Japan of Yesteryear

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The experiences I am about to relate will awaken a few memory cells in some and cause others to question my veracity, if not my sanity. I was 21 years old in August 1955 when an Air Force R6D deposited me on the tarmac at Yokota AB, somewhere between Tokyo and Yokohama. I was a most reluctant visitor, having spent the entire year 1954 on isolated duty in the Aleutian Islands (on Adak) and I had been looking forward to at least 18 months at Naval Air Station (NAS) Whidbey Island in Northwest Washington. The directive that ordered me to report to Fleet Weather Central (FWC) Yokosuka was as distasteful as it was surprising, and when I debarked from the aircraft I was still seething inwardly at being jerked out of a place I liked and sent to one I was determined to dislike. I disagreed vehemently with all who told me I was going to really like my new duty station.

The Japan I am going to tell you about no longer exists. Many of you of my vintage, plus or minus a few years, will readily relate to much of what you read, especially if you were ever stationed in Japan or made port calls there. I was at FWC Yokosuka from August 1955 until early December 1956. I then volunteered to be transferred to NAS Iwakuni in the southern part of the island of Honshu, about 30 miles from Hiroshima, and was there until May 1957. Once I had recovered from my initial culture shock, I came to like Japan very much, and remain to this day fascinated by her people, their pragmatic outlook on life, their way of life as it was at that time, and by the language. Absolute and total honesty was their most notable attribute. There was no other port in the world where a sailor could get inebriated, go to sleep on a bar stool, and wake up with all of his money stacked neatly in front of him. I have never been any other place where I could argue for thirty minutes over the price of an item, then have the proprietor run after me for blocks on my way to the train station to give me the 30 or 40 yen in change that I neglected to wait for. Many readers will remember things different from my experiences. I can only relate what I remember, which undoubtedly omits much of what some may consider more important than that which I do remember.

The first thing that struck me about Japan was the smell – the odors, if you will. There was the smell of thousands of charcoal fired cooking devices – hibachi pots – that cast a pall of smoke everywhere. The aroma of the hibachi pots mingled with that of the open sewers, which I later learned were called binjo ditches. Only the major cities had underground sewers. Binjo is the Japanese word for toilet, hence the appellation "binjo ditch."

I boarded a Navy bus, one of those ubiquitous gray ones with the butt-busting bench seats, and headed south to Yokosuka. Progress was slow by any standard save ox cart. There were no freeways, nor any four lane highways. We were on the left side of the road, which was somewhat disconcerting. I do not recall if we passed through Yokohama or only skirted it, but I have vivid recollection of steel skeletons of bombed out and burned out factories. After leaving behind the blackened skeletal remains we were in a more agrarian setting with many garden plots, both large and small. Mount Fuji came into view, reminding me of Mount Baker in Northwest Washington. I decided that Mount Fuji was okay, but Mount Baker is better.

After nearly two hours of bus ride, I was at Naval Station Yokosuka and soon thereafter reported for duty at the Fleet Weather Central. I was AG3, pay grade E-4, and was assigned to a rotating watch section to perform the routine duties of an Aerographer's Mate. Decoding weather reports and plotting maps was one of the duties, but only at night because there were Japanese employees who performed those duties in the daytime. Observing and reporting weather phenomena were tasks performed only by sailors, at all hours of the day.

