

FEUDAL OBSERVATION SITES

Samuel O. Nicholson

Mito was the castle town on the northern border. I have just realized there were two observation tower sites, one at each end of the border between the sea and mountains. These were both low hills, where a samurai from Mito could be located and could return and give the alarm if he saw activity on the other side of the border.

Mito had a very limited streetcar system. There was just a single line running up the main street on a gently rising ridge to the castle area. Along this route there were two wide areas, which the streetcars had used as passing stops. The entrances were to the north and to the south. Since the street was not in a straight line, the defenders could be waiting out of sight until the attackers had entered the square, and then at the right moment rush out and surprise the enemy. The street runs up to the top of the ridge, where the castle used to be. It was to the left of the road and the prefectural offices are now there. From here, the highway drops down quickly to the railroad station.

To fill out the picture of how the Samurai were prepared to protect their territory on the border, there was a steep exit to the north, halfway up the length of the town. When I was there as a boy, the prefectural headquarters of the weather service was on its lip. Before a storm warning, flags were flown there, and father had visited with the men in this office. If a runner from an observation tower gave warning, a flood of samurai could run out to attack.

A few times a day, a car would continue on the line that ran along the side of the hill and down across a rice field area, to cross the highway that followed the shoreline. There were houses on both sides where we crossed the road, and then the line clung to a small cliff over the breakers below. That was the part of the trip I enjoyed the most. Then it followed the shore to end in an empty tree lined area. The motorman just waited there until it was his scheduled time to return.

Although we didn't think about it, but just enjoyed the outings, we had discovered the location of the end of this single-track line, with no switches or sidings, didn't seem to make very much sense. The only other reason to go down to that area was a famous and excellent river eel restaurant, just upriver from the highway bridge. To get there you took the road, not the streetcar. The main fishing village and town was down river from the highway, on the other side of the highway. Was this hill the ocean end of the two Feudal Observation posts?

There was a short, private, narrow gauge railroad line, which started at Akatsuka station, that was within walking distance of our compound. It covered quite a distance through the farmland and ended up on the river at a cherry blossom park. It used small steam engines and had both passenger and freight cars. The first station after Akatsuka was the main station, as it was where the streetcar line started. This must have been the up river observation tower, as the river was behind the end of the mountains beyond that point.

Just up town from this point was the business center, with four six-story department stores. The one on the southwest corner was the Isejin, whose owner was a friend of Father's. During the war, he was the one who provided the funding to keep Father's old folks' home operating.