

“To the Gentle Sound of the Movie Camera Turning, I Record Those Things that Give Meaning to My Life.”

An Interview with Kiyotaki Akira

In Yamagata Prefecture, there was a railway line operated by Yamagata Transport that ran from Uzentakamatsu Station in the city of Sagae to Mazawa Station in the town of Nishikawa in the Nishimurayama region. The line, first known as the Sanzan Electric Railway, was opened in 1926 to carry worshippers visiting the Three Sacred Mountains of Dewa and also to transport mining supplies.

In 1943, in line with war-time industry consolidation policies, Sanzen Electric Railway merged with Takahata Railway (the Takahata Line), Obanazawa Railway, and each of the bus companies that operated in the inland regions of Yamagata. The new company was known as Yamagata Transport and the railway became the Sanzen Line.

As times changed, the mines closed down one-by-one and the car became more popular. This resulted in the line operating at a loss and operations ceased altogether in 1974. [The information above is based on the Sanzen Line Wikipedia entry.]

In the special section of the festival that looks at “Yamagata and Film,” there will be a screening entitled “Yamagata in Film.” This will feature Yamagata scenery of the time together with a record of the operation of the Sanzen Line. The film was taken with an 8 millimetre camera in the fourth decade of the Showa era by Mr Kiyotaki Akira, a former employee of Yamagata Transport who worked on the Sanzen Line. Below, Mr Kiyotaki shares his memories of the line.

I began work with the Sanzen Line when I was 14, straight after leaving primary school. In 1944, I volunteered — really I was half forced to volunteer — for service in the Navy and joined the military in 1945. In those days, conscripts were given leave, but if you volunteered you had to resign from your job. I entered the service in January, but the war ended in August. When I returned home, my former boss looked after me and I was able to go back to the same job. At first, I was told, “Go and work on the trains” and I did things like being a conductor, but after that, I worked in the company management team until I retired. Towards the end of my time with the company, I was in charge of the operation of the line. Trains had already been overtaken by cars, you see, and with the line continually running in the red, they gave the order to close it down. So it became my job to see that this happened.

It occurred to me at the time that if I didn't make a record of these trains, the chance to do so would be lost, and that's how I came to make these movies of the Sanzen Line. In the past, I had

had a number of hobbies and would write things like Japanese verse, haiku, poems and essays. I felt that I wanted to leave some proof that I had been alive. It seemed to me that making a record on film was part of this hobby. I still have these film records of the railway operations of the time and when I retired they were put on display in the (company) warehouse with a red paper that read, “To be permanently preserved.”

However, it's now thirty years or so since I retired so the warehouse, which fell into ruin, is no longer there, and the company headquarters moved to somewhere else. There's a Pachinko Parlour now at the Teppocho intersection where the warehouse stood and whenever I pass I think, “Ah, the warehouse used to be there.”

After the closure of the Sanzen Line, the train that featured in the movie *New Destinations*, was sold off to the Takamatsu Kotohira Electric Rail in Shikoku and worked there for a while. But eventually it became too old and was dismantled and no longer exists. You can still see one of the first electric trains, Train 103, that has been preserved in the Gassan Sake Brewery Museum in the town of Nishikawa. And there's also a carriage from the Takahata Line in the Lina World Amusement Park.

Now that my legs aren't that good I don't go out so often but I still make movies. There's a group of us who got together around 1958 and started the Yamagata Cine-Club to share our hobby of taking 8 millimetre film. [The group is now known as Yamagata Cinema Club.] We've been going for the past fifty years or so. Each month we publish a magazine which had its 408th edition in September, 2013, and at our monthly club meetings we screen material presented by various members. [Since 2009, Mr Kiyotaki has been the club's president.]

I tried using a digital camera but, well, I can't really get the hang of how it works. One of the things I would still like to film is in the town of Kahoku where a woman make craft goods from straw. I would like to leave a record of her work.

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of the movie camera turning,
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that give meaning to my life.” — Kiyotaki Akira

Interview conducted by Okuyama Shinichiro (Editorial Board)
in Yamagata on September 19, 2013

(Translated by Barbara Hartley)

■ Screenings

Yamagata in Film: Kiyotaki Akira Films [YF] 10/11 18:30– [M2]