August and September passed, and when November rolled around my thoughts turned to hunting. My self-confidence was bolstered by promotion to AG2, with a slight increase in spending money. I was resigned to being where I was and decided to enjoy it as best I could. I learned that I could sign out a shotgun from the Navy Special Services department, procure cartridges at the Navy Exchange, and through an English speaking Japanese ministry in Yokosuka, I obtained a hunting license. I then set about the daunting task of finding a place to hunt. There was a Japanese employee at the weather central, Taguchi, who was probably the most Americanized Japanese on the payroll. He was about 25 years old, single, spoke English well, and was really interested in accompanying me on a hunting trip. His work schedule was a Monday through Friday one, so I had to gear my hunting trip to his weekend of free time. In short order, we found ourselves, on a Saturday morning, on a train, heading for Ito on the Izu Peninsula. I had been up most of the night because I worked the midnight to 0730 shift, so I dozed a lot during the train ride, but I was aware that we changed trains at Ofuna and went from there to Ito, where the rail line ended and we boarded a bus. After about 45 minutes on the bus we arrived in a small settlement, situated on a lakeshore. We walked to a hotel and booked ourselves into a room, dumped our spare clothes and toiletries, and set off in pursuit of whatever game the countryside offered. Taguchi had no gun but his enthusiasm was not dampened by that fact and he proved to be an excellent beater and game flusher. I recall shooting only one pheasant and one small partridge, not much larger that a quail, which I learned later was called a bamboo partridge – by English speaking folks. The Japanese word for pheasant is kiji. Their word for bamboo partridge is kokiji, which means, literally, little pheasant. But I digress. We hunted only Saturday, availed ourselves of the community bath, fed by hot springs, ate whatever food the hotel provided, went out like a burned out bulb (at least I did), and on Sunday made the return trip to Yokosuka. We bestowed the kiji and the kokiji on the hotel owner who was immensely pleased to receive them, or so it appeared to me. All in all, it was quite a good experience and one which I hoped to repeat soon.

The next time my watch schedule provided a block of time in which I hoped to go hunting did not occur on a weekend, hence Taguchi would be unable to accompany me. I re-played the previous trip and decided that I could very well go it alone. I mean, how hard can that be? All I had to do was buy a train ticket to Ito, change trains in Ofuna, get off the train in Ito, walk across the train yard to a bus, buy a ticket on that, and get off when I see a village near a lake. It all came off like clockwork – almost. When I debarked from the train, there was the bus, waiting in the exact spot where Taguchi and I boarded a bus some eight days ago. I was almost the last passenger to board but I found an empty seat and parked me and my cased shotgun there. I noticed that almost all of the passengers carried colorful little knapsacks but did not think much beyond that noting. Soon the bus got underway and a soft-spoken female barker, with the aid of a sound system, captured the attention of all passengers but me. I understood almost no Japanese at that point in my life, so had no idea of the subject matter. I decided to not worry about it.

The bus soon arrived at some sort of shrine and everybody got off. With nothing better to do, I became the first one to ever tour that shrine carrying a shotgun. And so it went, throughout the day, going from shrine to cemetery to viewpoint and to yet another shrine, and me all the while with my shotgun in tow, ignorant of the fact that I could have left the shotgun on the bus and no one would have bothered it. It was an absolute certainty that no one would have stolen it, but I was a newcomer to Japan, as yet unknowing of so very much. When it got to be noon, my stomach thought my throat had been cut and chances of procuring a bite to eat were zero. I need not have been concerned. When all of those colorful knapsacks were opened, food appeared from every quarter. It seemed that every passenger was aware of this gaijin (foreigner) who came on the tour without any food and each of them was determined that I should be well fed. I ate things I never saw before, let alone tasted, but almost all of it was quite palatable, especially to a hungry sailor. With so many generous benefactors, this foodless one probably had more to eat than any other one passenger. I was glad that my meager vocabulary included the words for please and thank you.

About mid-afternoon the bus arrived back at the train station and everyone got off. Having been duly chastened by the trip that took me nowhere, I set about trying to find the right bus. I recalled that there was a golf course near the lake, at the edge of the little village, so I thought to perhaps pantomime my way to the golf course. I found a round stone approximately the size of a golf ball, held the cased shotgun by the barrel, and swung a few practice strokes, with a group of about fifteen onlookers captivated by this scene. When I contacted the stone with the butt stock, sending it rolling, someone in the crowd yelled "Golf." I pounced on that and immediately started conversing with the man in English, receiving in return a blank stare. I went back to the word golf, followed by please, and the man pointed at a bus parked nearby. I bought a ticket on that one and eventually, and most gratefully, arrived at the little village and proceeded directly to the same hotel in which I had stayed before. I suspect the proprietor was glad to see me because he anticipated receipt of game birds for his larder. Because I had worked the midnight to 0730 shift prior to embarking on this adventure, I was really tired, so I did not hunt that first day. I slept the clock around instead, in hopes of a better day to come.

