

# Yamanaka Melody

The old song is famous all over Japan, just as “My Old Kentucky Home” is well-known throughout America. Called “Yamanaka Bushi,” the song invokes in Japanese a nostalgia that may not differ much from what transplanted Kentuckians like me feel for a mostly imaginary time when darkies were gay, birds made music all day, and possums and coons roamed the hills of a land far away. *Bushi* is a somewhat archaic word for “song,” and Yamanaka, meaning “between mountains,” is the name of an 800-year-old hot springs town in western Honshu, far from the eastern population centers of Tokyo and Osaka. While there, I purchased a “Yamanaka Bushi” CD, and I listened to it as I prepared this album on my workshop computer. Accompanied by *shamisen* pluckings, a *geisha* (one imagines) wails a 300-year-old ode to Yamanaka’s riverside hot springs between the Matsu and Yakushi mountains. “Don’t forget the road to Yamanaka,” she urges in the opening lyrics. I surely would never have forgotten the road if I had walked it, up the mountains rising from the Sea of Japan coast. But a taxi made the trip short and easy for me. And there it was, an ancient spa stretching along the Daishouji River, between mountains, a mystic destination for generations of Japanese urbanites seduced by a song.



I am in silhouette here, but who cares? At age 71 in this photo and age 72 now, I look better in silhouette. The point is to show our Yoshinoya Hotel from river's edge in Yamanaka. The chute of water at lower left comes from overflowing bathing pools. I don't much care for Japanese "inns" such as this. Sure, you dress in *yukata*, walk barefoot on *tatami*, bathe in *ofuro*, eat *kaise-ki* dinners and sleep on *futon*, but commercial success has made the place too big, too modern. If I could go back hundreds of years and stay at this inn when it was just a ramshackle along this river, I might complain about inconveniences, but somehow I doubt it.

Often, after dinner at the inn, I slip away, seeking out a friendly little bar in an alley somewhere. Yoshi rarely goes with me. She would rather take a third bath and sink into her *futon* and be lulled to sleep by Japanese television, which I have difficulty understanding. Two baths a day at *onsen* spas are enough for me. How clean does one need to be? Always at the bars, I am the only foreign customer, a curiosity for most Japanese regulars, and it helps that I can stumble along in their language, telling them where I come from, why I am here, that sort of thing. In the photo at right, I am drinking *shochu*, a vodka-like liquor fermented from almost anything that will ferment. I don't much like it, but it certainly does the job. I simply ordered what the woman sitting near me was drinking, and then, with my digital camera, she shot this picture to commemorate my good taste. To my right at the bar sat a handsome 67-year-old gentleman who, for most of the time I was there, was hassled by an obviously scorned woman, much younger than he, and she wasn't going to put up with his dignified but dismissive crap. Yes, he was married, he told me, but his wife was at home like a good



Japanese wife should be, and this annoying woman was somebody else. In my journal, which goes everywhere with me, I jotted: "She came into the bar and yelled a lot. She left, she phoned several times, she came back again, she left again and phoned again." At below left, the bartender takes a call from her on his cell phone, before passing the instrument to the long-suffering gentleman, who always spoke politely for a while and then hung up, only to get another call within a few minutes. I asked the bartender what was going on. "She is just crazy," he said. At quieter times I talked to the bartender about the town of Yamanaka, on which I was now focusing, a seeker of "Old Japan." I told him I had come here from Yamashiro, another 800-year-old town down the mountain. *No*, he said, *Yamanaka is truly 800 years old, just as you say, but Yamashiro is no more than 100 years old*. He was contemptuous of Yamashiro's grandiose claims. I scribbled in my journal: "Am I in the midst of 'Old Japan' or in the midst of a local quarrel?" Two quarrels on this night, I should say — one civic, the other domestic, both eternal.







It was the third week of November, and townsfolk were apologizing for the lack of autumn colors due to unseasonably warm weather. But I saw lots of color as we strolled the famous Kakusenkei footpath along the Daishouji River. Below, girls take photos of each other, while I admire the graceful lines of a bridge originally built in the 17th century, say 350 years ago. Its name is Koorogi Bashi, or "Cricket Bridge." All wooden bridges, even *hinoki* bridges like this one, must be replaced from time to time, and this one was rebuilt in the late 1980s by artisans who followed the original design and used *hinoki* wood as their 17th century predecessors did. *Hinoki* is Japanese cypress, a water-resistant hardwood unknown in the West. It even makes great hot tubs.







Japanese rivers are never big. The nation's biggest, the Tone, "belongs" to Yoshi, since it runs alongside her Shibukawa/Komochi/Ikaho homelands in Gunma Prefecture. Her homelands, which include a portion of "her" river, lie at the geographical center of the Japanese archipelago, and so the area boasts of being the "Belly Button" of Japan. Anyway, the Tone looks pretty much like a *real* river as it rushes toward Tokyo to feed the city's storied Sumida. All the others look like American creeks at best. Here, in Yamanaka, far from Gunma, Yoshi pauses and poses alongside the Daishouji River, which makes up in beauty what it lacks in size. Near where Yoshi is standing, a brave man named Doumei killed a ferocious river dragon and saved Yamanaka from a gory fate. A nearby shrine recognizes his legendary heroics and signifies the villagers' gratitude. Sorry about the intruding hotel at upper left, but riverside hot-spring inns are the heart and soul of Yamanaka.



Am I a Japanophile? Perhaps so. Certainly I am uncritical of “Old Japan” — the architecture, the culture, the natural environment that existed long ago. But Japan nowadays contains an incredible amount of man-made ugliness that Japanese often see as progress. My personal experience with Japan covers about five years in my 20s and 30s when I lived there as a student, teacher and newspaperman and about five more years in my 60s and 70s when I visited the country at length as a tourist. My albums have focused on the beauty, and they will continue to do so, but I am planning additional trips to Japan this year and next, and I will take pictures of the ugliness I encounter, to document my contention. It’s one thing to be an admirer, another to be blind. This steel bridge in Yamanaka is not an egregious example, but it *is* ugly, no matter how well-painted, polished and functional it is. Oh, by the way, that’s Yoshi posing for me in the middle of this ugly bridge spanning the lovely Daishouji River. There are three major bridges at Yamanaka — one of wood, one of stone and one of steel. Only an engineer could love the latter.





Yamanaka's public bathhouses, the one above for men, the one at right for women. They are conveniently located in the very center of the town.

Public bathhouses — places where you can walk in, pay a few yen, wash yourself and soak in hot water — interest me, perhaps because there are not many of them left. In Tokyo, especially, they have virtually disappeared. People have their own baths at home. In my time as a Tokyo resident nearly a half century ago, they were everywhere. Wrapped in cotton *yukata* and shod in wooden *geta*, I would clip-clop down a narrow street, gloriously young and slim, carrying only a small washcloth and a ridiculously small amount of money, ¥30 as I remember, about 10 cents at the 1950s exchange rate. A half hour later I would emerge from the bathhouse, spick-and-span and warm all over. If the night air were chilly, I wouldn't even feel it as I clip-clopped back to my tiny bathless apartment. Prices have gone up over the years. Yamanaka charges ¥350 (a little more than three dollars now), but children can take baths for ¥130 and babies can be bathed by moms or dads for ¥50. Many Yamanaka residents, even those with fine baths at home, pay ¥2,000 for year-round privileges, a \$19 bargain. You see, getting clean is only part of it. The social aspects of communal bathing are important, too.