

RIDING TRAINS RIGHT AFTER THE WAR

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As my train was usually already in and about to leave, and I would not miss my train, I would drop my bike in front of the store and yell, “Negaimasu,” and run for the station. If there was a line at the wicket, I would flash my pass and jump over the barrier to grab the train. If it was a down train which I was taking, which left from the near side of the opposite platform, and if I figured I couldn’t make it over the bridge regardless of how fast I ran, I would quickly check for trains, jump the tracks and climb onto the train. I figure that the Stationmaster must have been relieved when I left to return to America.

In the Tokyo area, as the city grew, the suburbs were able to expand in all directions with an adequate number of rail links. However, as Kyoto expanded, the mountains were right up against the eastern edge of the city. That meant that a single double-track line had to handle not only all the major long-distance traffic along the length of the islands, but all the local and commuter traffic, and both lines went through two very long tunnels, with a quarter mile gap in between.

To make it worse, there was quite an upgrade going from Kyoto to the level of Lake Biwa, which you came to as soon as you left the tunnel. That was the location of the city of Otsu, the capital of Shiga prefecture, and the terminus of a side line around the back side of the lake and a ferry line with boats connecting two or three cities around the largest lake in Japan.

Soon after the train left Kyoto Station, the train entered the first of two long tunnels, with a fair degree of upgrade, with a three- or four-minute break before entering the second long tunnel. As we entered the first tunnel, the passengers would get out their handkerchiefs to cover their noses, and by the time we were halfway into the second tunnel, the smoke in the car was so thick you could hardly see someone two or three feet away.

There was one effort the government made to try to ease the crowded commuter traffic from Shiga. They had taken a few complete baggage cars that had usually been used on express trains, added wooden benches against the walls on each side, and added a few hand straps from the ceiling. Since these cars had a couple of non-automated, wide, sliding doors for loading and unloading baggage quickly, they filled the similar function of a metropolitan commuter car.

Every couple of months or so, I would decide to spend a day in Kyoto on Saturday, to explore the city, to see a temple garden, explore the stores or see a movie. If I wanted to stay in Kyoto longer, rather than leaving right after supper, the only other choice was to take the last train.

After two or three major stops in Shiga, it became a regular express taking the inner Nakasendo route, ending in Nagano city the next morning. All the cars were third class standard coaches and, needless to say, it was very crowded. There would be crowds at each door, pushing and shoving to get two or three people onto the train, so as not to be left behind until morning.

One time it wasn't quite that crowded, as I was able to get a little way into the aisle of the coach. There was a large group of schoolgirls with two teachers. They were probably junior high seniors, on their senior outing to see the temples, gardens and historic sights of Kyoto. I was almost sure that the young woman teacher must have been standing on a box. I was six feet tall, and she and I were the only ones taller than the other standing passengers. As the car thinned out a bit before I reached my stop, I discovered I was wrong!!

Once I heard a Japanese commuter passenger, who wasn't aware I understood Japanese, say that some of the high school boys would take chances and ride outside of the train, as long as they could get a hand or foothold. He also said that in one case one of them had been killed, by being pulled off by a passing freight train where a rope had come loose and was whipping around off that car.