Next morning I breakfasted at the hotel and set off for a pleasant day afield. I shot one pheasant of a kind I had not seen before – a very dark bird, almost black. I think it was a mutant pheasant, but do not know for sure. Eventually my foot travels took me over a hill and into a grassy field where a Japanese family was cutting and bundling tall grass and stowing it in a horse-drawn cart. I watched for a few minutes, then sauntered over to pay my respects, a virtually impossible task given my lingual limitations. The group consisted of a man, a woman, and two small children, maybe 8 or 10 years old. They were all bowing profusely, saying lots of words in a friendly tone, none of which were understandable by me. Eventually it dawned on me that they uttered "conichiwa," which is "good day," and I exhausted most of my vocabulary with my reply of that word. They beamed and smiled, and it occurred to me that they could well be very apprehensive. They were, after all, unarmed, in the presence of a gun-toting foreigner, in all likelihood, the first American they had ever seen, at least close up. It would have been reasonable for them to have some trepidation regarding this gun-toting interloper who appeared out of a forest. Sensing their potential unease, I gave them my pheasant. Their thanking and bowing seemed to go on forever, but the happiest note for me came when they offered me an orange and some rice balls. My planning for this adventure had completely omitted the noon meal, with me foolishly thinking

that if I should get hungry, I will just have to stay that way until evening. Oranges and rice may not be every man's fare, but for me they were a lifesaver. I made my way back out of the hills and down to the lake without finding any more game birds, but while skirting the lake shore I managed to bag a mallard. Now I had something for the hotel man. After all, I surely could not return to the Naval Station with a duck to cook since we had no cooking facility in the barracks. I stayed over that night and returned to Yokosuka next morning. By the time I was back at the Naval Station I was determined that I was going to master the Japanese language. If I could not become totally fluent in it, I would surely get good enough to preclude a bus tour of some shrines when I was trying to reach a hunting destination.

A shopping run to the Navy Exchange was rewarded with procurement of a neat little book titled "Japanese in Thirty Hours." It would have been more appropriately named if its title had been "Japanese in Three Hundred Hours." The language was more than a little daunting at first, but the more I got into it, the easier it became. While surfing local radio stations for listenable music, I happened onto one that featured English lessons for Japanese listeners. It was a fairly simple leap to take Japanese lessons from the English language course and I used those sessions to augment my learning text. I never did go hunting again that year but I was much better prepared linguistically for the hunting season of 1956. I learned from Taguchi that the name of the little village was Ipeikiko and cemented that vital piece of data in my memory bank.

Strangely, Japan no longer smelled. I did not notice the pall of smoke overlying every town and the binjo ditches seemed to have lost their stench. I enjoyed browsing in the market places, where eggs were sold by the "each" rather than by the dozen. Most fruit was sold by the individual item also, so one could purchase one peach, one apple, or one plum. Of course we had been advised right at the start that, no matter how good the stuff looked, or how attractively it was displayed, we Americans were not to eat any of it. It was definitely bad for us. Perhaps it is my rebellious nature, but I soon concluded that if it really were bad for us, all of those Japanese people who were eating it would soon be dead. I watched and waited, and when none of them toppled over, I got right into the fresh fruit. One time I got a sore throat and on another occasion I had a cold, but I never really believed either of those ailments was caused by the fresh fruit.

Street vendors were a common sight. Two that I remember best are the man squatting beside a charcoal fired brazier, cooking tiny little birds on bamboo sticks and the Osoba cart which appeared only at night, always tended by a woman. Its arrival was announced by the tinkling sound of a small bell. The tiny little birds were suzume, which translates to sparrow, and they cost ten yen each, or about three cents. I ate a few of them on various occasions but never really cultivated a hankering for roasted sparrows. Osoba, on the other hand, is a very flavorful noodle soup, well liked by all who tried it.. A generous bowl of it cost 50 yen. The exchange rate was 360 yen for one dollar so the osoba set one back a grand total of about fourteen cents. Of course we Americans were advised to never ever patronize these street vendors. In fact, the only places we were allowed to eat or drink had a big red A on a placard placed in a window, visible from the street. With no room for displaying a placard on a charcoal brazier or on an osoba cart, all of them were technically "Off Limits." Very few restaurants had the big red A in their window and the ones that did were invariably the most expensive. All of the bars and night clubs were marked with the ubiquitous placard, consequently that is where most Americans congregated.

