

Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum and Steam Operations on the Yamaguchi Line

Fumio Tanaka

Two well-known railway preservation activities in Japan are the Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum (USLM) and the *Yamaguchi-go* steam locomotive (SL) operation. Although both the museum and steam operation date from days of Japanese National Railways (JNR), they are now run by JR West and typify some of the company's cultural activities.

Introduction

Japan today has a number of railway heritage preservation projects but the USLM was one of the earliest to be established (in 1972) when JNR decided to preserve examples of SLs that had been rapidly replaced by electric or diesel locomotives. A unique feature of the USLM—and one that was very helpful in restarting steam operations later on the

Yamaguchi Line—is the large number (17) of locomotives preserved in working order in a roundhouse. This article describes the USLM and *Yamaguchi-go* SL as well as some other topics in the preservation of Japan's railway culture.

Circumstances Surrounding of Steam Locomotives Preservation

Government-owned railways started operations in 1872 with 10 steam locomotives imported from Britain and the number increased rapidly year-by-year as the railway network expanded. The rapid growth of domestic industry after the turn of the century also saw a rapid increase in the number of SLs with the number peaking at 5958 in 1946. Railway electrification started in the 1910s and diesel railcars appeared soon after WWII. In the late 1940s, JNR planned to proceed

with modernization of the network by electrifying 5000 km in 15 years and replacing all SLs with electric or diesel locos.

The target was achieved and the 4000 existing SLs in 1960 decreased rapidly in numbers. A steam locomotive preservation movement arose in parallel with the decrease, reaching its zenith in the early 1970s when SLs were expected to disappear entirely. Under these circumstances, JNR President Satoshi Isozaki started examining the possibility of preserving about 10 heritage SLs and a roundhouse. Although some JNR people were against preservation at first, the plan was discussed and became a concrete commemorative project to celebrate 100 years of railways in Japan. By September 1971, it was finally decided that 17 SLs from across Japan would be preserved at USLM, which opened a year later on 10 October 1972 when the 17



Turntable and roundhouse at Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum

(JR West)

working SLs were run into the depot watched by 12,000 visitors.

The last passenger steam operation ran on 14 December 1975 in Hokkaido, and 2 March 1976 saw the last yard operation.

Solving Preservation Difficulties by Revenue Operation of *Yamaguchi-go*

Two of the preserved 17 locomotives proved very difficult to keep in working order but the other 15 were kept ready for operations by daily inspections at Umekoji and periodic overhauls at the former JNR's Nagano Works. However, the Nagano depot stopped inspection of steam locomotives in 1976 leaving no workshop able to perform periodic overhaul. The resultant overdue inspections and serious financial condition of JNR at that time made it even more difficult to keep the SLs in working order and the situation darkened further when a child was killed by an SL hauling a heritage train as a crowd of people rushed on to the tracks to watch the train. The bleak future of JNR's heritage SLs was in stark contrast to that at Oigawa Railway where SLs had re-entered operations in the same year. But a speech by JNR President Fumio Takagi in 1978 changed the situation when he said, 'We should operate steam locomotives somewhere on commercial lines as a symbol of great scientific heritage.' Many local authorities looking to promote regional development saw this as an opportunity and stepped forward to offer lines in their areas. A section of the Yamaguchi Line running from Ogori on the San'yo Shinkansen to Tsuwano was finally selected because it still had facilities and staff to operate SLs; had little impact on the timetables of other lines; was well connected to a shinkansen line that could bring visitors; had a cooperative and enthusiastic local authority; and would benefit from an

increase in fare revenues from sightseers. After taking the decision to restart a commercial heritage steam operation on part of the Yamaguchi Line in August 1979, JNR started to rebuild a system for inspecting and maintaining SLs in working order. By now, the USLM only had one SL that was not overdue for inspection, but workshop facilities at Takatori Works were made available and two SLs were overhauled and returned to a condition suitable for commercial passenger operations while another eight were inspected for yard operations.

