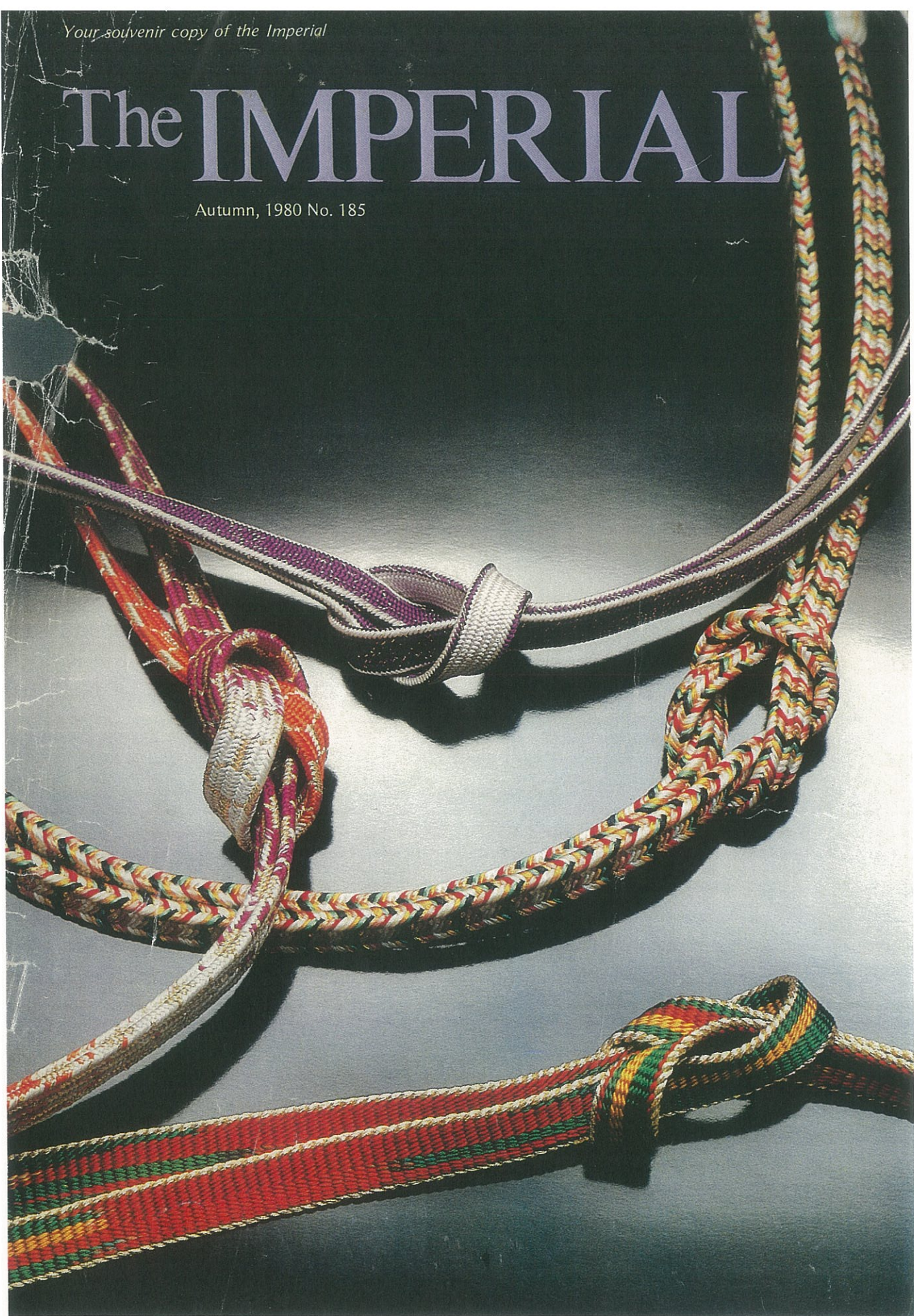


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# The IMPERIAL

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# Travels to the Japanese Countryside



## Progress in our Village—Kiyosato

### From Takeda Shingen's Kagemusha to Midnight Noodle Shops

A lot has happened to the Yatsugatake area of Yamanashi Prefecture—since a friend and I bought an old, thatch-roofed house there. The authorities had planned to buy it to preserve as a cultural treasure. It was built as a summer house by a “shrine carpenter” (meaning that no nails were used) for a pre-war Minister of Finance.

