

## 旧 JR 三江線：新たな遊園地 ～地域資源の継承についての報告～

The Former JR Sanko Line: A New Kind of Amusement Park  
~A Report on Utilization and Succession of Natural and Cultural  
Resources~

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### 1. Introduction

On March 31, 2018, the JR Sanko Line ceased operations. Connecting the cities of Gotsu in Shimane Prefecture and Miyoshi in Hiroshima Prefecture, the 108-kilometer-long line is currently the longest rail line to be closed on Honshu Island. In the two years following the closure of the line, the six municipalities that the line passed through (Gotsu City, Kawamoto Town, Misato Town, and Ohnan Town in Shimane Prefecture, as well as Akitakata City and Miyoshi City in Hiroshima Prefecture) had to decide if they wanted to utilize any of the 33 former stations on the now-closed line (Miyoshi and Gotsu Stations are not included as they are part of still-operating lines as well). Other railway structures, including bridges and tunnels, were also included in this decision-making process. This report will discuss how utilization of the line following its closure has been approached in these different areas, with a focus on activities and events that seek to preserve these cultural resources.

### 2. Background

The former Takachiho Line in Miyazaki Prefecture and the former Kamioka Line in Gifu Prefecture are two examples of railway lines in Japan

that found a new life following closure. However, ownership and operation of both of these lines was shifted from the Japanese National Railways to third-sector railway companies before finally being closed down. In contrast, the Sanko Line was closed down directly by West Japan Railway Company with no new company taking over operations. With third-sector railway companies, the ownership as well as the responsibility for the line has been transferred to the local areas along the line, which makes post-closure decisions regarding the future utilization of those types of lines easier. In the case of the Sanko Line, the local governments had to make the decisions about the future of the line without any sort of previous shift of ownership or responsibility. They were therefore understandably cautious about accepting any responsibility for the Sanko Line, particularly as they would also have to accept financial responsibility for maintenance of the line.

In the two years since the Sanko Line's closure, the areas along the line have made various decisions regarding responsibility for the line. What this has often meant is station buildings being torn down and sections of track being pulled up at former rail crossing points. Train bridges are also being dismantled, and sections of the line have been removed to make way for road construction. However, some parts of the line continue to be used by local governments, tourism organizations, and non-profit organizations. The two towns that have been most active in making further use of these cultural resources are Kawamoto Town and Ohnan Town.

### 3. Kawamoto Town

On April 1, 2018, the day following the closure of the Sanko Line, Kawamoto Town assumed ownership of Iwami Kawamoto Station and Imbara Station, along with short sections of train line that extended to either side of the stations. Iwami Kawamoto Station, located near the center of town, made it a major station along the line, providing access to the local high school for commuting students. Imbara Station is located near the Kawamoto Rest Area, and according to the staff at the Kawamoto Tourism Association, that location factored into the town's decision to

assume ownership of it.

Following the line's closure, the rail crossover bridge at Iwami Kawamoto Station was dismantled, but overall, the station has retained its original form. As is detailed on the town's Tourism Association website, Kawamoto Town has made effective use of the closed rail line. One popular event that is frequently conducted at the station is a "rail-bike" event. Visitors are able to ride on a motor-powered two-person vehicle, somewhat like a motorcycle, that has been adapted to ride on the rail line (Fig. 1). While most frequently held at Iwami Kawamoto Station, this event has also been held at Imbara Station.

The "rail-bike" event is often well-attended. The opportunity to ride on a rail line on something other than an actual train has an appeal for many people, not just train fans. Other activities are also held, including a guided tour of the station area, which gives people an opportunity to legally walk on the rail line, as well as see some of the features of an actual train station. Guests are allowed to try out the manual railroad switch, and many seem to find it surprisingly difficult to operate (Fig. 2).



Fig.1 A "rail-bike" event at Iwami Kawamoto Station (2019.3.31)

Fig. 2 The railroad switch at Iwami Kawamoto Station (2019.3.31)

It is common to see parents and children attending these events together. As a staff member of the Kawamoto Tourism Association described it, the town having these stations has created a "new type of amusement park" which is a draw for families. There are not many facilities in the Iwami region of Shimane that would qualify as an amusement park, so Kawamoto Town has taken the opportunity to do something positive with an

unfortunate situation.

In addition to these kinds of events, Kawamoto town has also organized a variety of events that make use of the Iwami Kawamoto Station building, including workshops for town residents, concerts, and flea markets. According to the town's Tourism Association website, there are plans to continue to hold events such as these at a pace of about once a month.

#### 4. Ohnan Town and Gounokawa Railway

Ohnan Town is located in southern Shimane, on the border with Hiroshima Prefecture. The Sanko Line only went through the Hasumi area of Ohnan, which was its own local governing body until it merged with the neighboring Iwami and Mizuho Towns in 2004. Of the four stations located there, Ohnan Town has assumed ownership of Uzui Station and Kuchiba Station.

