

わっしょい! わっしょい!

(*Wasshoi! Wasshoi!*)

Vol. 4 - Num. 1

"Happenings of the Palm Family in Japan."

Winter 1993-94

Hopefully this newsletter finds you in good health... ready to attack the new year. In the last letter, we left you while we were working for 3 months in America. We have been back in Japan for about a year now and still plan on staying for quite a while longer. In this letter we hope to update you on some of the fun we have experienced this past year.

Mikoshi

In August, I participated in a 351 year old Japanese tradition... the Fukagawa Mikoshi procession. Each neighborhood in the Fukagawa area gets several hundred people together to carry a "*Mikoshi*" (portable shrine) in a parade starting from Tomioka Hachimangu Temple.

I had seen the procession last year in our "Toyo-2-chome" neighborhood going between the various apartment complexes. About 60-80 people at a time would carry 4 logs about 20 feet long on which two cross beams were tied on. The mikoshi proper is an ornate carved

piece with lots of gold overleaf. It is only about 5 feet cube but weighs over a ton. With the logs, it turns out to be a fairly heavy load per person, but with a parade time of 2-3 hours including breaks for tea and beer... it did not look like such a hard afternoon. Since everyone is adorned in matching "happi" coats and shouting "*Wasshoi, Wasshoi,...*" to keep in marching rhythm... it is a festive time with lots of comradery around carrying the heavy load.

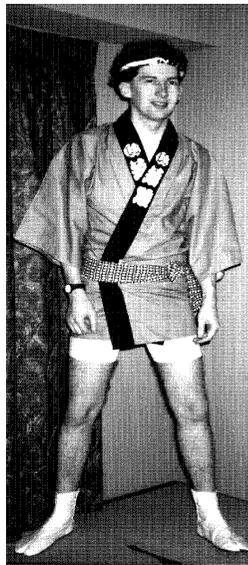
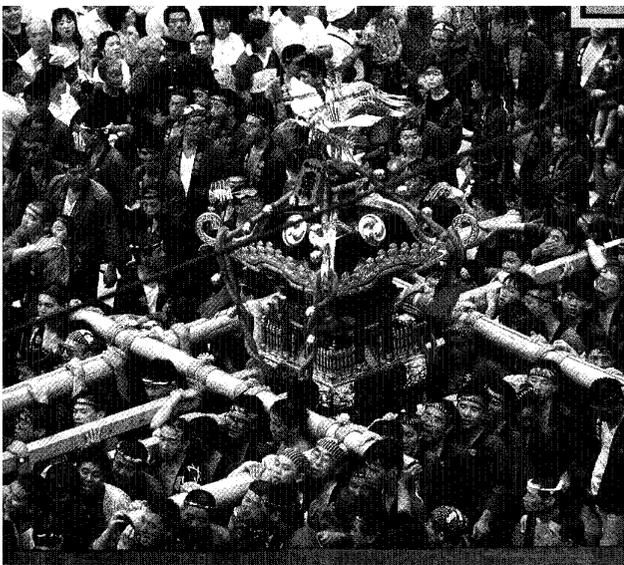
Anyways, that was what I had seen last year and was hoping to participate in it this year. Although I have carried on many short conversations with people and shop owners in our neighborhood, I was not confident that I would be allowed to participate in this potentially solemn/religious festival. I convinced Eiko to contact Mr. Sato in our Family Town Community Organization about my desire to participate. Although I was willing to not participate if it would disturb the "*wa*" (harmony) in our community, he was insistent that I

should participate. It would involve 2 Saturdays... the first to dedicate Toyo-2-chome's new Mikoshi and the second for the actual parade. Before that I had to travel into an old part of town to purchase the traditional "pants" and rubber-soled socks. Purchasing was easy... but it took a trip to a neighbor's grandfather's house to figure out how to wear the multi-holed and layered cloth.

The first Saturday rolled around and I had to go 2 train stops to the shrine where our Mikoshi was to be dedicated. Since I did not know anyone from our area who was participating, I apprehensively headed out on my own wearing the traditional festival garb. Along the way I met a Japanese guy who was also rushing to the dedication. We tended to stick together during the ceremony and the procession... this was also his first year to participate. He spoke nearly fluent English since he was a *salaryman* at Citibank.

The dedication involved a lot of priests shaking leaves and clapping... culminating in a sip of the nectar of the gods (*sake*) for everyone. The mikoshi was then hoisted by the long time carriers of the mikoshi and we all headed back to our neighborhood preceded by our community leaders in traditional *hakimas* (pants style kimonos). Since there were several hundred participants switching off carrying, no one needed to carry very long during the 2 hour trip back to and through our neighborhood.

Since I am a few centimeters taller than the average mikoshi carrier, more of the weight tended to fall on my shoulders. Combined



with my lack of meat and fat on my bones, I was pretty bruised and sore the following days. Nevertheless I thought I would be ready for the following weekend's parade which I assumed to be about the same duration.

What I did not know was that this year was the *Honmatsu*, in other words, the "special", once in three year mikoshi progression where 56 neighborhoods in the Fukagawa area all carry their *Mikoshi* in a single procession throughout the *entire* Fukagawa area. The little 2-hour community event I thought I was getting involved in turned out to be Tokyo's biggest, televised, 13-kilometer (10 mile), 8 hour marching event. And it started at 5AM!

