

MY JOURNEY TO TOWN OF FUJIMI - THE WORLD OF "AOI TORI"

By Raymond Chong

This story is my journey to the town of Fujimi, the location set of "Aoi Tori," ("Blue Bird in English or "Loiseau Bleu" in French) the Tokyo Broadcasting System (TBS) drama in October 2001. When I first saw the special 12th episode (a reflective narrative) of "Aoi Tori" television drama in December 26, 1997 in Osaka, my dream was to visit the home of "Yoshimori Shibata," the train station attendant. I saw the entire series of eleven episodes with English subtitles on Fuji TV (KTSF Channel 26) in the San Francisco Bay Area from December 19, 1998 to February 21, 1999 during Sunday nights. "Wandering Density" the theme song sung by Globe was very haunting. I was very determined to visit Fujimi to learn about the world of "Aoi Tori."

The TBS summary states:

A tale of tragic love between Yoshimori Shibata (played by Etsushi Toyokawa), a station employee at a quiet, rural station, and Kahori Machimura (played by Yui Natsukawa), the wife of the heir to a family fortune. When Kahori's husband (Hiromu Watanuki - played by Shiro Sano) uncovers their affair, the star-crossed lovers try to flee with Kahori's daughter (Shiori Machimura - played by Ann Suzuki). Their search of safety and happiness take them across the nation, from Hokkaido to Kagoshima. Filmed on location, this is an unforgettable story of romance told against the backdrop of some of the most beautiful scenery in Japan.

I had joined in the City of Fairfield-Nirasaki Sister City Delegation trip from Friday, October 5 to Monday, October 8. Nirasaki is in Yamanashi Prefecture. Mitsutoshi and Kazuko Tsutsumi kindly hosted me on their hilly country farm with beautiful views of the mountains. Mitsutoshi is a retired civil servant. Kazuko is a professor at Yamanashi Gakuin University in nearby Kofu. The delegation made the trip to celebrate the 30th year anniversary of the sister city relationship. Another purpose was to unveil a monument of Kieko and Elbert Whitaker for the dedication to promoting the sister city ties. On Sunday afternoon, we marched in parade through Downtown Nirasaki to honor Takeda family who had ruled Yamanashi Prefecture and Nagano Prefecture through March 3, 1582. The warriors were beautifully dressed in their battle gear. Members of the retinue were in fine dress. It was a great spectacle to see the honor guards shooting their flintlock rifles. Handmaidens were dressed in colorful gowns. This parade was simply grandiose in scope.



Fujimi is a beautiful resort town in Nagano Prefecture on the highlands at the foot of the majestic Yatsugatake Mountains on the island of Honshu. It is known for its eight mountain peaks that soar to 3,000 meters. Ponds are found among the deep virgin forest. A panoramic view of Mount Fuji can be seen from Fujimi. The Yatsugatake Chushin Kogen Quasi National Park is nearby. The region is known, as the Japanese

Alps for its beautiful green mountains on the "Roof of Japan." Fujimi is a short ride of 31.2 kilometers from Nirasaki. The area has spectacles of mountains, heights, forests, and lakes. White birches are in abundance with alpine flora blending in with the beautiful greenery of mountains. Fujimi is a place of nature, history, culture and recreation. Farming of vegetables, fruits, and flowers is widespread in the valley.

On Monday morning, October 8, the Tsutsumis drove me to Anayama Station on the Japan Railways Minobu Line. The Japanese were celebrating Sports Day, a national holiday. My journey started at 9:18 a.m. The ordinary (local) train ran passed stations at Hinoharu, Nagasaka, and Kobutisawa to Shinano-Sakai Station and arrived at 9:46 a.m. in the village of Sakai in Fujimi. Shinano-Sakai Station is the "Kiyosumi Station" where Yoshimori worked along with Kenji Shibata (played by Gin Maeda), his father, who is the stationmaster. The streets of village next to the Station were very quiet.



I explored around the Station and crossed the bridge to the other platform. Station appeared in fair condition. A bluebird cage is hung at a corner of the Station building near the passenger platform on the trackside. Two elderly men were managing the Station. A collection of "Aoi Tori" photos is hung in the wall at a corner of waiting room, which had a heater. Overall activity at the

Station was quiet.



Ichiro Arai, the tour guide, met me in front of the Shinano-Sakai Station in a green Mitsubishi Delica van at 10:31 a.m. He is a 32-year-old single man who loves nature. He graduated from Seikei University in Tokyo. His hobbies include photography, videotaping, web design, and swimming. Ichiro's parents operate Pension Raccoon, an alpine style lodging. Two ladies join us for the tour. Rieko Murakami is from Yokohama and Katsumi Ishii is from Kangawa. Rieko is an office lady with two sons. Katsumi is a housewife with three daughters. They had stayed the previous night at Pension Raccoon. They are fans of "Aoi Tori" who enjoyed the company of an American fan.

