

MY THOUGHTS ON THE AKITA DOG

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The History of The Akita Dog: The Early (1926-1945) Showa Period (1926-1989)

A widespread movement to preserve the Akita dog in Odate and other areas began after the Akita dog was declared as a natural monument in 1931. Prior to this time, any interest in the preservation of the Akita dog in Odate was almost nil with the exception of **Mr. Shigeie Izumi** (see photograph in the preceding chapter) and a few others who were interested in the preservation of the Akita dog as a Japanese dog.

A lecture by **Mr. Kokichi Saito** (see photograph) entitled, "**Nihonken Hozonshi**" ("**A History on The Preservation of Japanese Dogs**"), which discusses the Akita dog of that time as a natural monument, is found in Nihonken Kentogo (A Study on Japanese Dogs), a very informative book on Japanese dogs from the 1920s:

"In the Fall of the 15th year of Taisho (1926), I was looking for a certain type of dog that I believed was an excellent Japanese dog type. My rounds of the pet stores had no success. I was also surprised to learn that very few of the desirable dogs in Odate in Akita were found. Therefore, in the Spring of the 2nd year of showa (1927), I began to plan for an organization to preserve Japanese dogs. In the Fall of that year, I went to the Kuroishi area in Aomori and to Odate in Akita to continue my search. Even in Odate, I found very few Japanese dogs. **Mr. Shigeie Izumi**, the mayor of Odate at that time, had only four dogs, while a dog dealer by the name of **Mr. Echizen** had only two dogs. Mr. Izumi organized the **Akitainu Hozonkai (Akiho)** to preserve the large Japanese dog, which is the Akita dog. However, dog fanciers in Odate were quite indifferent to his idea, and thus, Akiho was started with no members.

At that time, the wealthy **Mr. Kuniro Ichinoseki** of **Niida Village** in Odate had several generations of some excellent lines of dogs.

My survey of the area made me aware of the urgency of preserving Japanese dogs and the importance of establishing the **Nipponinu Hozonkai (Nippo)**. First of all, I went to a library to find information on Japanese dogs and began some deep studies on this subject. I first heard of **Professor Watase** (see photograph in the preceding chapter) there, and immediately arranged for an interview with him. He was in favor of my idea of such an organization. Thus, the **Nipponinu Hozonkai (Nippo)** was established and announced in June of the 3rd year of Showa (1928).

Fortunately, these announcements were published in the local section of newspapers such as the Tokyo Asahi, Tokyo Nichi Nichi and Yomiuri. **Mr. Kenichiro Ono**, editor of the Tokyo Nichi Nichi at that time, was also a dog fancier. His announcements appeared in large prints in the important section of the local newspaper. This resulted in favorable responses from the readers. Later, I became acquainted with the dog magazine, Shuryo to Chikukun (Hunting and Pet Dogs), through my friends in the dog world. **Mr. Eiichi Nakagami** and **Mr. Heishiro Takaku** also joined in the organization's activities.

At that time, owners of bitches were not acquainted with owners of male dogs. People wanting puppies did not know where and when such puppies were available. Therefore, I organized a dog registry by contacting Japanese dog breeders everywhere with the assistance of club members and announcements in the Tokyo Nichi Nichi newspaper. The first dog registry, which included thirty dogs was published on August 30, 1928.

We sent out periodic club news to keep in touch with members. The rapid growth of the organization and its influence on society was probably due mainly to our reports in the newspapers, which attracted the attention of dog lovers nationwide. However, articles which pertained to the preservation of Japanese dogs did not bring much response from dog magazine readers. The public was probably more interested in western hunting dogs than in Japanese dogs at that time.

Western dogs were very popular then and some even proposed the crossbreeding of western dogs with Japanese dogs to improve the latter. In order to counter that trend, Nippo began to inform the public, through newspapers and magazines, about the valuable Japanese dogs and the importance of their preservation. However, the most effective way was to have the Japanese dogs declared as natural monuments by the government and draw the attention of the public to Japanese dogs.

