

# JAPAN Railway & Transport REVIEW

Special Feature

## Challenges in Rail Freight

Japanese Railway History 5

Construction of Local Railways



July 1995 Number 5

**JAPAN RAILWAY  
AND  
TRANSPORT REVIEW**  
July 1995 Number 5

JAPAN RAILWAY AND TRANSPORT REVIEW is published quarterly by East Japan Railway Culture Foundation (EJRCF).

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■ Class DD51 Locomotive Hauling Containers in Hokkaido (H. Morokawa)

## Editorial

### Hard times for rail freight

When the steam railway was developed in Britain early in the 19th century by the efforts of great engineers such as Richard Trevithick and George Stephenson, their main intention was to provide a more efficient method of freight transport in place of the slow and uncertain canals. Although the railway proved to be the dominant carrier of passengers as well, it enjoyed a monopoly in the inland freight market for many years until the first half of this century.

Starting 50 years after British railways, Japan's railways were also happy carrying coals and other heavy and bulky cargoes. Coastal shipping was always a powerful competitor due to Japan's geography, but road transport was never a threat until the late 1950s, when the rail freight transport capacity became insufficient to cope with the rapidly-growing demand.

Once started, however, competition with motor transport in the freight market was very severe for Japanese railways. Only secondary priority was given to freight trains on almost saturated main lines, and the remarkably-improved road network offered much more attractive door-to-door services to customers. As Japan's coal reserves became exhausted towards the end of the 1960s, the railways lost their biggest customer. The structural changes in Japanese industries brought a decrease of heavy and bulky raw materials and an increase in small but high-value new products such as cars, consumer durables and electronic products which preferred quicker door-to-door services. The frequent rail strikes during the 1970s also damaged the credibility of rail freight. Railway people including top managers, workers and trade union leaders were all too late in realizing the danger. The railway is a microcosm where people tend to think they are almighty.

Today, railways in Japan carry only 5% of the total freight movement in terms of tonne-kilometer. The conventional marshalling yards were all abandoned, and efforts have been made to increase combined transport, but it will be difficult to reverse the decline, because the limited capacity of trunk lines and the small loading gauge give rail freight little room to manoeuvre. Environmental considerations certainly favour rail freight, but in Japan it will take far more time than in Europe to reach a national consensus in favour of the "modal shift" from road to rail. Hard times seem set to continue for rail freight.

[T. SUGA]

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