Card-playing in the barracks and frequenting bars and night clubs seemed to be the major pastimes for the American sailor stationed in Japan. I had a girlfriend in Wisconsin and did not care to fritter away my money, seemingly always in short supply, on nonsensical things like poker and booze, so I strayed often and far from the path of red A placards. All one had to do was ride a train to the next town and the red A placards disappeared. My reasoning told me that the eateries in Kamakura and Ofuna were not really off limits. They simply were not ON limits. I frequented them at will. I recall one afternoon in a nearby town when I was absorbing my surroundings prior to working the 1700 to midnight shift. I mentally ran through what remained of the day, noting that I needed to return in time to change into a work uniform and shave. A haircut would also be a good idea.

The barbershop on the Naval Station had all Japanese barbers on the payroll, some of whom were females. I passed a barbershop and noted that a barber at work was a female. All barbershops were off limits to U. S. service personnel, but I could see little difference between the one on base and the one in front of me, so I went in, and was cordially welcomed. It was an unforgettable experience, especially the shave. Lying back in the reclining chair I watched a man coming at me with steaming hot towels and winced when he plopped them on my face. Too hot at first, they soon came to feel really nice. A second application was even better. The towels were removed and a young lady applied a generous layer of shaving lather. A second lady, not as young, and wielding a straight razor, then went to work. I think it took close to half an hour to get shaved. It was not the typical "scrape and wipe" routine common to barbers everywhere, but it seemed each whisker was individually cut, with the skin pinched to expose more whisker. I remember thinking when she was working under my chin that I sure hoped she hadn't lost loved ones in the Yokohama bombings. I was most vulnerable, slightly apprehensive for a while, and then eventually completely comfortable. When all was done, face wiped, more hot towels, then lotion applied, I was given a neck massage. The total cost for all of this was the exact same fee as just a haircut at the base barbershop, which saw less and less of me in the ensuing months. By the way, the haircut was first rate also, but less memorable than was the shave. It was two days later when the whiskers finally reached the surface again.

Kamakura is home to a famous Buddhist Shrine and features a famous huge bronze statue of a sitting Buddha. The place is well known and a tourist destination for travelers from within Japan and elsewhere. It is about a 20-minute train ride from Yokosuka with a 15-minute walk tacked on the end. When the flowering cherry trees are in bloom, sakura, there are few sights that are its equal. There is in Nara in the southern part of the island of Honshu, another statue of Buddha. The less devout among the visitors jokingly ask which Buddha will stand up first – the one in Nara or the one in Kamakura. I have never visited Nara and do not know if the Buddha there sits in such a lovely setting as does his counterpart in Kamakura. I last visited Kamakura in 1973 when Barbara and I visited Japan from our duty station on Guam. It seemed unchanged from the Kamakura of 1955 and I suspect that the shrine is still a major attraction to visitors from around the globe, looking much like it did 60 years ago.

I soon learned that taxi fares could eat up ones available resources almost as fast as beer and poker, so I used public transportation a lot – busses and trains. I also used my leg-o-mobile. One afternoon, prior to an evening working shift, I was out in Yokosuka shopping when it started to rain. Most of us sailors owned umbrellas because summer heat precluded the wearing of

raincoats, but my umbrella was in my locker in the barracks. I had a mile to walk or pay taxi fare. I opted for the walk, but before striking out I bought a paper umbrella – for 100 yen. I still have it. It no longer looks like new, but it did save me from a thorough soaking and, more importantly, provided insight into how the Japanese launched bomb-laden balloons across the Pacific Ocean during World War Two. A coating of shellac on the paper makes it absolutely air and water tight. They filled the paper balloons with hydrogen and sent them on their way, riding the air currents to North America. The paper umbrellas were considered inferior by indigents, suitable only for the very poor who could not afford a nice black cloth one. They faded out of existence during my tenure and can now be found only in museums and in our umbrella stand.

