

How I Discovered Kurikoma Kogen Station

Gary L. Satre

I've been riding Japanese trains off and on since 1968. Back then, I was a U.S. Navy seaman serving with the Seventh Fleet amphibious forces. While my ship was in Yokosuka, I signed up for an overnight tour of Tokyo. We were all expected to return to the ship on our own. I did so by taking the Yokosuka Line back to the naval base. A few months later, emboldened by the experience, the ease of Japanese train travel, and the frequency of the service, this low-ranking uniformed tourist left the good ship *USS Colonial* one Saturday morning. Not realizing then that I was going out of bounds (visiting the Japanese capital was a privilege I didn't have), I headed straight for Yokosuka Station and boarded a train for Tokyo Station. Despite the fact that I wasn't making a lot of money, the ¥360/\$1 exchange rate allowed me to ride in the more expensive compartment. Thus, I rode all alone—not a happy situation for my outgoing personality. I remember arriving a few tracks away from the shinkansen, still a novelty in those days. After spending a pleasant day in the Ginza, Tokyo Station and Shibuya areas, I returned to Yokosuka, riding in the less-expensive, more crowded car. I even made a friend en route—a high school student. To me, his uniform was just as distinctive as my own! An hour later, I was back where I was supposed to be—the then JNR's legendary



Kurikoma Kogen Station forecourt with Station Stamp (inset)

(T. Kato)

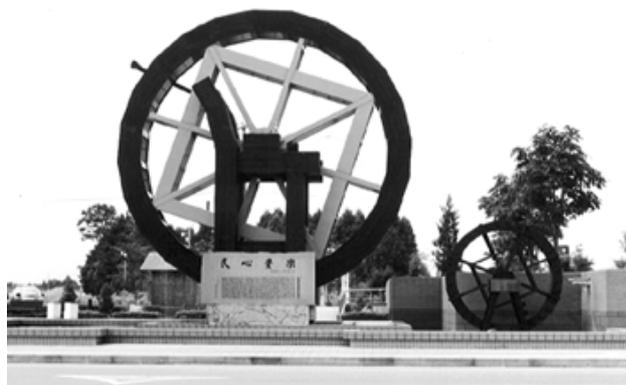
reliability saw to that. Other contacts since then have given me the impression that little acts of thoughtfulness are important to the Japanese. These details make their way into the train timetables, such as the earliest time you can board a train and on what track it will arrive at your destination. Fast forward 22 years. You can now understand my surprise as I was traveling southbound on an *Aoba* express on JR East's Tohoku Shinkansen the night of 12 April 1990. The train had stopped and I wanted to know how far I was from Sendai, my final destination that day. The sign above

the platform read Kurikoma Kogen. I looked at my *Japan National Tourist Organization Condensed Railway Timetable*. The station wasn't there! Thus, on that Thursday, I made this entry in my journal: '20:25—I discovered a new station. Called Kurikoma Kogen—I decided to backtrack from Furukawa to find out more. When I got there, I found out that it opened on 3 March and was so new, there was no station stamp!' (At most JR stations and at many so-called private line stops, you can get a rubber-stamped memento of your visit.) So, instead of the stamp, the souvenir turned out to be commemorative JR East



A reconstructed Nara-era (A.D. 710–794) dwelling designated an important cultural asset by Shiwahime City

(T. Kato)



Shiwahime City boasted Japan's largest water wheel

(T. Kato)



A glimpse of lead mining techniques

(Hosokura Mine Park)

cards. I eventually got my stamp impression—30 months later!

In its March 1990 edition, *Flash*, a popular Japanese-language magazine, asked pretty much the same question that went through my mind that Thursday night; ‘What in the world is a shinkansen station doing in the middle of a rice field in Miyagi Prefecture?’

Intrigued by this perplexing question, I began to ask other people about the reason. The Honorable Genjiro Suzuki, the Mayor of Shiwahime gave me a book published on the first anniversary of the station’s opening, telling the story.

Although Furukawa Station, the station just south of Kurikoma Kogen, provides a convenient transfer point to Naruko Onsen (hot spring) and other attractions, Kurikoma Kogen serves the same purpose to lesser known points of interest to the west—one being the Hosokura Mine Park. This open air museum near the end of the private Kurihara Railway was opened in 1990 after the mine closed in 1987, and offers tours and exhibits showing how lead and zinc extraction evolved over its 1000+ years of operation. Kurikoma Kogen also provides access to the region’s hot springs and the nature of Kurikoma National Park—the station name translates roughly as ‘Chestnut Horse Highlands’. Thus, Kurikoma Kogen figures prominently in Miyagi Prefecture’s tourism plans.

After two further visits, three interviews, and research at the Japanese Embassy

library in Metro Manila, I also discovered that Kurikoma Kogen and Urasa on the Joetsu Shinkansen have very similar stories. Officials in Yamato, Urasa’s host town, were just as kind to me as Mayor Suzuki was in Shiwahime.

Former Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, a powerful native son of Niigata Prefecture, was a dominant mover in the Joetsu Shinkansen’s construction. The long distance between Echigo Yuzawa and Nakaoka on the Joetsu Shinkansen favored the building of a new station in the intermediate section. Two other towns lobbied hard for the station but Urasa was in exactly the right place for optimum operations, or ‘right on the money’, to borrow an American idiom. Similarly, Kurikoma Kogen was located at the ideal spot between Furukawa and Ichinoseki on the Tohoku Shinkansen. While Shiwahime apparently took the lead in the drive to get the station constructed, the nearby communities of Karishiki, Hasama, and Wakayanagi, all in Kurihara County, joined in the effort, which included asking each household in the communities to make a



Naruko Onsen boasts a museum for Kokeshi wooden dolls—a folk toy unique to the Tohoku District of Japan (Nihon Kokeshi-kan)

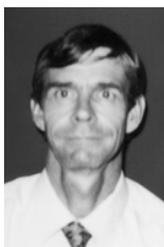
financial donation to the cause. In Japan, local communities that want a new railway station usually assist by raising funds for the construction. Today, all four towns are reaping the rewards of their joint efforts.

A distinction the station claims is one perhaps only railroad trivia lovers can appreciate: Kurikoma Kogen was the first shinkansen station authorized to be built in 1988, after the privatization and division of JNR in April 1987.

The town of Shiwahime also boasted the biggest water wheel in Japan in 1990, which can be seen from the station’s free car park for 500 cars (*JRTR 17*, p 16).

In similar fashion to the children’s story *The Little Train That Could*, Kurikoma Kogen could be called *The Little Town That Could*, or more accurately, the towns that could.

I once read that a Japanese Christian pastor was of the opinion that ‘A town without a train station is a town without a heart’. The soul of railroading is alive and, I trust in these hard economic times, hanging tough in northern Miyagi Prefecture in and around Kurikoma Kogen Station. ■



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