

1985-1989

# Life in a Japanese village



Jeff Hudson

A sit-down dinner at the home of Kimio Hayashi (far left), with Tetsuya Kawakami, Toru Kobayashi,

and Tadahiko Fujiwara. Note baseball game on television in the background

## Report from Watsonville's 'sister city'

(Register-Pajaronian staffer Jeff Hudson and his wife, Karen Kumari Hudson-Bates, visited Watsonville's sister city of Kawakami in Japan in September. A delegation from Kawakami will arrive in Watsonville on Sunday, staying through Thursday.)

By JEFF HUDSON  
STAFF WRITER

You don't get to Kawakami, Watsonville's sister city, on the Shinkansen, the gleaming, high-speed trains that are the pride of Japan's railways. They don't pass that way.

Neither do you reach Kawakami on the multi-lane expressways that wind through the mountainous countryside between Japan's major cities. (And don't call them freeways; there's a nasty toll charge levied on each vehicle).

In our case, my wife and I reached Kawakami on the Koumi Line.

The Koumi Line is a local train not listed in the bright-green schedule handed out to international tourists. The route is not widely known —

several of the reservations agents I spoke with in Tokyo and Osaka had never heard of it.

The Koumi line begins in Kobuchizawa, a Swiss-chalet-style mountain resort a few hours out of Tokyo on the Chuo Main Line.

At Kobuchizawa Station, it's easy to sort people out. Waiting on one platform are the vacationing urbanites — returned from a mountain hike, wearing designer sportsgear and toting backpacks. Fresh from their encounter with nature, these folks are wearing unaccustomed suntans and walking gingerly on slightly blistered feet. They're snacking on noodles and bento lunches while they wait for one of the sleek express trains, which will take them back towards teeming Shinjuku Station in Tokyo.

Waiting at another platform — the one furthest from the ticket office and the snack bar — stand the locals: school kids in their uniforms, mothers with little babies, women with loaded shopping bags, and a few retired men enjoying a day's journey.

Everyone stood up and formed lines as the 15:02 rounded the corner to pick us up.

For me, it was love at first sight. The train was a well-worn, two-car diesel — not exactly the pinnacle of technological achievement, but with lots of personality. The conductor, who clearly knew almost everyone on board, made sure that all the tickets were in order. Then he sat down, took off his shoes and began a long talk with one of his friends.

Everyone tried hard not to stare too curiously at the two *gaijins* (foreigners), who were terribly conspicuous in the second car. My wife and I, for our part, tried to act as though we were a normal part of the scenery.

The train, meanwhile chugged and wheezed and slowly made its way up the steep slope towards Nobeyama — at 1,345 meters, the highest station in the Japan Rail system. The views — forests and mountain peaks, interspersed with small, hand-tended fields of lettuce, peas, daikon and hakusai — were spectacular. Looking out over acres and acres of

lettuce, we almost felt as if we were out on San Juan Road — except of course that there were much taller mountains in the background, and everyone was speaking Japanese.

One stop further on, in a pretty mountain valley, we got off at Shinano-Kawakami Station. It was the beginning of an incredible visit, as people from Watsonville and Kawakami met face-to-face for the first time.

Watsonville and Kawakami became sister cities last year, through the exchange of letters. But the until we arrived in Kawakami, nobody from the two towns had met face to face. I felt a bit nervous, knowing that somehow I was representing all the folks back home, Anglo and Mexican, Japanese, Portuguese, Filipino and all the others who live in the Pajaro Valley.

We were whisked off to Kawakami's City Hall, where we were seated in a meeting room and served a glass of fresh milk from the

WATSONVILLE  
Register-PAJARONIAN  
November 14, 1987

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local dairy and other refreshments. Talking with people here (both Karen and I speak enough Japanese for basic communication), we began to get a feeling for what sort of place Watsonville's sister city is:

—Kawakami has a population of a little under 5,000 people, living in about 1,200 homes. Kawakami's boundaries include a sizable amount of agricultural land and forest outside the eight neighborhoods that make up the village itself.

—There's a birth, on average, every 4.7 days, and a death every 9.6 days. There's a marriage every 11 days, but on average there are only two divorces per year.

—There are about 740 farms, and three large nokyo (or agricultural cooperatives). Two of these cooperatives deal entirely with vegetables — lettuce accounting for about 60% of their business, followed by hakusai (a cabbage-like vegetable) with 30%. Strawberry jam is another local product. The area's third cooperative handles milk and fish (from the Chikuma River) in addition to vegetables.

—There are two elementary schools, with around 150 students apiece. There's also a middle school, but high school students have to take the train into Koumi, an hour away.

—The town is peaceful. There are two policemen, who seldom have to deal with anything more serious than an occasional traffic accident, one of which occurs (on average) every 5.3 days.

