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Introduction

From March through mid-summer FAS Japan is working on an exciting series of events called *Partners in Agriculture*. This celebration aims to commemorate the tremendous success of the U.S. cooperator program, the special agricultural relationship between the United States and Japan, the famous “hog lift,” the 50th anniversary of the Grains Council, and the 50th anniversary of the Iowa-Yamanashi sister-state relationship.

The focal point of the celebration was the visit of Secretary Vilsack and his wife Christie Vilsack from April 6- 10, accompanied by delegations from Iowa, the U.S. Grains Council and the U.S. agricultural sector. As part of the celebration, Mrs. Vilsack participated in three readings of the book *Sweet Corn and Sushi* at elementary schools in Tokyo and Yamanashi. The book is about the Iowa Hog Lift and the significance of the unique 50-year friendship between the people of Iowa and Yamanashi created by the hog lift.

Mrs. Vilsack was joined at the readings by Mrs. Lori Erickson, the author of *Sweet Corn and Sushi*. In the Japanese elementary school in Tokyo, Dr. Yukio Hattori, noted Japanese food educator and president of Hattori Culinary and Nutrition School, read this amazing story for the children in Japanese.

The readings provided a rare opportunity for the children both in Yamanashi and Tokyo to learn about the agricultural partnership that started in 1960 with Iowa Hog Lift and the significance of the long friendship between the people of Iowa and Yamanashi. The school visits included two sessions in Tokyo on April 7 and one session in Yamanashi on April 9. The children, ranging from the 3rd grade to the 6th grade, were well prepared and enthusiastically took part in the readings. The events ended in Yamanashi with the special school lunch at elementary school in Yamanashi. It featured “Fujizakura Pork,” a local pork brand derived from the 35 hogs sent to Yamanashi in 1960 and described by school officials as a “symbol of friendship” between the two peoples.

The Iowa Hog Lift

In 1959, Yamanashi Prefecture in central Japan suffered two terrible typhoons in less than a month, devastating much of the prefecture’s agriculture sector. [1] Master Sergeant Richard Thomas, who was from Iowa, was working in public relations for the U.S. Air Force in Tokyo at the time. When he heard about the heavy damage to the livestock industry in Yamanashi prefecture, he considered arranging Iowa hogs to

industry. He presented his plan to Don Motz, the U.S. Agricultural Attaché at the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo, who was excited about the project and began working on its logistics.

The idea of a “hog lift” received enthusiastic support from multiple parties in the U.S. agricultural sector including the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), key representatives of the USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) and the Japanese Agriculture Attaché in Washington D.C.

As a result, Iowa farmers donated 36 lean meat hogs rounded up by the Iowa Corn Growers’ Association, and the U.S. Air Force agreed to supply a plane to fly the hogs to Japan. The animals were shipped on a cargo plane fitted with special crates and attended to by representatives from the Iowa Corn Growers’ Association. The journey took a total of three days and involved multiple stops. At each stop, the hogs were bathed as to not overheat during the journey.

With the loss of one animal along the way, 35 hogs arrived safely in Yamanashi, and eventually populated the prefecture with their descendants. Within three years, the 35 hogs had multiplied to more than 500 thereby restarting the hog industry devastated by the typhoons. Today, most of the pork that is raised in Japan has a genetic connection to Iowa as a result of the 1960 hog lift.

Yamanashi prefecture has since repaid the kindness of the hog lift. In 1962 the people of Yamanashi sent Iowa a “Bell of Friendship” and a bell house which currently sits south of the State Capitol building in Des Moines. Furthermore, when Iowa suffered from the Great Flood of 1993, Yamanashi prefecture sent \$300,000 in flood aid relief.

The origins of *Sweet Corn and Sushi*

The origin of the book *Sweet Corn and Sushi* dates back to 1999, when Mrs. Christie Vilsack, then Iowa First Lady, and Mrs. Lori Erickson came to Yamanashi prefecture as part of an Iowa sister state delegation. During the visit, which was their first to Japan, they learned about a touching but little-known story about the Iowa Hog Lift and felt it important to make sure that this amazing story be told to today’s children and to the next generation of children. They thought that with few people living today to share the story “it would die” if someone would not write about it. They agreed that a book would be the way to keep alive the story, which contains many lessons for people on both sides of the Pacific.