JNR Privatization and Preservation of Railway Culture

Although JNR's financial difficulties did not abate, commercial operation of the *Yamaguchi-go* on the Yamaguchi Line progressed well along with continued preservation work at the USLM. Finally, JNR was privatized and divided into six passenger companies and one freight company in April 1987 with JR West inheriting the USLM and steam workings on the Yamaguchi Line. JR West is a

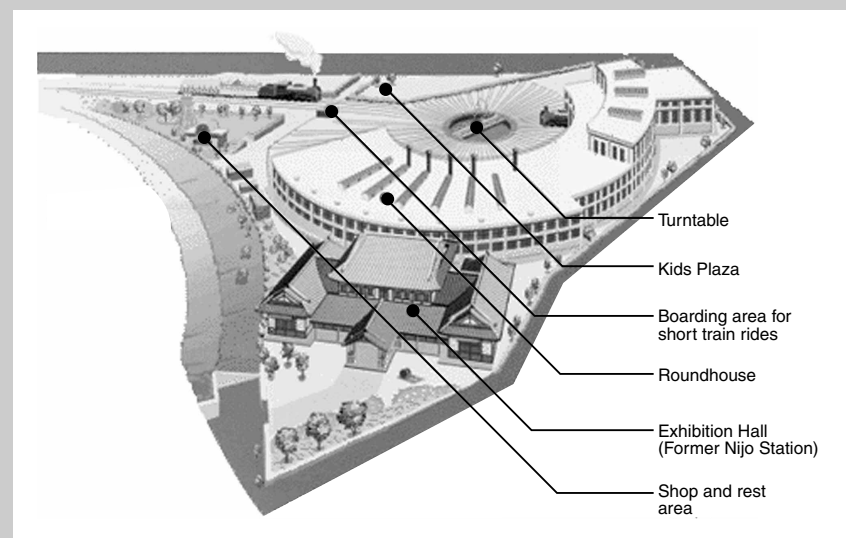
commercial railway company in pursuit of profits for its shareholders, but it is also a corporate citizen with interests in preserving social and cultural activities, such as preservation of steam locomotives in working order. Consequently, the future of the USLM and the *Yamaguchi-go* look even brighter than in the JNR days.

Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum

USLM and its 25 staff including curators, drivers and engineers are located near Kyoto Station on the site of a historic depot dating back to 1877.

Some 170,000 visitors each year enjoy a variety of events at the museum, which offers 43,000 m² of space to watch SLs in the roundhouse, stand on the footplate, walk around the turntable, study exhibits in the exhibition hall converted from the former Nijo Station and ride a steam-worked train in the station yard. But the museum does not just exhibit SLs, it also trains staff in all aspects of inspection, including daily and intermediate inspection and overhaul. (Boiler

Architectural Plan of Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum



Steam Locomotives Preserved at Umekoji Steam Locomotive Museum

Class	Wheel arrangement	Weight (tonnes)	Year built	Class	Wheel arrangement	Weight (tonnes)	Year built
9633	2-8-0	94.8	1914	C58-1	2-6-2	100.2	1938
8630	2-6-0	75.9	1914	D51-200	2-8-2	123.0	1938
D50-140	2-8-2	127.5	1926	C56-160	2-6-0	64.6	1939
C51-239	4-6-2	113.8	1927	B20-10	0-4-0	20.3	1946
C53-45	4-6-2	127.3	1928	C59-164	4-6-2	134.6	1946
C55-1	4-6-2	113.0	1935	D52-468	2-8-2	136.8	1946
C11-64	2-6-4	66.8	1935	C61-2	4-6-4	125.6	1948
D51-1	2-8-2	113.0	1936	C62-1*	4-6-4	143.0	1948
C57-1	4-6-2	115.5	1937	C62-2	4-6-4	143.0	1948

Working order
* Added to collection in 1994



The former Nijo Station and now part of USLM

(JR West)

maintenance is contracted out to other companies.) *Yamaguchi-go* staff are also offered courses to obtain a licence to drive an SL. In this way, the museum is ensuring that the traditional skills of driving and maintaining SLs are handed on to younger generations.