As is typical in August, it was a hot day... but we never felt very hot. One of the traditions is that the parade watchers throw buckets of water on the passing parade marchers. Even the local fire departments get into the act by setting up their trucks to hose down the participants.

The most painful part came at the end of the day... the culmination of soggy clothing, walking the entire distance in socks, and being stomped by the people carrying the mikoshi in front of me left my big toes pretty bloody. Even now the nails are still discolored underneath from the event almost 6 months ago... yucky. Anyways, it was definitely an experience I will not forget.

BBQ

One of the American traditions that I still relish in Japan is the typical urban bound quest to get close to "nature" by roasting dead cow parts over hot coals... ie: Barbecuing! Our friend from Matsushita, Tom Borgstrom, had given us a very nice charcoal BBQ for a wedding present. We had several successful BBQs while we lived in Osaka and had a few in our

new apartment in Tokyo. We usually started while it was still light but one night I got a late start and wanted to get the coals ready quickly. I loaded up the grill with a large pile of "Match-Lite" briquets, lit it, and went inside. Within 10 minutes, there was pounding on our front door... the panicked building manager wanted to know if we knew our balcony was on fire. A quick check revealed the coals were burning nicely... flames about 1 to 2 feet in the air... but still safely contained in the BBQ. A crowd had formed in the garden 5 stories below and a few neighbors were out on their balconies. I tried to calm them by explaining it was just a BBQ but some people lingered around for quite awhile.

For the next 2 years, things seemed to go fairly well since I tried to start the flames while it was still light and kept the lid down. However, one Saturday last Fall, we loaded up the grill since several *gaijin* families had come over. The building manager called to inform us that several people were complaining... in fact he claimed they had been complaining for months and that we should stop. We did continue with the BBQ that evening, but Eiko was adamant that we were never going to BBQ again. I tried calm her with the plan that we would find out exactly what was bothering people and change our BBQ strategy... BBQing would go on. The next day Eiko and I headed down to talk to the building manager to determine the "problem". Various issues were raised, but it seemed the predominate one was the smell of the charcoal briquets. We presented

him with "a small token of our appreciation for the suffering he must of endured" (more or less a "bribe") box of cookies which he unhesitantly accepted. While in America, we found an "odorless" propane gas BBQ that we have been using successfully for several months. If anyone does complain again... it will probably take more than a box of cookies next time.



Coming/Going to America

Rockwell business took me to America a couple of times during the Fall and then in November, Eiko, Rony, Andy, and I went to visit my parents for two weeks. Cooped up on a plane for 12 hours gets pretty exhausting... and jet lag seemed to hit the boys pretty hard. But it was worth it so that boys could see all of their USA relatives whom they had not seen in almost a year. Eiko and I even got to sneak off to New York for a few days to spend some time alone. We had tickets on American Airlines and flew on the first and last days of the strike which added a little adventure. It was nice to visit my Carnegie Mellon housemate, Erik Carlson, who has a great view of Manhattan.



Boys

Well now that I have droned on about all sorts of things... I finally get to the part that people might be most interested in hearing about... Cameron and Andrew. Both Rony and Andy have continued to develop well even after their premature start nearly 2 years ago. Just before they celebrated their first birthday they started taking their first steps without holding onto anything.

The boy's first real word besides mamma or daddy was "Owatta", the Japanese word for *finished* or *over*. Their main use of the word was when a song was finished or especially at the end of a CD, they would run over to the stereo and point to the CD player and say "Owatta, owatta, owatta..." until the next song started or a new CD was inserted. The boys have a few other words but not quite as many as other kids their age. We are not worried since everyone has their own development rate and the boys also must deal with three languages: Japanese, English, and their private "twin" language. Rony's favorite phrase is "What is this?" and Andy enjoys saying "Cool" and "Wow". Recently they started mimicking many words that we say.

Their comprehension has not seemed to lag, in fact they seem to

have a double vocabulary. Questions or commands in English or Japanese generally yield the same effect. Saying "Wash your hands" or "*O-tete o arauu*" causes both of them to head to the bathroom sink.

Living in Japan, the boys most likely hear more Japanese than English, but they also can hear quite a bit of English. Of course I speak English to them, but Eiko speaks some English to them as well. They can also hear Disney Sing-A-Long videos, Sesame Street, and a Japanese TV show called "*Eigo de Asobou*" (Let's play with/in English) which alternates between Japanese and English in a "Sesame Street" style format.

The boys run around a lot now and enjoy riding around on their "Tike Bikes". They also are fairly fearless, sliding down head first on 10 foot high slides. Almost everyday Eiko takes them to parks to meet and play with their friends.

On Christmas Eve Day, 5 boys, a girl and their moms came over for a Christmas party. For most of them, it was their first time to meet a real live Santa since I dressed up in a full red suit with beard. Everyone received presents from Santa's goody bag... but some of the kids were terrified by the costume. Andy and Rony seemed to recognize me...

they were not afraid to sit on my lap even though they are usually very shy around strangers. Many of the mothers were very interested in the tree and house decorations and the Rice Krispy bears we had made... traditions that are not seen in Japan.

That is all...

Well that is about it for this time. The only other item I want to mention is that Rockwell Japan has moved across town... my new phone number (with voice mail) is +81-3-5371-1564 and FAX is +81-3-5371-1507. As usual, we want you to stop by when you are in the neighborhood.

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