While I was engrossed in furthering my linguistic skills I had a piece of unbelievably good luck. A new shop sprung up on Yokosuka's already jam-packed souvenir alley and I stopped to chat with the proprietor and owner. He was recently arrived from a different part of Japan where down-sizing had closed an American air base, thus ending the souvenir sales in that town. For reasons I will never know, I liked the guy, though I had no intention of buying anything from him. His name was Auku and I will never know if that was his surname or his given name. I just called him Aukusan. One Sunday afternoon when there were no ships visiting and things were really slow in the souvenir trade, I invited him and his wife to accompany me to the enlisted men's club for dinner. We ate chicken and both of them loved it. His wife, whose name I do not recall, was a really pretty lady, somewhat shy, and mostly smiling. That simple gesture of hosting them to a meal seemed to endear me to them forever and I never went to town after that without stopping at their store for a chit chat. One day Aukusan's wife handed me a doll she had made – one of those stuffed ones, on a pedestal, with much fancy embroidery on it. I had shown her a picture of Barbara and the doll was her gift to my future wife. We treasured the doll for decades and then somewhere in the last thirty years some careless movers failed to deliver the carton with the doll in it (along with several other personal treasures). Fortunately, we still have the memories. Five years after I left Japan, I returned to Yokosuka on an aircraft carrier. Aukusan was still there, still in the same business, and doing well. Some ten or eleven years after that, when we visited Japan from Guam, I took Barbara to Yokosuka and once again visited souvenir alley, in hopes of having her meet the lady who had made the doll for her. Alas, such a meeting was not to be. There were a lot of people who remembered Aukusan but no one who could tell me where to find him. One man told me he had moved to a different city, something I found plausible since he had arrived in Yokosuka from some small town in northern Japan.

E**ar**ly in 1956, when I was leader of a watch section, Bill Averitte reported for duty and was assigned to my watch section. Bill was a Texan – a no-nonsense man with a good work ethic, and, in spite of my Yankee beginnings, we became fast friends and remained so over the ensuing years. Our work section was number one in error-free observations, largely because of Bill's and my continuous striving for first place in everything in which we were involved. We took first place in the intra-mural bowling league and Bill won trophies for high game, high series, high average, and most improved bowler. As spring morphed into summer, Bill and I crewed on a sailing yacht. The yacht belonged to the Naval Station Special Services Department. The coxswain and best yachtsman around was a sailor at Fleet Weather Central, so it was pretty easy to become a crewman with our own guy as the coxswain. The sailing yacht was called a yawl by those who were knowledgeable, 36 feet in length and about that tall. I recall her name as Kaza Hai, meaning good wind, and the story behind it was that she had belonged to the Japanese

Navy. Some rumors had it that she was owned by a Japanese admiral. When the war ended, the U.S. Navy took over the formerly Japanese Naval installation and everything on it, including Kaza Hai, along with a 100-foot motor launch which had her name changed to Miss FAY – acronym for Fleet Activities Yokosuka. There were various Army and Air Force installations around Tokyo Bay and sailing vessels were common. The competitive nature of U. S. forces required that there be sailboat races and Kaza Hai was always the first vessel across the finish line. That sounds good, but some kind of handicapping system kept us from ever being declared the winner, in spite of our being first to finish.

As summer wound down and hunting season once again approached, I procured a hunting license. I also convinced a shipmate that he should get one, and as soon as the October opening arrived, we were on a train bound for Ito. We boarded the bus for Ipeikiko and soon settled into our hotel room. This might be a good place to mention that Japanese hotels were an experience all their own. There were no beds, and the only furnishing was a low table, perhaps a foot high. Shoes were left at the main entry and house slippers were worn throughout the hotel's interior. Meals were taken while sitting on the floor, a position to which not many Americans are accustomed. There was no menu from which to select food items. The evening meal was the same for all occupants and after dinner a chambermaid shuffled in, slid open the doors of a wall cupboard, and pulled out the beds. They were called futon (no plural form in the Japanese language), and consisted of a thick pad covered by a sheet and a second really comfy and warm top cover. There was no central heating system and the only room heat was provided by a charcoal burning pot – hibachi. If it was really cold, guests were provided with covers to trap the heat of the hibachi and warm ones bottom half. Sweaters or jackets were worn to keep the upper part warm. On a cold morning, there was a strong temptation to remain in bed because that was so nice and warm. The chambermaids seemed to be able to sense our stirring because we were barely finished dressing, still shivering, when the door slid open and a beaming and smiling pretty young lady entered with a pot of hot tea and a tray of cups. In short order, the tea was served and while we warmed our insides, the beds were stuffed back in the wall closet. Soon after that, breakfast was served, consisting of many items few would ever consider breakfast food. A bowl of rice, some watery soup, dried minnows, a small slice of pork – those kinds of things. If one needed bacon and eggs, he needed to visit a Western Style hotel, and there were none of those in Ipeikiko. The man with me, Schumann, was also an AG2 and along with me, had recently learned that he was selected for advancement to AG1 on 16 November. Naturally, both of us were on cloud nine and perceived ourselves as capable of dealing with anything. Not many sailors were advanced to pay grade E-6 in less than four years, so our good spirits were understandable. We had both been in Japan for more than a year and each of us had grown accustomed to accepting whatever came our way, no matter what it looked like on the breakfast or dinner table.