Kuchiba Station was the terminal station on the South Sanko Line, while Uzui Station began operation in 1975 as part of the New Sanko Line that finally connected the South Sanko Line to the North Sanko Line that terminated at Hamahara Station in Ochi Town (now Misato Town). Uzui Station was known as having the tallest station platform in all of Japan, at a height of 20 meters that could only be accessed by a flight of 116 stairs. This rarity, as well as the difficulty of access, made it a popular spot for people to visit. Also, from 2010, it has been the site of an annual illumination event called "INAKA Illumi" (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 INAKA Illumi event at Uzui Station (2017.11.25)

Up to the closure of the line, local residents of Ohnan Town as well as fans of the Sanko Line collaborated on providing hospitality to visitors to the area. This continued after the closure of the line, beginning at the end of April 2018. Drinks and food were made available to people visiting the area, and although entering the station itself was forbidden, many people visited the area during the Golden Week period of national holidays from the end of April to the beginning of May that year (Fig. 4).



Fig.4 A café event welcoming visitors to Uzui Station (2018.4.30)

Gounokawa Rail Way, a non-profit organization that formed in 2018, worked with West Japan Railway Company to conduct a series of events at from July of 2018 to January of 2019 (Gounokawa Rail Way Newsletter Vol. 1, Jan. 7, 2019). These events were held at both Kuchiba Station and Uzui Station, although the majority were at Uzui Station, and they were held in part to demonstrate the viability of the stations as a resource Ohnan Town could use, should they choose to do so. Events included running a trolley at both stations (Fig. 5), planting rice in the fields near Uzui Station that would be used to brew *sake*, and even using the tall staircase to do *soumen-nagashi* (where noodles are sent down a bamboo chute with flowing water) (Fig. 6).





Fig. 5 Trolley at Uzui Station (2018.11.23)

Fig. 6 *Soumen-nagashi* at Uzui Station (2019.8.31)

Following the end of this trial period in January, which also included the continuance of the INAKA Illumi event, the NPO made a presentation to the Ohnan Town government, making an appeal for the “high ability to attract customers” (Asahi Shimbun, Jan. 2, 2019). After the town made the official request to West Japan Railway Company in March 2019 to transfer the Kuchiba and Uzui Stations to the town, that request was officially accepted in June. Ohnan Town will now, together with Gounokawa Rail Way, move toward developing a railway park around the two stations (Asahi Shimbun, June 19, 2019).

At an event held in Hiroshima on January 28, 2019, just prior to their presentation to Ohnan Town, two members of Gounokawa Rail Way participated in a talk show to discuss their activities up to that point, as well as hopes they had for the future of the line. One comment a member made that speaks to the appeal of their activities is that they do ridiculous things, but do them with the utmost effort. An activity like *nagashi-soumen* is not something many people would think of, and as such, sparks the curiosity of people. With members who can make unexpected suggestions, there is a high potential for Gounokawa Rail Way to continue to draw visitors to their area.

## 5. Gotsu City

Many of the Sanko Line station buildings located in Gotsu Town have been torn down. Kawahira Station and Kawado Station have been transferred to the city, although they mainly function as bus stations now. Residents of the area near Shikaga Station set up a crowdfunding plan to build a mini-train (Fig. 7) designed to look like the rail cars that ran on the line that could be ridden by children at various events following the line's closure (Asahi Shimbun, June 19, 2019). They also organized Sankousen Station Festival 2018, an event to be held at Shikaga Station that would feature food stalls, souvenirs, and a performance of Iwami Kagura on a stage set up on the rail line and station platform. Although it was a well-attended event, the station building was torn down in September of 2019, and it is unclear if further similar events will be held there again.



Fig. 7 The mini-train on display near Utsui Station (2019.3.9)

## 6. Misato Town

Hamahara Station and Kasubuchi Station have been transferred to Misato Town, while several other station buildings have been torn down (Kiha 120, 2019). One intriguing plan to make further use of the former Sanko Line has been proposed by Iwami Winery, located on Mt. Sambe in Oda City. They will use a tunnel near Kasubuchi Station to store wine, and also set up a wine café there. This is part of an overall plan to create a “Winery Resort Town” in Misato, which may become an amusement park for adults (Asahi Shimbun, August 22, 2019).

## 7. Miyoshi City

Miyoshi City is considering the transfer of Ozekiyama Station and the surrounding area from West Japan Railway Company to the city. Although there are no definite plans as of yet, the city is looking to include the station's utilization in connection with the nearby Miyoshi Mononoke Museum (Asahi Shimbun, Dec. 6, 2018).

## 8. Future Possibilities

Any sections of the line that are not transferred to local governments will be eventually torn down and removed, although the length of the line means that this will take some time. Kawamoto Town and Gounokawa Rail Way have set an example that other areas may follow. One area in particular is the Ikawashi area of Miyoshi City, where the Sanko Line passed through and stopped at Ikawashi Station (Fig. 8). Its location between Uzui Station and Kuchiba Station have made it ideal for expanding the range of Gounokawa Rail Way activities. However, because this station is located in not only a different city but a different prefecture, there are some challenges that a transfer of this station will face. Additionally, two bridges over the Gōnokawa River that connect the three stations present particular difficulties, as their maintenance and upkeep will be challenging and likely expensive.



Fig. 8 Ikawashi Station on the final day of Sanko Line operations  
(2018.3.31)



Local residents have formed the Ikawashi Gounokawa Rail Way, and are hoping to convince Miyoshi City to ask for transfer of the station and rail line. They also hope to connect activities with the Gounokawa Rail Way group in Ohnan Town (Chuugoku Shimbun, Oct. 14, 2019).

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