



Forty-Seven Loyal Samurai

The story is huge all over Japan. It starts in a town called Ako on the Inland Sea coast. Forty-seven warriors struck out from here just over 300 years ago, seeking vengeance against a powerful lord responsible for their own lord's

death. In far-away Edo, as Tokyo was called in those times, they took the head of the evil lord and then committed suicide *en masse* in atonement for breaking the *Shogun's* law. They've been honored ever since, in theater, literature and song.



Ako Castle

Defying posted prohibitions at an Ako museum, I snapped a picture of a model showing a bird's-eye view of the castle compound as it looked back then. The watchtower above is at lower right in the photo. The small town, population 51,000, can't afford to rebuild the entire castle ruins. Anyway, the Japanese government won't permit it. No accurate blueprints have survived.



The Forty-Seven's Leader

Oishi Kuranosuke was his name, and his image can be seen at left in my 45-year-old *hakata* doll. He was the chief *samurai* at Ako Castle. In real life, by all accounts, he was ugly, but legendary heroes are always handsome. He held the Forty-Seven together as he plotted revenge. The evil lord's spies kept a close watch on him. To throw them off guard, Oishi pretended to be a drunkard and womanizer, a worthless *samurai* with a dead master. Was it only pretense? Maybe he just loved hot *sake* and golden *geisha* asses. A hero with feet of clay, like the doll.

Gate House

At right is Oishi's Ako *nagayamon*, front and back. It wasn't his main house. That's long gone. It was his gate house. *Nagayamon* means "long gate house." The building housed servants and provided secure entryway into Oishi's gardens and main living quarters. The large gateway running through the narrow structure can be seen in both of these images. I am very familiar with this architectural concept. Many times I have visited Yoshi's family compound in Gunma Prefecture's mountains. The *nagayamon* there is not dissimilar, just more modern after a major 1999 refurbishing.





Oishi's Ako garden still exists. The 400-year-old spreading *kusunoki* tree, across the pond and above right in closeup, was mature when Oishi strolled here. On this trip, I couldn't resist buying Tsuneyoshi's woodblock artwork of 76-year-old Horibe Yahyoye, the oldest of the *samurai* who took the evil lord's head. Below, Yoshi can never resist buckwheat noodles, which she ate at a little shop outside the castle grounds. The noodles are billed as being the same as the Forty-Seven ate before their bloody 1702 attack on the lord's Edo mansion. Who knows? It may be true.



Jackson Sellers, Lake Forest, California, June 2006