Yamaguchi-go Steam Workings

When JNR was first considering restarting steam workings, it looked at lines near the USLM, such as the Nara Line, Kusatsu Line and San'in main line, but

urbanization along these lines made steam operations difficult (and unpopular). Consequently, most operations like the *Yamaguchi-go* have been on more rural lines like the Yamaguchi Line and sometimes the Hokuriku main line. Another reason for choosing the Yamaguchi Line was the presence of turntables at both terminus of Ogori and Tsuwano.

Heritage steam locomotives in Japan are usually operated on a commercial line and have to share the tracks with normal operations. This is also the case for the *Yamaguchi-go* in which a Class C57-1 from the USLM usually hauls carriages by itself (or sometimes double-heading with a Class C56-160) on about 100 days each year, especially on holidays between March and November. The 50,000 or 60,000 passengers annually shows us that SLs still remain popular even among young people who have never previously ridden an SL.

However, the *Yamaguchi-go* operations would never have been possible without the cooperation of the local authorities along the line and the great efforts at USLM to keep the steam locomotives in working order.

Problems and Future Prospects

There is no doubt that most people in Japan would agree on preserving historic railways in the same way that historic buildings and works of art are preserved. However, there is a difference between a heritage railway and a building or artwork. Simply exhibiting a heritage railway does not fully explain the cultural significance of the railway—it is in operation that the railway demonstrates its real significance. But keeping a SL in operating condition requires huge resources in terms of money, space, spare parts, skills, and labour. At the same time, operation without sympathetic

maintenance runs the risk of destroying the artifact to be preserved.

Additionally, despite the many railway fans in Japan, most preservation policies are managed by railway companies. The USLM and *Yamaguchi-go* preservation projects rely on the concept that preservation is an important cultural activity of railway companies. This is quite different from railway heritage preservation movements in other countries, such as the UK, where volunteers devote themselves to heritage preservation and railway preservation societies back them up.

The priority of a railway company is to carry people and goods by offering high-quality services and lower prices by making every effort to introduce new rolling stock, facilities, and services. To some extent, this drive to modernize by introducing new assets is in contradiction to preserving old assets and unless modern railway companies make a conscious effort to preserve their cultural heritage, they may be the very cause of its loss. ■

This article was first presented at the international conference 'Slow Train Coming: Heritage Railways in the 21st Century,' held in York in September 2001.

Further Reading

E. Aoki, M. Imashiro, S. Kato, and Y. Wakuda, *A History of Japanese Railways 1872-1999*, EJRCF, 2000.

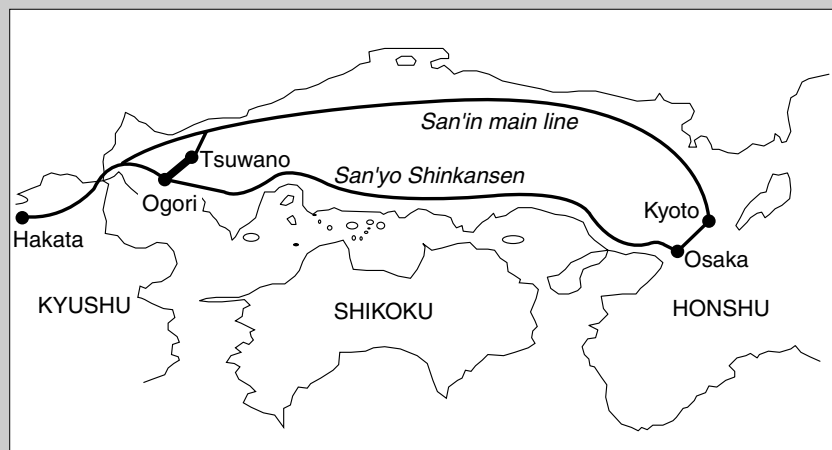
N. Tanemura, *Footsteps of C57-1*, Soryusha, 1988.



Yamaguchi-go Class C57-1 running on Yamaguchi Line

(JR West)

Yamaguchi-go Operation Section (Ogori-Tsuwano)



Fumio Tanaka

Mr Tanaka is Deputy General Manager in the Corporate Communications Department of JR West. He joined JNR in 1980 after graduating from the Faculty of Precision Engineering of Kyoto University. He has worked in the Rolling Stock Department, the Technology Planning Department, and the Takatori and Hamamatsu works.