

November 20, 1949 (1)

*Early in day*

Dear Fran:

This is Sunday morning in Osaka. That is, it is Sunday morning and we are here, having arrived last evening on the train from Okayama. The trip was a 4-hour trip by steam train and, as usual, the train was exactly on time to a split second. The train system in Japan is excellent. It goes everywhere and the trains run on schedule.

For the first time in a week Harold Wise and I are in an American style hotel without a delegation in attendance and without maids circulating all around at all times. When traveling Japanese style one has absolutely no time to himself; at least the occupying Americans do not. Everything is arranged. We literally had to fight off the arrangers to get a breathing spell today.

Now that several days have gone by since my last letter it will be practically impossible to bring you up to date on everything. I'll try to hit the highlights. Ink is hard to come by; hence the pencilled letter.

Enclosed are a couple of my cards. Note both sides. They are the same, they tell me. One just doesn't go anywhere here without a good supply of personal cards. The Japanese all hand them out and they expect to receive cards in return. I have a briefcase full of cards that have been handed to me and more are coming in all the time.

Last Monday evening we boarded the train at Tokyo Central for Fukuyama. Besides Harold and me there were two entomologists, Kojima and Murayama, and one forester, Yokomaku. We met our interpreter, George Kataoka, at Fukuyama upon arrival at noon Tuesday. How many assorted foresters and officials also met us at the Station, I'll never know.

Once the baggage situation was in hand, twenty-five or thirty of us had lunch Japanese style in a department store restaurant. My chief difficulty was in trying to operate chopsticks with frozen fingers. Naturally there was no heat in the establishment. (The only heat in Japanese homes and most places of business comes from a few charcoal embers in a pot (habachi)). This is no great shakes for a heating unit.

In due course we got out into the woods to see the bark beetle control operations. Enroute our retinue was met at various towns and villages by the mayor, vice-mayor or chief of police, usually all three and many others. At each place we were offered tea and a conference. It took time to decline all the hospitality. And it took time merely to drive along the roads which are just barely wide enough to accommodate a car. The trouble is that the roads twist and wind and they are choked with bicycles, cows, children, motorcycles, push carts and stuff. The horn is the key to the situation. In due time, I suppose, one becomes accustomed to seeing calamity averted by inches as some mother snatches her child out of the road just ahead of the front wheels.

As I started to say, we finally got out into the woods to see the bark beetle control. No beetles. Nor were the foresters able to show us any in that prefecture, Hiroshima. (The city of Hiroshima was quite some distance away, and, consequently, we did not get to see it.)

Now comes the part at which the Japanese foresters shine. They are great party men and seldom get near the woods. When they do, they never do any work. There are drivers to drive the cars and there are loggers to cut the trees; and the farmers keep the records, such as they are. It's a complicated business and I'll not attempt to go into it any further at this time.

Oh yes! about the party. We were told that we were to spend the night at a Japanese hotel in Tomo-(machi - town). In the evening as we drove toward Tomo along the Inland Sea, Harold and I noted that the surf was breaking in good fashion and were glad that we were not out there in a fishing boat such as the Japanese use (Harold skippered an LST in the Pacific during the war.)

At Tomo we were greeted with the usual delegation plus a sizeable group of maids from the hotel. And what do you suppose? We put to sea in a Japanese fishing boat and headed for the hotel which is on an island, one of numerous islands in a national park, the name of which park I never did learn.

In due course we arrived and the maids grabbed the bags and we were soon inside the hotel, a very attractive place. Harold and I were given the two best rooms in the place. He took the only American-style room. I took a Japanese-style room by preference. The rest of our gang, numbering about 30, settled down in assorted Japanese rooms.

Then the first order of business was to take a hot bath. (The Japanese take a hot bath both morning and evening - always before eating.) So far as the occupying personnel is concerned, the practice of the maids scrubbing the men's backs has been discontinued. The wives of the occupation force saw to that. However, it is not at all uncommon to see a maid or two passing through the bathroom while the bath is in progress. This comes about because the bathroom is a sort of crossroads in the hotel with all hallways leading to it. It is standard for the bathroom to have about three doors, none of which can be locked. We got our first bath without incident.

About 9 pm we assembled in a Japanese room for dinner (a party). It seems that there is money set up in the forestry budget for the entertainment of visiting officials. Since food is severely rationed for the Japanese, the parties are quite popular and are well attended. The food served us was partly western and partly eastern. I tried everything except the raw fish, sea weed and rice. That was where the beer drinking began. One gets dry without water and the Americans drink water only at approved places. So most of the time it's beer or nothing. Have you ever tried to clean your teeth with beer?

There we were sitting around in our kimonos on the floor being served with exotic food by a bunch of Japanese maids (not geishas). It was a saki party. Saki, as you probably know, is natural rice wine served hot in special small cups. To me, the stuff is tasteless and furthermore it doesn't have any particular effect. The Japanese think it's great stuff and they all get blotto, if the party goes on long enough, and they usually see to it that the party lasts. Harold and I were cruel enough to cut things short after what we considered to be a reasonable time.

When the eating was over, the maids got out a portable phonograph (in place of a samisan) and got under way. They demonstrated several Japanese dances, one of which I may be able to remember until I get back. They had several waltz and foxtrot records and insisted that Harold and I demonstrate Western-style dancing. There being no graceful way out, we complied. I'll leave it to your imagination as to what kind of a demonstration that was, what with my aptitude for waltzing.

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Rather than prolong the agony, I thought it best to teach them the California Schottische and Road to the Isles. They went over big even without any music. My regret was in not having a good square dance album. (Square dancing has hit the larger cities but only the rumors of it had reached Tomo). Anyway we had fun. The Mamasin was a dancing teacher and caught right on. The hotel owner's wife (this family owns two big hotels in Tomo) also was an apt pupil. Before the evening was over they were all doing the schottische, counting off the beat in Japanese. What a sight!

The next morning I got up early, went out and took some pictures, and took a walk around the island. In due course the others began to stir. By 9:30 am we were off for the field - standard departure time in this part of the world.

Wednesday morning the gang again went to the woods in search of beetles and still found none. That's not exactly so either, for we did find a dead tree at a Shinto shrine that had a few Ips in it. We had lunch and a conference and received presentos. (I'll never know how to get all the plunder back.) At 2:14 pm we left for Okayama. At 3:17 pm we arrived in Okayama.

Okayama is a separate chapter and, since this is mid-day and Osaka is yet to be seen, I'll send the Okayama chapter along later.

Osaka with about 3,000,000 people is Japan's second largest city. It is heavily industrialized and was hard hit during the war; however, the public buildings in the downtown area seem to be largely intact. We are staying for a couple of days at the New Osaka Hotel - the best in town, I believe. We will return to Tokyo on the 23rd.

Love from

Bob

Sent to:

Biel Couster