After breakfast we conversed with the elderly proprietor and gleaned from his ramblings that we could expect to find many ducks on the far side of the lake. Something got lost in translation because I understood that we had to walk around the lake, hide ourselves in the tall grass near a reed filled cove, and wait for flights of ducks to come into the reeds to spend the day. We made the shoreline trek, a half mile or more, and came to the small bay that was filled with reeds. We silently secreted ourselves near the shore and waited – and waited – and waited. We occasionally looked at one another and shrugged, but remained in place. The sun was well above

the horizon when a pair of ducks appeared, winging their way toward the reedy little cove. As they settled into the reeds, Schumann, who was closer to them that I was, fired. I never knew if he hit one or not, but when he fired, the little cove literally erupted. There must have been 100 mallards taking their rest in the reeds and they all got airborne at once. We fired until our guns were empty and ducks fell like rain drops. When all was quiet, we stepped into the lake, wearing hip waders, and quickly discovered that we would not be able to walk out to where the ducks lay. The water got too deep after only a few steps. I had seen some small boats moored over by the golf course and we thought the best option available was to rent a boat. We walked back around the lake, past the village, and eventually arrived at the boat concession. The cost for the use of a row boat for a few hours was minimal and we took turns rowing the mile or so over to where our ducks lay. By noon we were back at our hotel, bequeathing our take on the hotel proprietor. We had lunch at a restaurant and then hunted pheasants the remainder of the day. After a second night of lodging, we returned to the Naval Station, getting back in time for the noon meal.

Schumann and I talked a lot about our adventure and soon there were two chief petty officers who became interested in a hunting adventure. They were in Japan with their families and had automobiles, so a decision was made that we would drive to Ipeikiko, four of us, and spend a weekend hunting. The two chiefs were day workers rather than watch standers so we geared our hunt to a weekend, leaving on a Friday, after work. We missed or miss-read too many road signs because we never got to Ipeikiko Friday evening. Instead we slept in a farmer's living quarters, in what appeared to be his main room, and froze. There were no nice warm futon and we did not bring sleeping bags, so we just huddled up, wearing every item of apparel we had brought, and shivered our way through the night. With the dawn, we thanked our farmer host, tried without success to reimburse him, and continued on our search for Ipeikiko. We eventually arrived, early enough to get in half a day of hunting, and then headed back home. The chiefs, living in houses rather than in a barracks, had the wherewithal to process the contents of our game bags so they went home with all the pheasants and the one duck and one bamboo partridge. That was my last hunting expedition in Japan.

A few days after I was promoted to AG1, FWC Yokosuka received a request for volunteers to bring NAS Iwakuni up to strength. They were seeking an AG1 and one AG2. Averitte and I were on what turned out to be our last mid-watch in Yokosuka when we agreed that we were due for a change of scenery. We performed the necessary paper work and were soon on our way to NAS Atsugi, about 35 miles northwest of Yokosuka, where we boarded a Navy R4D-8 transport, bound for NAS Iwakuni. That was a good move, providing not only new scenery but new job opportunities. I was working as a flight weather forecaster and enjoyed immensely the opportunity to provide hands-on support to the aviators. Iwakuni the town was smaller than Yokosuka, with no souvenir alley. It did have the prominently displayed placards with the big red A on all the bars and night clubs, but across the Iwakuni River, in West Iwakuni,

There was a totally different world, with no placards on display and few neon lights. Life there was tranquil, inexpensive, and enjoyable. It was where I spent much of my free time, prowling around the little shops and relaxing in coffee houses. Yes, there were coffee shops, where rich black coffee was served in small cups, not much larger than a demitasse mug. The Japanese patrons who took coffee instead of tea were few, and those who did so laced it liberally with sugar. Putting sugar in their tea would have been sacrilegious, but the coffee must have

resembled syrup when they finished spooning in the sugar. Strangely, I never encountered any other Americans in the coffee shops, other than a fellow I took with me once in a while. With classical music playing softly over a hidden sound system, they were a nice place to unwind and contemplate the events of a day.