We, therefore, worked on the declaration as natural monuments as the first priority. By that time, Professor Watase had passed away, and a successor had not yet been named. Therefore, I asked **Mr. Seinosuke Uchida**, a committee member of the Natural Monument Preservation Society, to preside and find the most effective method of

achieving this goal. It was decided, first of all, to put the Akita dog through the application procedure as stated in the Hozonhoshikoyomoku (Preservation Principles). On May 25, in the 4th year of Showa (1929), a meeting to begin this application procedure was held at the Restaurant Hotei of Kanda in Tokyo with **Mayor Shigeie Izumi of Odate, who was also a trustee of Nippo** .

Later, **Dr. Tokio Kaburagi was named as one of the committee members of Nippo**. On July 7 of the same year the Akita dog was first recognized as a natural monument, followed later by the Kai dog, Kishu dog, and the Koshi dog."

The declaration of Japanese dogs as a part of the national institution as natural monuments should be considered as one of the highlights in the history in the progress of Japanese dogs.

Mentioned in the foregoing lecture, "Nihonken Hozonshi" ("a History of The Preservation of Japanese Dogs"), is an Akita dog called **Tochini-go** (see *photograph*). Tochini-go was the first dog petitioned to Nippo by Mr. Izumi. However, when Dr. Kaburagi went to Odate in the 6th year of Showa (1931), Tochini-go was already dead. But Mr. Izumi's **Kin-go** (a male offspring of Tochini-go) (see *photograph*), **Matsukaze-go** (a bitch), **a bitch of Mr. Ichinoseki, a bitch of Mr. Aoyagi, a male and bitch of Mr. Takahashi, a male dog of Mr. Tayama and several male and bitches of Mr. Akabira** are said to have been declared as natural monuments. According to Dr. Kaburagi's report, dogs owned by Mr. Ichinoseki, Mr. Aoyagi and Mr. Akabira were from the same bloodline as Mr. Izumi's dog. This sheds some light on the bloodlines of these dogs.

Dr. Kaburagi has also written several articles on Japanese Dogs. In an article entitled "**Tennenkinenbutsu to Nihonken**" ("**The Natural Monument and Japanese Dogs,**"), he makes the following comments in the section under "**Nihonken Hozon no Igi**" ("**The Significance of The Preservation of Japanese Dogs**"):

"The dog became man's companion probably, when it became man's first domesticated animal. Archeological findings from the Early Stone Age seem to support this theory. Dog bones have also been found with those of cattle, horses, mountain goats and swine in the Swiss ruins from a later period. The ancestry of these dogs have not yet been determined, in spite of much research. Although the domesticated dog may be surpassed in usefulness by other domesticated animals, it is not surpassed by any other animals for its trust and loyalty.

Domesticated animals have their primary herd instincts, but these instincts may be altered to man's benefit without due harm. These animals may also flourish under man's care. Dogs are man's good companions, are trainable to be obedient, and thus were very useful during the hunting era as hunting dogs. Many types of dogs, depending on tribal preferences, accompanied the nomads. In this way, one is able to trace the migratory routes of people by studying the distributions of the different types of dogs.

Close companionships between man and dog existed. We should preserve pure Japanese dogs as one of the deeply national and significant animals that has been handed down from our ancestors.

The preservation of Japanese dogs was not considered until the establishment of the Natural Monument Preservation Legislation. Much effort was involved in putting these principles to use. However, the popularity of western dogs, due to the then prevailing trend of valuing anything western tended to push Japanese dogs aside, which led to a gradual obliteration of these Japanese dogs. Therefore, the time had arrived for one to be thinking of ways to preserve and to appeal to the nation the importance of preserving Japanese dogs. As a result, the large Japanese dog, the Akita dog was the first Japanese dog to be so declared as a natural monument."