—The city government is very active — City Hall employs some 72 people — about one city employee for every 65 village residents. The city runs a hostel, a campground, and other tourist-related facilities. The city government is headed by Sosuke Yui, who holds the position of soncho — sort of an elected city manager, or village chief. There are also other officials, and a 14-member village council — all of them men.



Photos by Jeff Hudson

## A young student in gym class in elementary school

—People in Kawakami are, on average, fairly prosperous — lettuce has made some of them downright wealthy. There's an average of 2.8 automobiles per household, and a new cable-television system is being installed to serve most homes.

Lettuce is not a traditional crop in Kawakami. Before the war, the local economy was geared to lumber and subsistence farming. By the war's end, however, most of the trees had been cut, and although large numbers of young pines were being planted, they wouldn't mature for years. So the American occupation forces in Tokyo, homesick for salad, suggested that the cool climate of Kawakami might be suitable for lettuce. The rest, as they say, is history.

A town, however, is its people, and statistics and social trends don't do them justice. So perhaps its best to introduce some of the people we met.

Our first night in Kawakami was spent at the home of Tadahiko Fujiwara. Like 90% of village residents, he was born in Kawakami, and his living

room is full of mementos of the area — stuffed wildfowl taken in the area's forests, and several carved renderings of the Kawakami dog, a local breed that's highly sought after by dog lovers.

Fujiwara's house is spacious by Japanese standards. In the countryside, space is at less of a premium than in Tokyo. Next to his home stands a 100-year-old storehouse, which dates back to the village's early days.

Kawakami's past, however, extends much further back than that. The local archeological site, known as the Omiyama Ruins, has produced ceramics dating back to the Jomon period, while some of the stone implements found there are said to be 4,000 years old. A small museum, not often disturbed by out of town visitors, holds most of the relics. On the wall is a faded photograph of the day, more than 30 years ago, when the Emperor's younger brother came to investigate the dig, along with Clifford Evans of the Smithsonian Institution. Fujiwara points out his mother in one of the group portraits.

Near the museum are some thatched huts, reconstructed in the manner of stone-age dwellings. While we're soaking up the history, Fujiwara's wife, Kazuko, disappears into the forest, returning a few minutes later with edible wild mushrooms.

Not too far from the Fujiwara house lives Kimio Hayashi, a lettuce grower and the head of the Kawakami Village Council. The combination of civic duties and agribusiness keeps him on the go all day. His farm is one of the larger ones in Kawakami, and he is assisted by his son Hiroyasu. Hiro (as he introduces himself) is 28-years-old, and has studied some English in school. Strong and energetic, he gets up in the small hours of the morning and helps cut lettuce before dawn, lettuce that is shipped that day to markets

in Tokyo and other major cities.

Talking with Hiro, I was reminded of Japanese-American friends back in Watsonville, who work with strawberries, or repair cars or work in other fields. Their parents, however, left Japan for America, and now (although they look a bit like Hiro) they lead very different lives. And yet they're still a little bit alike.

In another part of town lives Choichi Hayashi. One of the youngest members of the Village Council, he enjoyed a career in the meat trade before returning to Kawakami to take up lettuce farming. As a buyer for Japanese meat suppliers, Choichi became a well-travelled man, visiting Australia, New Zealand, America and other countries. He learned quite a bit of English in the process. However, strong family ties and the outrageous cost of supporting a family in Tokyo swayed him to return to Kawakami, where he now is developing a seed business in addition to his farm. He's particularly curious about lettuce varieties grown in the Watsonville area.

Just how strong Choichi's family ties are becomes apparent when you enter his living room. There on the wall are portraits of ancestors — grandfather, great-grandfather, and further back — stern faces matched by traditional Japanese outfits. Choichi, with a touch of pride and also a trace of rebelliousness, talks about how his family has lived on the same land for generations. Looking from the great-grandfather to Choichi, I hear the family's heir (little Daisuke) crying in the kitchen. You just don't see that kind of family continuity very often in America.

We also met the Village Council — all men — and described for the slightly incredulous members the distant land of Watsonville, where cigarette smoking is forbidden at public meetings, and a woman sits in the mayor's chair. They were delighted to see photographs we'd brought from Watsonville, and Kawakami's mayor (Mr. Yui, who's cheerful mannerisms reminded both my wife and me of Ann Soldo) sent back calligraphy, a record of the official Kawakami village song, and other gifts for the Watsonville City Council.

We met dozens more over the course of several days in Kawakami — there is no space to describe them all, or the town's festivals, or many other details. But it was a wonderful place, full of very kind people, with a much more relaxed pace of life than the pressured folks in Tokyo. We hope to return some day — my wife was invited to teach English and Spanish at the middle school — and some day, I'm sure we will.



Mr. Nakashima shows off the local broccoli.