There were three bridges over the Iwakuni River that took one from Iwakuni to Nishii Iwakuni, or West Iwakuni. Two of them were suitable for wheeled vehicles but the middle one accommodated only foot traffic. It is named Kentai Hashi and consists of a series of arched spans. Each span ends in a valley where the next arch starts, kind of like a Roman bridge where the bridge deck follows the same contours as its underpinnings. It is of wooden construction, except for the piers, which are mortared stone.. It is red, very Japanese looking, and well known throughout Japan. I have often seen it pictured on calendars. Crossing the Iwakuni River on the Kentai Hashi (hashi means bridge – I have no idea what Kentai means) was enough of an experience to make the visit to Iwakuni worthwhile and was something of a pilgrimage completion for Japanese travelers. It was not a comfortable stroll so most of those seen walking over it were visitors. Walking across the Kentai Hashi was something everyone had to do once, but no one had to do twice.

In about March of 1957, while bicycling across the southern-most bridge, I saw a lot of people down by the river. Driven by curiosity, I walked my bike down the river bank to see what was going on. I am glad I did so. People were catching tiny little silvery looking fish, four to five inches in length, using small hand nets. There were family groups and they had a fire going with a kettle of water on it. The live fish were put in the cold water along with some bean cakes, similar to the stuff now sold as tofu. As the water got warmer, the fish sought the cool interior of the bean cakes and tunneled their way inside. After the water had boiled for a few minutes, the kettle was placed in the sand to cool. Eventually, the family members, using chopsticks, plucked the bean cakes from the caldron and ate them, fish included. Some bean cakes had more than one fish inside and some fish never made it to the interior of a bean cake before succumbing to the hot water. I never was fond of bean cakes, even when flavored by a silver fish, so I politely declined the opportunity to try one. I often wish I had at least given it a taste test and since that time I rarely pass on any new food presented to me for trial. Filipino balutes (sp?) were one of the rare items I have passed on and will do so again, if need be.

It was a little less than twelve years since an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. I did not really want to visit the place and certainly was not drawn to it by some inward pulling force, but, being only about 30 miles away, it seemed like something I ought to do. I rode a train to Hiroshima and had my first hand look at ground zero. I was greeted by many cold stares, some hostile looks, and avoided being spat upon only by some quick side-stepping. My cordial greetings were answered only by blank stares – even in the bar near the train station where I decided to have a beer while awaiting the train to Iwakuni. I never considered getting a shave there and was really relieved when the train left the station. I never went back to Hiroshima. Recent photos depict a Hiroshima that bears no resemblance to the one I saw.

My mother put in a request for a coffee set consisting of small plates, cups and saucers, preferably in a service for eight, and if that were not possible, as service for six. I knew right where to go and on my trusty iron steed, pedaled over to Nishii Iwakuni to the district where

little shops abounded. In no time at all I was in a small store with lots of dishes, many of which were members of a tea or coffee set. There were many very colorful ones and I knew I would have no problem finding what I was after. Locating sets of a color that appealed to me was easy; locating sets comprised of a number of cups and plates other than five proved impossible. Every set was a service for five. Calling upon all of my linguistic skills, I queried the clerk concerning the availability of a service for six, or eight. I was advised that there are none. There was no equivocation, no explanation, just a flat statement that all of the sets are a service for five. When I asked why that was, in her irrefutable Japanese logic the clerk told me it was because five is a good number. To this day, my signature woodworking project is a pentagon box of my own design, which I give to special people in my life "because five is a good number."

With that I will close out this narrative, hoping I have brought back fond memories in those readers who have visited the Japan of yesteryear. If you did not see it, you never will. It is gone – overtaken by modernization and industrialization. A way of life has been forever altered and will never go back to where it was. If you did not see the bank teller count out ten thousand yen in a blur of bills and finish with a loud pop, you missed out. They use machines to dole out the bills nowadays. There may be more of the old ways still in existence than I realize, because I have not been back since 1974; if so, I would herald that as good news indeed. One thing I do know is that the graciousness and certain pure honesty of the people are still very much in evidence and I would be most pleased to make a return visit to any part of that island nation.