In another article entitled, "**Akitainu Shisatsu**" ("**My Observations of The Akita Dog**"), Dr. Kaburagi states:

"If my memory is correct, I saw Akita dogs for the first time in Odate at the end of April or in early May in the 6th year of Showa (1931), when the cherry blossoms were in bloom. I saw about ten dogs at that time, but I also learned that only about 4 or 5 more dogs were in that area. I was rather surprised by the scarcity of these dogs and, therefore, quickly declared them as natural monuments. The repercussions which followed because of this were unexpected."

Thus, the Akita dog was declared as a natural monument in July 1931, due to the efforts of **Mr. Kokichi Saito** and others who had much foresight. Not much has been recorded beyond this period until after World War Two.

Japanese dogs were rarely seen at dog shows in those days. Only two or three Japanese dogs were entered at the well established Chuo Chikukenkai (Central Dog Society), due to double registration fees (10 yen) required to enter Japanese dogs. The regular registration fee was applied to Japanese dogs only after the establishment of the Nipponinu Hozonkai (*Nippo, Nipponken Hozonkai, Nihonken Hozonkai*). However, in spite of the lower fees, only 5 or 6 Japanese dogs were entered. The first dog show with more than ten Japanese dog entries was held on March 1931 during the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Ueno Zoo. Since 1932, Nippo began to hold its own annual dog shows that are limited to Japanese dogs. The First Nippo Show was held on the rooftop of the Matsuya Department Store in the Ginza District of Tokyo. Eighty Japanese dogs were entered and the Monbu Daijin Shohai (Minister of Education Medals) were presented to the winners. The number of dog entries increased with subsequent shows, but I believe, the number of Akita dog entries were still very few.

Many records are available on the increased activities in the Odate area to restore the Akita dog to the Japanese dog since the Akita dog was declared as one of the natural monuments. Some of the pioneers who were involved in the restoration process were: **Mr. Shigeie Izumi** (Mayor of Odate at that time), who was also a **trustee of Nippo** and **chairman of Akiho**; **Mr. Yaichiro Tayama** (see *photograph in the preceding chapter*), who was the chairman of Aiken Kyokai (a fighting dog club); **Mr. Susumi Ono**, who was on the faculty of the Odate Junior High School; **Mr. Kuniro Ichinoseki of Niida Village** and **Mr. Hyoemon Kyono of Yuzawa in Southern Akita** (see *photograph*).

According to some seniors, some of the Japanese dog fanciers sent people out to purchase relatively pure Japanese dogs living in the matagi's (hunter's) villages in the country and mountain areas for large sums, in order to restore the Akita dog to the original state.

With the public awareness of the Akita dog as being one of the natural monuments, the fame of the Akita dog was soon spread widely through a newspaper story of a faithful Akita dog called **Hachi-ko** (see *photographs*). He left an indelible impression when his statue was erected in front of the Shibuya Station in Tokyo (see *photographs*).

In the October 4, in the 7th year of Showa (1932) issue of the Asahi Shinbun (Asahi Newspaper), a moving story entitled "Old Dog's Seven Year Wait For His Master" with a photograph of the dog made the headlines. This story drew as much attention as other world events, such as the beginning of Japan's involvement in the Manchurian Incident earlier in September 1931. The story of Hachi-ko touched not only the hearts of dog lovers nationwide, but also of those throughout the world. Thus, the Akita dog, as a breed, was basked for a while in the floodlight of popularity.

Reportedly, **Hachi-ko** was born on November 1923 in Akita. At the age of two months, he was sent to the home of **Dr. Eizaburo Ueno**, who taught at the Tokyo University's Agricultural Department. Dr. Ueno lived in the Shibuya area in the suburbs of Tokyo and commuted daily to the agricultural experimental station at Nishigahara. Hachi-ko was adored by the whole family and accompanied his master in the morning and in the evening to and from the Shibuya Station. On May 1925, when Hachi-ko was 1 1/2 years old, Dr. Ueno suddenly died from a cerebral hemorrhage. Later, Hachi-ko was cared for by relatives and friends of the family, but it has been reported that he continued to go to the Shibuya Station to await his master's arrival. Questions have been raised on Hachiko's birth and deeds. Be that as it may, on April in the 9th year of Showa (1934), his statue was unveiled in front of the Shibuya Station. Hachiko died at the age of twelve years and five months on March 8 the following year. With the announcement of his passing, his statue was said to have been covered with flowers and enough smoke from incenses to cloud the sky.

