

## WOODEN HORSE FESTIVAL OF UMayA

(ENGLISH VER.)

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I will tell you the origins of the Wooden Horse Festival of UmayA [also called the Wooden Horse Festival of Kuruma] that began here in Maebashi.



1) 150 years ago, Japan was going through difficult times, as it was changing greatly from the Edo period to the Meiji period, and natural disasters such as volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, and crop failure were happening at the same time. In this time of serious confusion, there was a man named Chuji Kunisada who killed an evil magistrate to save many poor people, got arrested by the shogunate and was executed. Chuji had a pair of twin children. This is the story of the younger brother, Toraji.



2) Toraji was taken charge of by Eigoro Omaeda, a benefactor of Chuji who lived in Ogo, and was adopted by Oyoshi, who managed a manju shop. As a substitute for Toraji's mother, Oyoshi put Toraji into a temple school and made him thoroughly learn how to read and write. When Toraji was 18 (Bunroku 3, 1863), he moved to Maebashi to work under Zentaro Shimomura, an acquaintance of Eigoro. Toraji lived on what is now Bentendori Street, just nearby Dairenji Temple. He studied English, which was necessary for business, and became an interpreter.



3) At the age of 29 (Meiji 7, 1874), Toraji called his foster mother Oyoshi to Maebashi and lived together. Hearing the reputation of Orime Manju, the shop that Oyoshi owned in Ogo, Mitsumata Senbei had opened in Mitsumatomachi, and yakimanju had been made in Mukaicho. In Maebashi, Oyoshi taught Bunsaku Miyauchi her secret manju recipe. This is how Katawara Manju, which would later become a specialty of Maebashi, was born.



4) When he was 18, Toraji started to use the name Toraji Nagaoka as an adult. Zentaro Shimomura, the owner of Miyoshiya, made a large profit from raw silk trading and became a locally famous businessman. Using messengers on horseback, he was gaining information of Yokohama earlier than others. It was Toraji who suggested the use of horses to Zentaro. This was because Toraji heard an oracle from the Benzaiten (God of Wealth) at Dairenji Temple in a dream. Eventually, Maebashi became the centre of the silk industry and achieved fame as “Maebashi, the City of Thread” .



5) Most of the raw silk exported from Japan in the Meiji period was packed at Maebashi, and raw silk was called “Maebashi” in London. The reason why it was possible to produce raw silk of a high quality acceptable around the world was the cooperation of a Swiss company. Not only did Toraji work as an interpreter, but he also became good friends with Hans Sporry, a technician from a company in Switzerland. Hans possessed a collection of around 1,500 bamboo products that he bought from all around Japan, and he also always wrote down in detail what he saw and heard in Japan in a notebook.



6) The number of factory girls in Maebashi was increasing. However, their salaries were low and many of them were poor. So Okawayaya, a soba restaurant at Tatemachi, made “Kinu-oroshi Soba” , which was cheap and nutritious, for the poor factory girls, and Toraji was involved in that. Additionally, Toraji was selling vegetables grown by Akagiyama’ s Denjiro Funatsu and Oshima pears by Chozaemon Sekiguchi to the factory girls at cheap prices. Toraji also helped Kiroku Oshima, the first fishmonger in Maebashi. People gathered at Kankodo, a book store in Maebashi, to learn new knowledge from Toraji’ s Swiss friend Hans.



7) During this time of serious confusion, great fires as well as volcano eruptions and earthquakes frequently happened, and everybody was having trouble. But Toraji, who had received an oracle from the Benzaiten in his dreams, advised his master Zentaro to build warehouses with walls of earth to prevent the flames from spreading. Such warehouses were built here and there. At the same time, Zentaro served free food and drink for the many poor people who were burned out of their homes due to the great fires. In these difficult times, epidemics broke out after the fires, and thousands died of cholera and typhoid over the following years.



8) When Toraji was 38 (Meiji 16, 1883), cholera became prevalent and his foster mother Oyoshi passed away. Within Maebashi, 1,833 people died of cholera. Mitsuzo Hagiwara (father of the poet Sakutaro Hagiwara), who came to Maebashi in this situation as a new doctor, opened a hospital and saved cholera patients. During this period, in which fires, epidemics, eruptions and earthquakes repeatedly occurred, many poor people lost their homes and families, but Zentaro and Toraji went into action together to save the socially disadvantaged, and established hospitals, homes for the aged, and orphanages.



9) In Meiji 18, 1885, Toraji heard the last oracle from the Benzaiten. Eventually the era of confusion and reformation will end, and a new era of the people will begin. By making a wooden horse for the Benzaiten to ride, and walking all around the town, you can give much happiness to the people. Fire and disease will happen once more before that, but a new age will come riding on the wooden horse. You shall start a Wooden Horse Festival. The Benzaiten ordered Toraji to make a wooden horse. Toraji made a wooden horse, and just as the oracle said, he started a festival in which he pulled around the wooden horse rode by the Benzaiten. The citizens of Maebashi also participated in the Wooden Horse Festival, and celebrated the end of an old era and the coming of a new one.



10) This was the last time that Toraji heard an oracle from the Benzaiten. The next year, Toraji caught cholera and passed away at the age of 41. Afterwards 751 houses were burnt in a great fire, just as the oracle had said. However, Zentaro's mansion and the many people living in the vicinity managed to escape because of the warehouses that were previously built. Hans, who came to visit Toraji's grave the next year, has depicted Maebashi's Wooden Horse Festival in his notebook. A picture of the town being filled with the energetic shouts "Mokuba da, mokuba da, da, da (Wooden horse, wooden horse)" is drawn there. The Benzaiten had left behind two oracles. One was that someone who would put the breaths of the new era into words would be born in the following year. The other was that "the wooden horse will be revived in a year made of 1, 2, 3, and one more 2 (125 years after the oracle)". The first oracle has been fulfilled with the birth of Sakutaro Hagiwara. The next oracle will be fulfilled in 2011 with the building of a wooden horse in Maebashi. There is another oracle, but that has already been fulfilled as the "Dada" movement in Zurich. The story of Toraji and the origins of the wooden horse are inherited by the hearts of those who seek and attempt to create a new age, and revived in the city of Maebashi as the Wooden Horse of Umayo or Kuruma.