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Faith & Farming

Tom Van Sickel and his wife, Ai, live in Tsukuba (the T is silent), Japan, where they have served as Christian missionaries for years. They are involved with Community Missions through Navigators, and lead Bible studies. When Covid hit in 2020, they began organizing Zoom meetings and fellowship times. But after purchasing three-quarters of an acre of fertile Japanese soil, they now are also farmers, bringing a bit of Tom's agricultural background in Monroe County, Iowa to this beautiful city of some 256,000 (a little larger than Des Moines), which lies about 30 miles northeast of Tokyo. The son of Robert and Martha Van Sickel, Tom is a 1995 graduate of Moravia High School and has lived in Japan over two decades, most of his adult life.

Robert and Martha recently returned from a visit with Tom, Ai, and their four children. Martha, who has made several trips to Japan since her son moved there, shared some interesting facts about her grandchildren's school life. Mako, 15, rides her bike to school every day, a trip of 40 minutes each way. Her brother Soma, 13, rides a bike 25 minutes each way to his school. The younger siblings, Kota, 10, and Mei, 7, walk about four blocks to school. All the neighborhood children meet at a central location each day and walk together.



The Van Sickels gathered for a family portrait. Shown in front, left to right, are Soma Van Sickel, grandmother Martha Van Sickel, Mei Van Sickel in traditional Japanese dress in honor of her 7th birthday, grandmother, Veerin Tadeka, and Kota Van Sickel. Standing behind them are grandfather Robert Van Sickel, Tom Van Sickel with his older daughter, Mako and his wife Ai, and Ai's sister, Aya Tadeka.

In elementary schools, there are no janitors. Students take turns doing the cleaning for two weeks at a time, including restrooms, hallways, and classrooms. Parents meet on Saturdays every few weeks with their children to do outside maintenance jobs, including weeding and cleaning around the campus. No shoes are worn inside the building. As students enter the school, there are rows of shelves where shoes are placed, and the youngsters wear slippers while in the classroom.

The city governments build and manage the schools. Teachers are actually city employees and

are rotated to a different school every four years, so that the highest level of teachers are not all together in one school, but more evenly distributed. Kids go to school year-round, with 2 or 3-week breaks throughout the year. They routinely have 20 hours of homework each week. Students pick only one sport and play it throughout the year for three years at a time.

Tom and Ai's farming operation is a family affair, with a sign in English and Japanese welcoming visitors to "Van Sickel Farm Tsukuba." They have over 1,300 blueberry trees (yes, their blueberry bushes are as tall as

trees), 300 blackberry bushes, and 300 raspberry bushes. They also raise lavender, kiwi, and have hives for honeybees. They sell fruit they have picked from an attractive triangular hut Tom and his boys built, but customers can also pay a fee to pick their own fruit. The couple is now shipping produce to other locations in Japan as well as selling at their local farmers' market. Besides the freshly picked fruit, they offer homemade jams and dried blueberries. While the family does most of the work, they do have a few workers and volunteers who help at various times during the grow-

ing season. Their large variety of blueberries are harvested from June through early August, but the kiwi isn't ready to pick until November. Blackberries and raspberries are ripe for a brief time in July.

As with all farms, water is the key to success. When Tom realized his expanding crops needed more water, he began to dig a well, by hand! As he dug deeper, he would put a ring of concrete in the ground and continue to dig, adding another ring of concrete support. As it got even deeper, he

had someone man the buckets from above to pull out the dirt. Tom hit water at 18 feet and secured a pump to bring the water up. The finished well is between 22-24 feet deep and supplies the moisture needed for their crops.

As Martha Van Sickel put it, "God uses their little farm. People come and they share the Word of God. Many come back for more." They also come back for the berries, the honey, and the friendship of their Japanese-American neighbors.



This attractive hut, built by Tom Van Sickel, serves as the sales office for the family's farm produce business.

A little of everything at

Council session

At the June 11 City Council meeting, Mike Fisher requested permission to have a "Poker Run" for motorcycle riders in August, to include a motorcycle and car show, a live band, and vendors utilizing the city square, park, and stage. Fisher stated that half of the proceeds would be donated to a local organization. Councilman Ken Martin asked if it would be a wholesome family event and Fisher stated that it would be. He does not plan to provide alcohol but noted that he cannot prevent anyone from going to Fat Annie's. Councilman John Baty noted that all park rules would need to be followed and Councilwoman Sheila Kirby reminded Fisher that there are Senior Housing apartments located on the square. Fisher will proceed with plans and provide more information at the July Council meeting.

Jayne Gibb requested that the Council address the streets and drainage issues in Westview Acres. Jayne also requested that signs be posted stating that the cul-de-sacs are not through streets to help prevent unnecessary

traffic. She noted there is a large tax base of houses in West View and many of them have potholes at the end of their driveways.

Maintenance Director

Mitch Main

said the City is well aware of the condition of all the streets in Moravia. Mitch explained street repair is very costly and the City has been looking at avenues to address repairs in ways that provide greater longevity. He noted one of the methods being considered is renting or buying a machine that resurfaces, in lieu of putting down gravel and cold pack, which are only short-term. Mitch explained that to do "chip and seal," which is the cheapest route, would cost between \$60,000 - \$80,000 just for the two streets mentioned, and at the earliest, repairs could not be scheduled until fall or possibly next spring. Main assured Mrs. Gibb that the condition of the streets throughout Moravia is not unnoticed and the Council is trying to use solutions that are more durable.

Jim Kaster reported that the Ruritan's fireworks supper was not well attended, but

donations were generous. A sufficient amount of funds needed for this year's fireworks display was donated. The Ruritan group is not large, and they will not be able to take on fundraising for this event in the future.

They hope another organization will take over this responsibility. Any money left over from this year will go to that organization. If no group steps up, it appears this will be the last year for an Independence Day display. The Ruritans are asking the Fire Department to be present with a fire truck at the July 6 event for safety reasons and to collect donations. The Ruritans have voted to give the firefighters \$500 for their assistance. Chief Ryan Moore stated the Fire Department will commit to having a truck on site and will ask his volunteer members if they will assist in collecting donations. Moore stated his department will do so as a community service and does not want renumeration.

A second incident has occurred involving the same three dogs discussed last month. The Council noted since

all three canines were involved in both incidents and are in violation of the "two-bite" ordinance, the dogs must be permanently removed from the city limits. By consensus, the Council agreed to modify the current ordinance to a "one bite rule" if an animal leaves its

property, and it must be permanently removed from the city limits. If the animal is on its own property when it bites, action will be at the Council's discretion, depending on the circumstances. City Clerk Stogdill reported she has sent letters to twelve residents who own unlicensed animals with only one response.

Council members reviewed a letter from the Iowa Southern Railroad claiming no responsibility for damages to homes flooded when the culvert running under the railroad tracks was blocked. The City Attorney will be contacted for directions.

Fire Chief Moore reported eleven medical calls but no fires in the month of May. The water heater at the department needed to be replaced and repairs to the ceiling will need to be done. The

new side-by-side has arrived, and volunteers have trained for its use. Pump testing is scheduled. There has been one application given out for the Junior Fire Fighter program. The Council agreed by consensus on the Department's request to sell three pieces of equipment by sealed bids.

Library Director Amanda Smith reported the budget is looking

good. They are ready for the summer reading program. The library has purchased children's furniture and has started a small food pantry. The Policy Manual is ready for the Library Board to approve.

In department reports, the cemeteries looked very nice for Memorial Day. Larry Coltrain did another good job organiz-

COUNCIL

Continued to page 2



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