to live in internment camps, died on May 23 in Sacramento. He was 101.

His death was confirmed by Doris Taketa, who was 12 when Mr. Fletcher agreed to run her family's farm in 1942, the year she and her extended family were relocated to the [Jerome War Relocation Center](#) in Arkansas.

"He saved us," Ms. Taketa said.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, the United States government forced 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast out of their homes and into internment camps for the duration of the war.

Near Sacramento, many of the Japanese who were relocated were farmers who had worked land around the town of Florin since at least the 1890s.

Mr. Fletcher, who was single and in his early 30s at the time, knew many of them through his work inspecting fruit for the government. The farmers regarded him as honest, and he respected their operations.

After President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed an executive order in February 1942 that made the relocation possible by declaring certain parts of the West to be military zones, Al Tsukamoto, whose parents arrived in the United States in 1905, approached Mr. Fletcher with a business proposal: would he be willing to manage the farms of two family friends of Mr. Tsukamoto's, one of whom was elderly, and to pay the taxes and mortgages while they were away? In return, he could keep all the profits.

Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Tsukamoto had not been close, and Mr. Fletcher had no experience growing the farmers' specialty, flame tokay grapes, but he accepted the offer and soon quit his job.

For the next three years he worked a total of 90 acres on three farms — he had also decided to run Mr. Tsukamoto's farm. He worked 18-hour days and lived in the bunkhouse Mr. Tsukamoto had reserved for migrant workers. He paid the bills of all three families — the Tsukamotos, the Okamotos and the Nittas. He kept only half of the profits.

Many Japanese-American families lost property while they were in the camps because they could not pay their bills. Most in the Florin area moved elsewhere after the war. When the Tsukamotos returned in 1945, they found that Mr. Fletcher had left them money in the bank and that his new wife, Teresa, had cleaned the Tsukamotos' house in preparation for their return. She had chosen to join her husband in the bunkhouse instead of accepting the Tsukamotos' offer to live in the family's



house.

“Teresa’s response was, ‘It’s the Tsukamotos’ house,’ ” recalled Marielle Tsukamoto, who was 5 when she and her family were sent to the Jerome center.

Ms. Tsukamoto is now the president of the Florin chapter of the [Japanese American Citizens League](#). Her mother, Mary Tsukamoto, was a teacher, activist and historian who, with Elizabeth Pinkerton, wrote “[We the People: A Story of Internment in America](#).”

Mr. Fletcher’s willingness to work the farms was not well received in Florin, where before the war some people had resented the Japanese immigrants for their success. Japanese children in the area were required to attend segregated schools. Mr. Fletcher was unruffled by personal attacks; he felt the Japanese farmers were being mistreated.

“I did know a few of them pretty well and never did agree with the evacuation,” he told The Sacramento Bee in 2010. “They were the same as anybody else. It was obvious they had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor.”

After the war, resentment against the Japanese in Florin continued. If Mr. Tsukamoto tried to buy a part at the hardware store only to be told that the part was not in stock, he would ask Mr. Fletcher to buy it for him.

Robert Emmett Fletcher Jr. was born in San Francisco on July 26, 1911, when the city was still rebuilding after the great earthquake five years earlier. He attended the University of California, Davis, and later managed a peach orchard before taking the job as a state shipping point inspector.

Survivors include his wife, the former Teresa Cassieri, to whom he was married for 67 years; their son, Robert Emmett III; three granddaughters; and five great-grandchildren.

The Fletchers bought their own land in Florin after the war and raised hay and cattle. Mr. Fletcher was a volunteer firefighter in Florin for many decades before becoming the paid fire chief. He was also active in historical groups.

He was never much for celebrating his role in the war, and he noted that other Florin residents had helped their Japanese neighbors.

“I don’t know about courage,” he said in 2010 as Florin was preparing to honor him in a ceremony. “It took a devil of a lot of work.”

A version of this article appeared in print on June 7, 2013, on page A24 of the New York edition with the headline: Bob Fletcher Dies at 101; Helped Japanese-Americans.