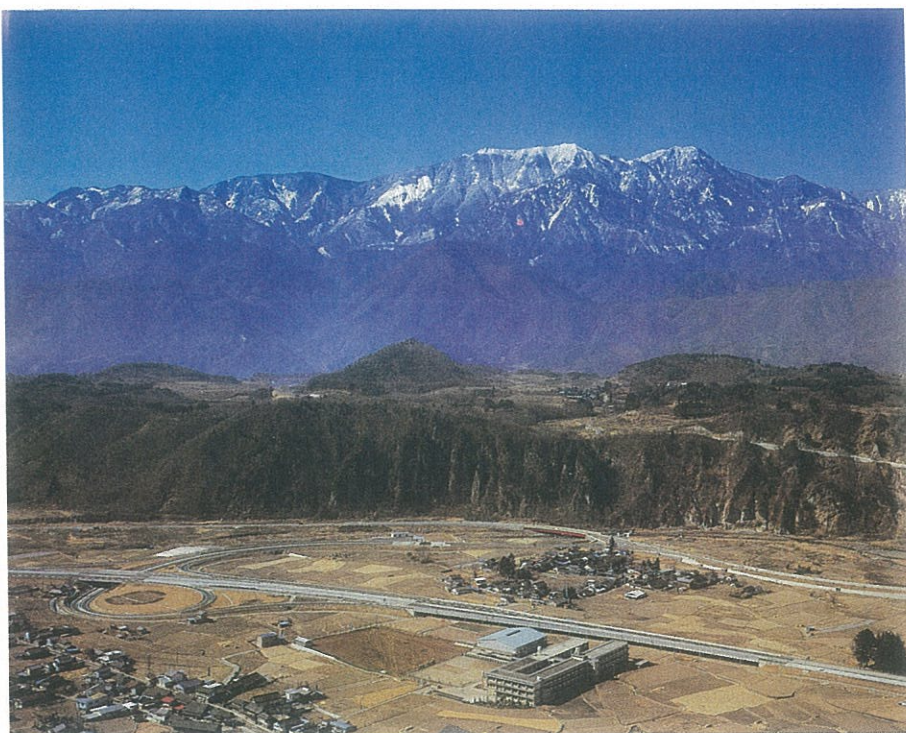
Afraid that the local government might recognize its historic value, we immediately committed ourselves to the restoration. We were intrigued not only with the building but with the stories and flavor of our surroundings

as well. That was five or six years ago, when today's nearby expressway was mostly in the blueprint stage. In those days, we took a train from Shinjuku. Depending on the season, it could be incredibly crowded. Huge back packs of the *kanizoku* (“crab families,” a word used for backpackers whose rucksacks seem to tower over wobbling, little legs) usurped space from the hundreds of other express passengers, all of whom were more interested in saving time than in traveling comfortably. After two and a half hours, it was a welcome relief to change trains at

*The author's thatch-roofed country home is an historic relic set in history-rich Yamanashi Prefecture*







From the relatively untraveled Nirasaki-Kobuchizawa portion of the Chuo Expressway, drivers can enjoy the view of Mt. Shirane to the south.



Kobuchizawa and take the two-car Koumi Line up the slopes of Yatsugatake headed for Kiyosato. (This line claims to run at the highest elevation of any Japanese railroad, and the view of trains traveling through this mountainous area is a famous one in Japan). Before getting off, we always confirmed that our house was still standing. This was possible because the thatched, beam-capped roof juts up into the sky and can be seen through the trees from the approaching tracks. We usually paused at a stone where General Takeda Shingen is said to have sat while pondering strategy some 300 years ago in the days of the Warring States (1467-1568). This is the period Kurosawa depicts in his internationally acclaimed movie *Kagemusha*. People in Kiyosato say that the film's hero, Takeda Shingen, who was based in the neighboring village of Kofu, greatly feared assassination, and employed more "shadow generals" than any other daimyo.