The talk that began between the two during the trip eventually led to the publication of *Sweet Corn and Sushi*, a bilingual book with many illustrations. Mrs. Erickson says it was important to her that the book be written both in Japanese and English so that it would be read equally and its message be passed widely in the two countries.

Mrs. Erickson describes the book as one about the power of friendship. “A most unlikely friendship” was formed thanks largely to the effort of one man, an Iowan who had served in the U.S. military in Japan after World War II. It has blossomed to this day. Likening to a pebble in the pond, she says that the ripples created fifty years ago by just one person, Master Sergeant Richard Thomas, are continuing to develop today. Indeed, the ripples may have gained a new force with hundreds of copies having been newly published recently to be donated widely not only in these elementary schools but elsewhere during the period of the *Partners in Agriculture* promotion.

As First Lady of Iowa, Mrs. Vilsack launched “Iowa Stories” literacy program in 2000. Each year she picked one book written by Iowans about Iowa and delivered it to over 40,000 families with a kindergartener throughout the state while raising funds to make that possible. *Sweet Corn and Sushi* was the third book chosen in 2004 for that program.

Tokyo

The first two readings took place on April 7 in Tokyo at Akasaka Elementary School, a public school in Tokyo’s Minato Ward. Mrs. Vilsack and Mrs. Erickson met with an audience of 74 students in the 6th grade in their tidy carpeted auditorium. “I did not know about the story [described in the book] as a child,” Mrs. Vilsack told the children in class. “I wanted to make sure” that today’s children would grow up knowing what had happened fifty years ago, she added. After the opening remarks to give the background how the book came about, they took turns reading the story while Dr. Yukio Hattori, president of Hattori Culinary and Nutrition School, joined the two Iowans by reading in Japanese to help the children keep up with the English reading.

Following the lively session at the local public school, Mrs. Vilsack and Mrs. Erickson visited the International School of the Sacred Heart (ISSH), also in central Tokyo, for another reading. This time, the class consisted of 3rd grade students. The format was slightly different as the students there all spoke English. They spent most of their time answering the children’s questions instead of doing the reading. Even so, time ran out before Mrs. Vilsack and Mrs. Erickson were able to respond to all those enthusiastic children who had raised their hands.

The students at both schools, who had read the book before the class, asked a wide range of questions reflecting the general appeal of the story beyond people in Yamanashi and Iowa or rural regions. “Why did they do a book?” “Why does the title say sushi?” “How do you like Japan?” were some of the typical questions the children asked. In addition, Japanese students, intrigued by the difference in culture of shoe wearing at home (briefly described in the book), asked a few questions about that practice. Mrs. Erickson says they are some of the most common questions she receives from children in both countries. Meanwhile, nearly everyone in class said they had eaten sweet corn when asked in turn by the American visitors.

There was little question that the readings are proof that what the two collaborators had hoped to accomplish when they set about discussing a book is now actually happening; that is, the story is now being passed onto the next generation of children. The book readings also served as an opportunity for the children to learn about the bilateral relationship between the United States and Japan and our different cultures. Local government officials of Minato Ward, which places an emphasis on teaching international studies and English, said that they were pleased to see the students get a chance to help deepen their understanding of people outside Japan through the reading.

Kofu

The third reading took place on April 9 at Joei Elementary School, a public school in Yamanashi, as part of the local ceremonies for the 50th anniversary of the sister state relationship between Iowa and Yamanashi. The Iowa visitors included Bill Northey, Iowa Secretary of Agriculture, and members of the U.S. Grains Council.

The series of readings culminated with the special school lunch based on the winning menu of the recipe contest held jointly by the U.S. Embassy and the Prefecture in commemoration of the anniversary. The lunch featured “Fujizakura Pork,” a local pork brand derived from the 35 hogs sent to Yamanashi in 1960 and described by school officials as “symbol of friendship” between the two state/prefectures. Mrs. Vilsack, Mrs. Erickson and the 30-strong group of visitors from Iowa joined over 200 students and teachers to talk about the book, Iowa, Yamanashi and the two countries.

^[1] “Iowa Hog Lift,” Wikipedia.org



Mrs. Erickson answering questions at ISSH in Tokyo



Mrs. Vilsack talking to the students



Mrs. Erickson autographing her book for students



Mrs. Vilsack with students at ISSH in Tokyo