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The Columbian People

SUNDAY, APRIL 6, 1997



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Rooted in Vancouver



Harvest: Harvesting lettuce usually begins at 5 a.m., depending on the number of orders that need to be filled.

*From poverty to racism to growth,
the Onos have fought to keep their
farm for 50 years*

By BRETT OPPEGAARD

Columbian staff writer

On a recent sunny day, Vancouver lettuce farmer Ken Ono and a friend were in front of Ono's tool shed trying to fix a tractor when a van approached. It was pulling an old tractor on a trailer and had another one of the machines crammed inside.

The driver, dressed in overalls and a dirty baseball hat, climbed out of the van and waved to Ono.

"I see you're losing ground," the man said, pointing to the condominium skeletons rising in the background. "I'm not trying to hurry you out or anything, but I wondered if you wanted to sell your tractors?"

Ono cringed, then gave the man the answer he gives to anyone who asks about the future of his farm.

"Nope," Ono said. "Nope. I'm not going anywhere."

"Well I just don't want to miss out," the man said, persistently, explaining that he collected old farm tractors.

"If I'm going to sell, I'll put an ad in the paper," Ono said, then turned his back and returned to work. He later said he has had too many similar conversations to be drawn into small talk.

"If I do sell, then what am I going to do?" Ono said. "Sit in a rocking chair? ... I'm a farmer, and I'm going to farm until I can't anymore."

Ono said he will fight to keep his land on his terms, development be damned. He will farm as long as he wants. It's his right. It's his freedom. He says no one will ever take

that away from him or his family again.

Yet pressure comes from all sides. Subdivisions to the north. A Minit Mart, tavern and busy street to the west. A swollen and often flooded Burnt Bridge Creek to the south. And now condominiums to the east.

Ono and his family are being boxed in by urban development. Forced off their landmark lettuce farm once already, the Onos have spent decades trying to shelter their land from further assault.

That won't be easy. Quail Construction Inc. of Vancouver wants to add to its 100-unit development under construction just east of the Onos. Last month, representatives from the company offered to swap the city \$38,000 and a 20-acre parcel on Burnt Bridge Creek for permission to build about 80 more duplex-style condos on 9 acres of agricultural land next to the Onos.

That proposal infuriates Ogden Neighborhood leaders, including Ken Ono. Kathy Huss, a spokeswoman for the neighborhood association, says the fertile lands of the lettuce fields are one of the neighborhood's most prized assets and should be protected from more encroachment.

"It's one of the reasons homeowners settled here," she said. "We bought our house because we love being near a farming area. We enjoy the open space, the wildlife, the birds, hearing the frogs croak at night. ... Now all you can hear at night is cars driving by."

Ono, who works about 25 acres at 7525

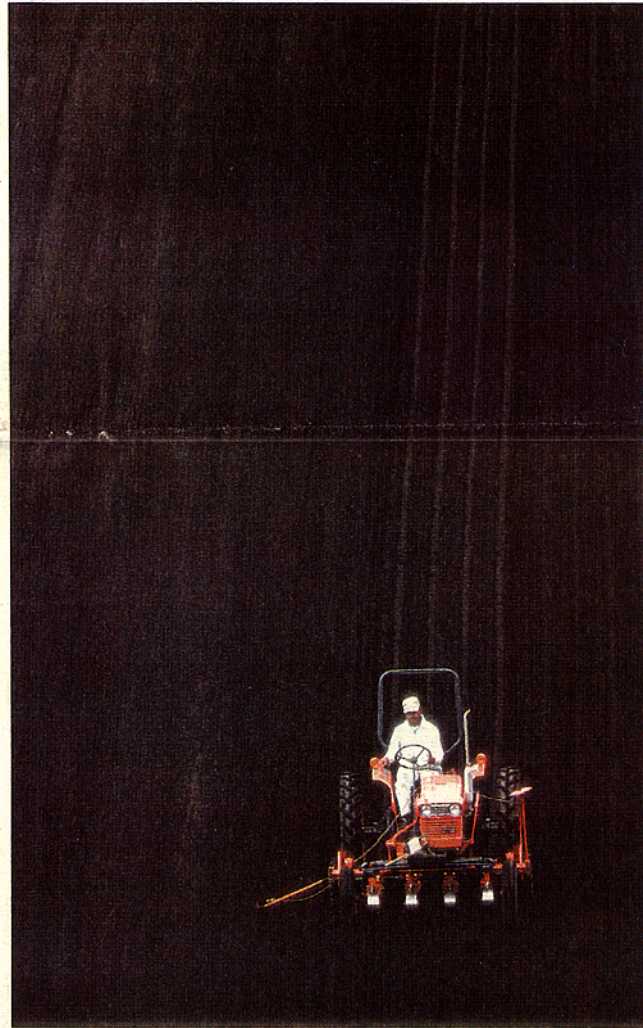
ONO FARM/ please see D10



Transportation: After a long morning of harvesting, Ono secures boxes of lettuce on his truck for transportation to market.



Flood: Recent growth around the Ono farm has contributed to flooding problems.



Planting: Ken Ono plants lettuce seed in the dark, rich soil. The Onos have farmed here since the 1930s.



Development: New homes slowly push up like weeds around the Ono farm, bringing with them a change in the landscape of what was once a rural farm community.

Ono farm

Family forced onto trains for internment in California

From Page D1

N.E. 18th St., operates one of the last small farms in the area.

Many people think Ono already is on the way out. He says people often give him condolences and ask him what kind of development is planned for his land. It's a shame, they say, another piece of rural Clark County gone.

Ono's uncle, Mojro, started cultivating the Ogden site in the 1930s. Ono's parents, Kay and Lilly, rented a small rocky lot in Sifton and raised lettuce. They both did well enough. Mojro bought his 20 acres. Kay and Lilly were working to buy their piece.

