

The Lifeways of Kawakami Village

Madison Luken, Centre College, Danville, KY
Yamaguchi Prefectural University, Yamaguchi, Japan



“Within each tool or article is the shape of a person’s face or the size of their hand, and you feel nothing but the warmth of those who lived here.”

「ひとつ一つの道具や資料の中に、その人々の顔や手の大きさ背丈など、生きた人のぬくもりさえ感じるものばかり」

- visitor to Abugawa History and Folklife Museum



Today, much of Kawakami Village no longer exists, due to the construction of the Abugawa Dam in 1966 and the submersion of large swaths of land. To preserve the lifeways of the people who lived there, the Abugawa History and Folklife Museum (pictured above) was erected by locals.

History of life in Kawakami Village and of nearly all the materials housed by the museum is recorded in *Abugawa no minzoku shiryō (Articles of Abugawa Folklife)* by Hōsai Hata.

Introduction to Kawakami Village

According to legend, during the Genpei War, the son of commander Taira no Munemori fled into the Heike mountains and fortified a temporary hideout following defeat at the Battle of Dannoura. The Genpei War, fought between the Taira and Minamoto clans, ended with the installation of the Shogunate military governance system that would persist until the Meiji Restoration.

The people who came to settle in the Abugawa valley enjoy telling this Romantic tale as the prelude to Kawakami Village’s establishment. The Battle of Dannoura was in 1185 and the first recording of the village’s name was in 1699. Since then, Kawakami Village grew into a number of districts scattered amongst the tendrils of the Abu River, where people subsisted by fishing, farming, and eventually by selling lumber.

The mountain forests are blanketed in evergreen conifers like Japanese cedar and cypress trees, those leafy residents separate into laurel forest, deciduous and tropical deciduous forest. The Abu river, which is largest river in northern Yamaguchi Prefecture, flows between these mountains, emptying into the Japan Sea in Hagi City on the northern coastline.



Henry Luce Foundation

Life on the River: Then



(Right) A fish preserve for keeping captured sweetfish (鮎) that could be stored on a typical river boat (川船).



(Left) Abugawa River Fishing Association Fishing License

The museum records the existence of approximately 125 river boats that carried firewood and charcoal to Hagi city in 1845. A single boat carried 20 kilograms of charcoal in 30-35 *datsu* and 40 bundles of chopped pine firewood from Takase district to Hagi. When returning, these boats carried high-price miscellaneous goods like salt. The men who drove the boats departed at 5 AM and returned as it grew dark, at times needing to rope off their boats and haul them upriver. This made it an especially difficult job, particularly in the winter. Unlike firewood and charcoal, timber was transported via “timber rafting” or “log driving,” which involves connecting several rafts and driving them with a scull or quant pole.

Life on the River: Now



Just several steps from the Abugawa Museum is the Abugawa Dam. At its foot is a camping site and onsen that is visited by tourists and locals. The river has seen a reduction in several fish species like the akaza catfish and Japanese fluvial sculpin, which are both on Yamaguchi’s red list of endangered species.



Forestry & Agriculture

千歯十



(top left) “The one thousand teeth thresher used in rice farming was made of iron and invented in the neighborhoods of Osaka. During the Edo period, Ise pilgrimages from the countryside became popular and thus it was common that along this journey convenient farming tools were discovered from other regions and introduced as new tools to one’s own village. The thousand teeth thresher continued to be in use until the rotating threshing machine was invented in Meiji 43 (1910).”

臼群六



(above) Mortars for tea leaf grinding, flour grinding, and rice hulling were often operated by women or children.

(right) A woman weaves a sack (*datsu*) for charcoal on a *datsu*miki.



たつ織機



Resource	Quantity	Used in Edo Period other contents
Firewood	250,000 ken	
Charcoal	60,000 ken	
Pine, cedar, and chestnut boards	25,000 ken	

Agricultural Product	Japanese	Planting Season
Rice	稲	Soak the seed rice in a stream for twenty days before harvest (the 18 days before the first day of spring). Then, soak in a bucket for twenty days and sow in a top sown. Plant in the middle of May (1 st to 20 th).
Wheat	麦	Plant in autumn (the 18 days before the first day of fall).
Steamed green peas	豆	Plant in harvest.
Foxtail millet, common millet, summer adzuki bean	粟 (あひろ) 黍 (あぶら) 豆 (あずき)	
Eggplant	茄子 (なす)	Sow in seedbeds during the equinoctial week of spring. Plant in May.
Cucumbers	大瓜	
Guards	瓜	Plant on hedge (the 11 th day after the summer solstice and the 2 nd of July), the period when rice planting finishes.
Soybeans	大豆	
Sesame	胡麻	
Fall adzuki bean	秋小豆	
Japanese leek	こっせよう	
Hemp	麻	Finish planting by the eighty-eight day from the beginning of spring.
Soba	蕎麦 (そば)	Plant in the middle of July (1 st to 20 th).
Dalton	大豆	Plant before the equinoctial week.
Turnip	蕪 (かぶ)	
Hybrid rubbery	樹	
Japanese cedar seedlings	杉の本	Plant in February.

“In the Edo Period (1603-1868), the population of Kawakami Village increased as a result of development in Hagi, the feudal domain capital. At the same time, Kawakami became a chief producing area for charcoal and firewood, fuel resources that were the equivalent to modern day concrete, gasoline, and oil.”

「江戸時代、川上村の人口が急増するのは、藩都萩の建設によるが、当時の木材、薪炭は現在のコンクリート・ガソリン・重油に相当し、その主たる生産地の一つが川上村であった。」