I believe, historically, the appearance of Hachiko was most fortunate for the Akita dog. When the Akita dog was announced as a natural monument in the newspapers in July of 1931, the Odate dog was soon renamed the Akita dog in September of that year. Therefore, the Akita dog was not well known until the favorable publicity of Hachi-ko caused the name of the Akita dog to be known nationwide. Moreover, this caused Akita dog lovers to work together for the progress of the Akita dog.

Information of Akita dogs around the 10th year of Showa (1935), aside from that of Hachi-ko, is sparse. However, it seems that other Japanese dogs also began to gain in popularity, owing to their promotion by Nippo. As stated previously, the First Nippo Dog Show was held on November 6, 1932, the second show on November 3, 1933, the third show on November 3, 1934 and held annually thereafter until the 17th year of Showa (1942). Other Japanese dog breeds were also shown and Nippo branches were established in other areas. Akita dogs were shown in some of these branches since they were included in the large and medium groups. Hokkaido and Kishu dogs are in some of the Akita dog's ancestry and this was then considered as an absolute necessity to return the Akita dog to the original Japanese dog state. Thus, this was approved.

Information on the trends in the restoration of the Akita dog in the Odate area, which is the place of origin of the Akita dog, and the activity of Akiho are not readily available. But according to available information, the first Akiho dog show after the war that was held on November in the 22nd year of Showa (1947) was called the eleventh dog show. This means that ten previous dog shows were held before and during the war. Details on the Akita dogs or records of previous Akita dog shows are not readily available. However, I saw the wartime 1942 Akiho membership registry at the home of the Akita dog pioneer, **Mr. Sadakichi Tayama**, during one of my recent visits to Odate. Membership of that period will not fill that of an Akiho branch today. I felt as if I were in another era. Almost all of the members in that early registry are now deceased. However, several on the list are still members of Akiho and hold responsible positions at the headquarters.

The war spread from the Manchurian Incident to World War Two. Owing to the world conditions then, a rapid progress of the Akita dog was not possible. The changes in appearances due to the crossbreedings with the Tosa fighting dogs were not easily correctable. However, since the designation of the Akita dog as a natural monument, supporters for the traditional Akita dogs were joined by fighting dog enthusiasts to restore the traditional Akita dog. The number of supporters increased and the road to restore toward purity soon became evident in appearances of some of the Akita dogs in the photographs of 1942 (see *photograph*).

The Second World War, which began on December 8 (7 in the *United States*) in the 16th year of Showa (1941), was cruel to the Akita dog. Wartime shortages led to strict rationing. Food shortages became worse. The large amount of food required by the Akita dog contributed to the sufferings. This led to fewer dog owners and a decline in the number of Akita dogs.

Furthermore, dog and cat furs were collected for the manufacturing of the military's winter clothing. The large Akita dog thus became an easy target, leading to the threat of its existence. According to dog owners in Akita, dog catchers were ordered by the police to find and eliminate all dogs except the Shepherd dogs, which were used as military dogs. Many Akita dogs are said to have been clubbed to death. Dog lovers, who could endure this cruelty no longer, sent their Akita dogs to farms in the remote mountain areas or to apple orchards in Aomori to be used as guard dogs, in order to avoid their dogs being taken away and be killed. These dog owners also changed the call names of their Akita dogs to be mistaken for Shepherd dogs. The fact that Akita dogs with such names as "Peace" or "Karl" that survived the war may be attributed to this. -----

Note: **Bold** types and *italics* were supplied by the translator.

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