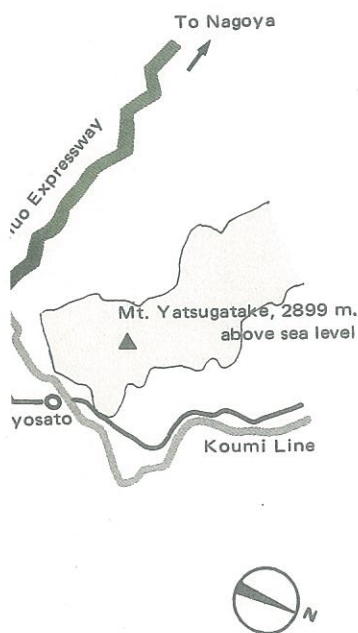
Through a narrow glass window of our house, between the white paper panels and the wooden base panel of our *yukimi shoji* ("snow viewing sliding door") Mt. Fuji can be seen, snow-capped, and looking at its very best. The villagers will tell you that our view

of Mt. Fuji compares with no other, and it is indeed a splendid sight. The jagged and majestic Japan Alps wall in the Yatsugatake plateau, and to the south, Mt. Shirane's North Peak rises 3192 meters above sea level, making it the highest Japanese volcano after Mt. Fuji.

Just across the road from our house is a spring which bubbles a tremendous amount of crystal clear, cold water out of a 30-feet-tall mound of earth. This has been divided into three troughs which disperse the water to farms clinging to the side of the mountains ringing the vast plateau below. People are forbidden to wash directly in the channel so that the water remains clean for the lower levels. We are lucky to be right at the source. The old man who previously lived in our house raised thousands of rainbow trout, using these clean spring waters which maintain uniform temperature throughout the year.

Village folklore has it that a former daimyo had his home located where the spring now is. One day earth suddenly bulged up in his entrance hall. Fortunately, in Japan, not only volcanic ash shoots out under such circumstances; a pleasant trickling sound announced the creation of a spring. He moved up the hill to dryer ground, where a very impressive *kura*





Northeast of Kobuchizawa lies the impressive Yatsugatake plateau.

("storehouse") used mostly for rice still survives, and the unpolluted Yatsugatake air has been kind to it, leaving the surface a sparkling, sun-bleached white. The family crest is still boldly embossed in black on the side walls below the peaked tile roof.

Nearby the *kura* are the extensive ruins of the stone foundation of the ancient mansion and just down the slope is a huge dilapidated *sake* brewery with a rugged path that challenges only the boldest to approach it. In the gloomy interior, one sees gigantic wooden barrels, perhaps some 30 feet in diameter, once used in *sake* making.

When we first came there was not a single house to be seen up the road, just forested ravines and gorges. Now, at last count, there were 450 vacation houses, mostly built with only one side anchored to the ground and the other supported by flimsy steel stilts, sometimes 70 or 80 feet in height. One wonders if the architect forgot that Japan is earthquake country.

Now we drive to our weekend retreat via the Chuo Expressway. The Kobuchizawa interchange allows us to make the trip faster than by train. On the stretch between Nirasaki and Kobuchizawa you can drive at top speed

on a four-lane highway for several minutes and not see a single car in either direction. And I know that is a face of Japan few of you have seen. When the expressway is completed, we should be able to drive from, say, the Imperial Hotel to our house in just two hours.

But I have a sneaking suspicion that supply will create demand, and that we will see more colonies of bungalows perched among our mountains. We used to say, rather proudly, that no other house could be seen from ours. But when my partner returned from the house last week, he reported that in the month we had been away, a typical prefabricated, modern Japanese structure had been built on property adjacent to ours. It is a little, drive-in-style Japanese restaurant serving mostly noodle dishes. I'm trying to believe that progress can mean more convenient midnight snacks: we used to cook our noodles over our traditional, open pit *irori*.

But I really wish a spring would bubble up in my neighbor's living room—without the accompanying earthquake, of course—causing that restaurant to move on up the mountain, and leaving us to contemplate happily on our isolation.

Thomas Nevins