

# Nuclear Paranoia

By Jackson Sellers  
August 2011

This is a tale of two cities, two Japanese cities, one famous, the other obscure. The famous one is Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan, which lies in the Kansai region near Osaka. The obscure one, Rikuzentakata in the Tohoku region, far north of Kyoto, was virtually destroyed by this year's great "3/11" tsunami. A tenth of the coastal town's 24,000 residents died and no more than half of their homes survived in useable condition. In contrast, nothing truly bad ever happens to inland Kyoto. It is recognized as an international treasure, with its 2,000 temples and shrines displaying priceless artwork created over the centuries. Even in the 1940s, during World War II, American bombers avoided Kyoto while reducing many other



Japanese cities to rubble. Kyoto was the safest place in Japan back then. This month Kyoto celebrated its annual "Obon" festival, as it has done for centuries. Bonfires were lit on surrounding hillsides. The firewood was supposed to come from tsunami-ravaged Rikuzen-

takata, but it didn't. Therein lies the tale.... Rikuzentakata certainly had lots of firewood on hand. About two hundred years ago, numerous pine saplings were planted on a 1½-mile stretch of beachfront property. Over time, a forest of tall pines grew up, providing a wind-break for the town. This spring's tsunami uprooted or otherwise destroyed all of them, all but one. The survivor stands alone, scarred but still upright, as seen in the above photo. Rikuzentakata citizens, facing awesome rebuilding chores, see the lone pine as their "Tree of Hope." They were also buoyed by sacred Kyoto's plans to build "Obon" bonfires with wood from the fallen Rikuzentakata trees. Firewood was trucked hundreds of miles to Kyoto. But this symbolic gesture in support of the coastal town was called off. It was found that the bark on the firewood contained minuscule amounts of radioactive cesium. Horrors!



Rikuzentakata firewood, rejected by Kyoto "Obon" festival officials.

Nuclear radiation! Never mind that someone could eat a pound of the pine bark and suffer no ill effects. Never mind that Rikuzentakata was 110 miles north of the damaged and leaking Fukushima nuclear plant. Kyoto was still concerned. It would get its festival firewood elsewhere and figure out what to do with the “contaminated” wood delivered by Rikuzentakata. *Sorry about that.* A friend of mine, San Diego lawyer Kats Hiragi, asked for my opinion on the Kyoto-Rikuzentakata firewood controversy, which, in the weeks leading up to the festival, was a prominent issue in Japan if not in America. I emailed my response:

*Two words come to mind: “silly” and “paranoid.” I’m firmly on Rikuzentakata’s side in this matter. Kyoto took a nice upbeat idea and turned it into a real downer for a distressed town up north. Hell, there’s radiation in everything, and there are always people who will be fearful of the tiniest amount of it. “Concerned citizens,” we euphemistically call them. I might call them something else. I don’t blame Rikuzentakata for being annoyed at Kyoto. The next thing you know, Kyoto residents won’t shake Tohoku hands, or eat anything that comes from Tohoku. – Jackson*

Kats is an interesting guy. He is a San Diego lawyer, as I said, but he doesn’t look like it in the 2009 photo at upper right. There, he is planting rice seedlings in Shikoku,



a major island in the Japanese archipelago. I have written about him several times. His interests are wide and he indulges all of them. His Shikoku rice field has shifted this year to wheat. I guess he has learned everything he wishes to know about rice farming. Kats has even written a book identifying and profiling the kamikaze pilot who crashed into the *USS Kidd* off Okinawa in 1945. He became interested in this naval matter when legal business took him to Baton Rouge where the *Kidd* is cradled in the Mississippi River as a memorial warship. A Hiroshima native who knows something about living with radiation, Kats responded to my Kyoto-Rikuzentakata email:

*Thanks for your insight. Your assessment of Kyoto’s concerned*

*citizenry is quite appropriate. I have always been somewhat annoyed by the general population of Kyoto, but could not quite put my finger on it. I now think I know why I felt uneasy about them. I think you are right about them not wanting to shake hands with Tohoku people. For a long time after the war, people from Hiroshima and Nagasaki were shunned as potential marriage mates, for fear of offspring turning out grotesque. In fact, many from Hiroshima and Nagasaki hid their past to improve their marriage prospects. Has time changed this perception? I am afraid not. Unreasonable fear and paranoia are manifested in different forms now. The whole thing regarding Rikuzentakata and Kyoto reminds me of the NIMBY syndrome (Not In My Back Yard). – Kats*