But the Onos lost their claims shortly after Dec. 7, 1941, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.

Hatred and fear of Japan triggered a mass evacuation of all Japanese nationals and Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast. More than 100,000 Japanese people, including the Onos, were forced to leave their homes.

"A Jap a Jap," U.S. Army Lt. Gen. J.L. DeWitt said at the time. "It makes no difference whether he is an American; theoretically he is still Japanese, and you can't change him."

Mojro Ono fled to Japan. Kay and Lilly Ono, who had two children and another on the way, decided to stay.

The Columbian's front-page headline on March 3, 1942, read, "Aliens forbidden to live here."

Soon afterward, the Onos were forced onto trains and shipped to California. Their possessions, including all of their farm equip-

ment, were auctioned off to the highest bidders, although the bids weren't high.

"We had no way of bargaining," Lilly Ono said. "We had to take whatever they offered."

The Onos were transported to a war camp about 35 miles southeast of Klamath Falls, Ore., called Tule Lake Project, a desolate, treeless area of northern California named after the tule weeds peppering the sandy ground.

At Tule Lake, the Onos were given 300-square-foot sleeping quarters and a map to the huge complex, more than 7,000 acres surrounded by barbed wire. A coal stove next to their bunks kept them warm. They shared a mess hall and toilets with several other families.

The Onos don't like to talk about their three years in the camp. "Those were terrible days," Lilly Ono says, shaking her head and looking to the ground.

Ken Ono, who was a child at the time, said he remembered the sand was so soft that it was difficult to walk on. The armed soldiers who paced the compound left him with a lasting impression. "From a kid's point of view," he said, "their pistols seemed about 2 feet long."

Ken Ono remembers his address at Tule Lake: Block 17, Room 2, Shed C. There was no other way to find home in this huge maze of identical buildings. At its height, Tule Lake had more than 18,000 occupants.

Some people accepted the war camps as temporary. Others felt they had been stripped of all dignity. According to historical reports, a Monterey County resident, Hideo Murata, was one who thought there was a mistake when he was ordered to move out of his home. The veteran of



Internment: Lilly Ono holds a photograph showing some of the people she was interned with at the Tule Lake relocation center.

World War I soon discovered there was no mistake.

Murata chose to go to a local hotel and kill himself. He was found clutching a Certificate of Honorary Citizenship granted him July 4, 1941, which read: "Monterey County presents this testimony of heartfelt gratitude, of honor and respect for your loyal and splendid service to the country in the great World War. Our flag was assaulted, and you gallantly took up its defense."

Internees suffered many indignities. Historical accounts tell of people who were shot for leaving the fenced area. Others were gunned down for reaching their hands through the fence.

A Tule Lake inmate named James Okamoto was confronted by a private who had a reputation of harassing internees. Okamoto, who had a work permit to drive a truck outside the camp, was stopped by the soldier who de-

manded to see his pass. Okamoto, apprehensive because he was outside the camp, refused to leave his truck. The private pulled him out, hit him with the butt of his rifle and shot him in the stomach from a distance of about 5 feet. Okamoto died.

The private was brought before a court martial two months later but acquitted of the crime. According to reports, he was fined \$1 for unauthorized use of a bullet.

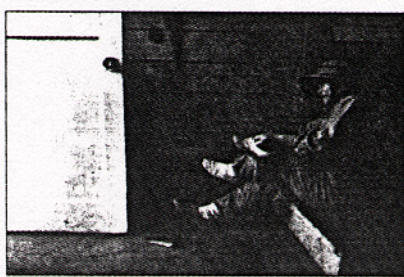
When the Onos were freed after the war ended, the family returned to Vancouver to find that Mojro Ono's farm had been ignored by its caretakers. It was overgrown with weeds, and a county road had been built through the property.

Even though Mojro Ono had owned the farm before he left, the Onos again had to buy it.

They have been working the farmland since, watching the county grow around them. Ken Ono spends just about every sunny day in his fields. When it rains, he works inside his shop. Many of his days start before dawn. Many end after dusk.

He said farming can be a tough business, but he enjoys being his own boss. He enjoys working the land, creating life with his hands, providing food for his neighbors.

The Onos make a modest living, producing about 21,000 boxes of iceberg lettuce a year, and other vegetables such as cabbage, radishes and leaf lettuce.



Back to work: Lilly Ono prepares to head to the fields after lunch.

The crops are sold for about \$6 a box at local Fred Meyer stores and wholesalers in Portland.

Ken Ono works on the farm with his mother, Lilly; his wife of more than 25 years, Tomoko; and occasionally his three grown children, Robert, 26, a medical researcher at Shriners Hospital for Children in Portland, Edward, 24, a medical technology student at University of Washington, and Laurie, 20, a music and biology student at DePauw University in Indiana.

Recently, someone drove a pickup through a field and ruined a couple of rows of lettuce. A thief broke into their shed and took tools. Trespassers often stomp through the property, crushing seedlings. Flooding of Burnt Bridge Creek seems to be getting worse each year; three lettuce fields were covered with water in September, destroying more than

\$30,000 worth of crops. Ken Ono blames city of Vancouver staff for poor creek maintenance and urban development of the city.

The condominiums to the east are being built too close to the property line, Ono said.

Ono says he expects complaints from those bordering condos because of the dust and noise his farm creates. Tomoko Ono added, "But there's nothing we can do. That's our living. Farms make noise and dust." Most of the land is zoned for high-density living, but Ken Ono "has never indicated to us that he is in the least bit interested in developing his property, said Marc Veneroso of the Vancouver Planning Commission. "He says he's farming, and that's what he wants to do. ... It's pending out for him in the short term, but the question is whether he will be able to keep it up."

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