Ichiro drove around the scenes of "Aoi Tori" through the town where Yoshimori walked and biked. The fall harvest was in full swing. Senior farmers were busy collected rice and burning chaff in the fields. Cosmo flowers were in full bloom in a multitude of colors. The day was generally overcast and cool. During the drive along the countryside, we saw the summer rental house where Kahori and Yoshimori were to rendezvous. We stopped at three bridges. Ichiro begun to drive up the mountain road as we saw town of Fujimi below us. The mountain forest was in the autumn colors that were pervasive everywhere. Crystal streams flowed down the hills as creeks into rivers of the valley plain.



During the drive to the famous tree at "Otomegahara," Ichiro picked up a couple from Tokyo. We then walked up a mountain trail to the lonely "Shirakaba," (elm) tree on a grassy knoll. Fujimi residents know the grassy knoll as "Nyukasa Bokujyo." This place was where Yoshimori and Shiori watched the shooting stars. The same place is Yoshimori and Kahori made love under the stars on the grounds below the tree. The view of the Yasugatake Mountains was quite impressive. The area was cold with a strong wind howling in our faces. A meadow with cows grazing is below the tree.

At 1:30 p.m., Ichiro took us a high-class restaurant, "Sumire-Tei," which was the scene of Yoshimori and Hiromu dining at

the sushi restaurant. We ate a bowl of delicious tempura udon. We visited the Fujimi-Cho Community Plaza where Yoshimori and Shiori met at the public library. "Aoi Tori" posters and plaques were hung on a wall. Mikiko Akimito's (played by Hiromi Nagasaki) noodle shop is located near the Fujimi Station. It is now a shoe store. Mikiko is Yoshimori's childhood friend who secretly loved him.

We saw the temple where the "Night of the Festival" where Yoshimori and Kahori passionately held hands in secret. We saw other scenes of the beautiful countryside. Yoshimori's home was modest and had a solar panel roof. Along the way, we saw Minami Middle School where Shiori attended. We walked through the rice paddy fields where Yoshimori and Mikiko strolled together. The graveyard with a solitary



pine tree was in the horizon. The tree forlornly hung over where Kahori's tombstone stood. At 4:30 p.m. Ichiro dropped off Rieko and Katsumi at the Kobutisawa Station for their departure to their homes. The cost of the tour is 5,000 yen.



Ichiro and I arrived at Pension Raccoon at 5:00 p.m. for my one night stay. I met Ichiro's parents, Senzaburo and Namiko Arai, who are the owners of Pension Raccoon. Pension Raccoon was established in November 1995. The Arais have a beagle dog. Pension Raccoon is located on a row of other pensions. This lodging has eight rooms. A one night stay including dinner and breakfast is 10,000 yen, I ate a hearty dinner with two senior ladies also were in the dinning room at 6:30 p.m. The dinner consisted soup, appetizers, fish filet, beef stew and apple strudel. During the dinner, Ichiro played a slideshow of "Aoi Tori" scenes with the "L'oiseau Bleu" soundtrack.

I rose early at 6:00 a.m. on Tuesday morning, October 9. to have a breakfast at 7:00 a.m.. Another fine meal consisted of fruit salad, toast, buns, ham and eggs. Ichiro offers a Kiyosumi Note book, "L'oiseau Bleu" Kiyosumi photo album compact disk, and S.E.N.S. "L'oiseau Bleu" soundtrack. I bought the book for 500 yen, the compact disk for 2,000-yen, and the S.E.N.S. soundtrack at 2,850 yen. He is very talented photographer who specializes in landscapes. Ichiro shot the photos with his Fuji FinePix 6900 Zoom digital camera from May 28, 2001 to June 29, 2001. The Kiyosumi Note book has 48 pages of photos and Japanese text. The Kiyosumi photo album compact disk has 209 photos of scenes, HTML documents of the Pension Raccoon website, slide show of 50 slides, and video clip movie of 68 seconds. The "L'oiseau Bleu" soundtrack has eleven moody songs. Along with the two items, Ichiro also gave me a set of five photos of "Aoi Tori" scenes. Senzaburo gave a set of colorful five postcards of Taizi Harada: "Four Seasons in Japan."

We took group pictures in front of Pension Raccoon. The road was wet from the overnight rain. Ichiro dropped me off the Shinano-Sakai Station. I departed to Toyokawa-Shi in Aichi-Ken to visit my friends at 8:34 a.m. on Japan Railways Minobu Line.

My journey to the town of Fujimi was very memorable. I will always remember the beautiful rural scenery surrounded by an evergreen forest in Fujimi. I felt the moods of a tragic romance between Yoshimori and Kahori. The place left me with a mystical feeling about the world of "Aoi Tori".

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