

# The Yamagano Gold Mine Revisited

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(Received 24 December 2005; accepted 30 September 2006)

We report about Yamagano Gold Mine in Kagoshima Prefecture one of the top three productions in Japan. It began to operate in 1640 and continued active operation for more than 300 years. Nowadays, in order to distribute knowledge of its history and historic sites widely, we have been organized a walking tour visiting the historic sites. Members are finding their lives worth by welcoming visitors and cultivating the site together with them.

**Keywords:** History of Yamagano Gold Mine, One of Top Three Gold Productions in Japan, Walking Tour for revisiting to the site

## 1. INTRODUCTION

From Kokubu and 30 km upstream along the Amori River is Yamagano, the source of the Amori River. This mountain area once flourished as a gold mine. It was one of the top three productions in Japan, namely Hisikari, Sado and Yamagano. In the village of Yamagano, the old streets, houses, and stone walls which show the glorious history of a gold-mining town still remain and clear-water streams provide soothing comfort for visitors.

The local people are proud of their history but because of a declining and ageing population, the task of preserving this historic town becomes difficult. The Yamagano gold mine was found in 1640 and began operation, soon after Japan's feudal government commanded to close, because of too much production, and in 1656 operated again. The population of Yamagano was about 20,000 in 1640 and decreased to 12,000 in 1656. It was more than 200 years ago, when the gold first discovered in California in 1848. Today, few industries can boast of such a long history. This industry also once supported the rice-centered development of the various villages in the Satsuma Domain, a fact known by few people. Therefore, we intend to revisit the history of our hometown

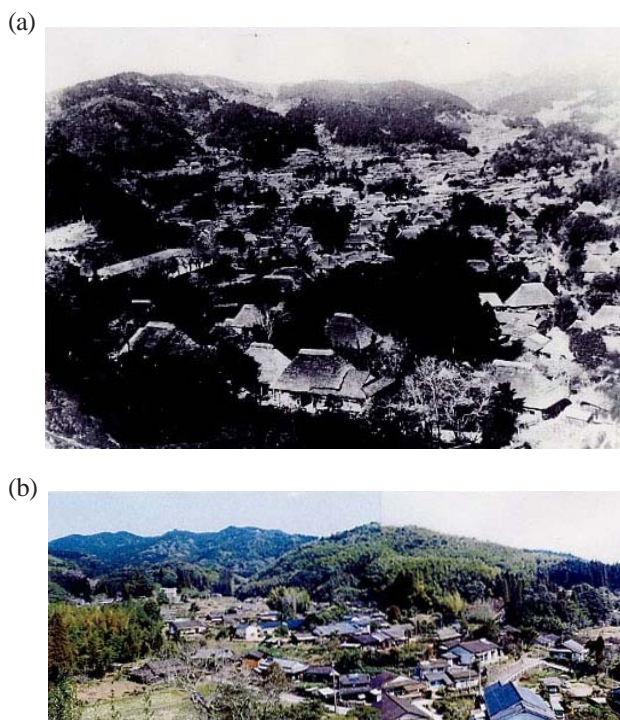


Photo 1. (a) Past (ca. 1920) and (b) present (2005) views of Yamagano Village.

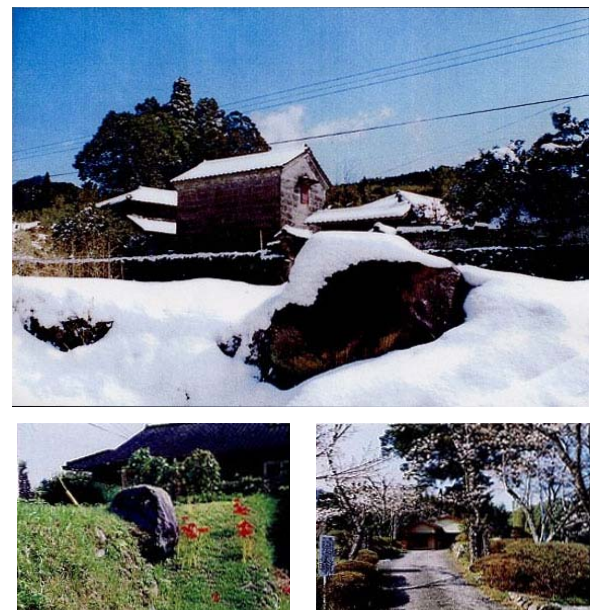


Photo 2. Seasonal scenes of Yamagano Village.



and revitalize the community in which we live. With this purpose in mind, the Executive Committee to Protect the Cultural Assets of the Yamagano Gold Mine was established. First, about the history and the historic sites of the Yamagano gold mine is mentioned. Then, it is introduced the walking tour around the gold mine village of Yamagano, and finally a brief history of our activities, information about our tours and issues we are facing is discussed.



Photo 3. State of affairs of the gold mine in the Edo Era from “Sangoku Meisho Zukai” compiled in 1843 (ca. 1700).

(a)

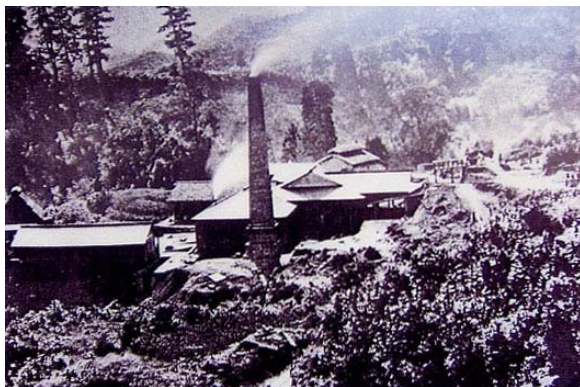


(b)



Photo 5. (a) New course of Amori River changed , and (b) its construction monument of river.

(a)



(b)

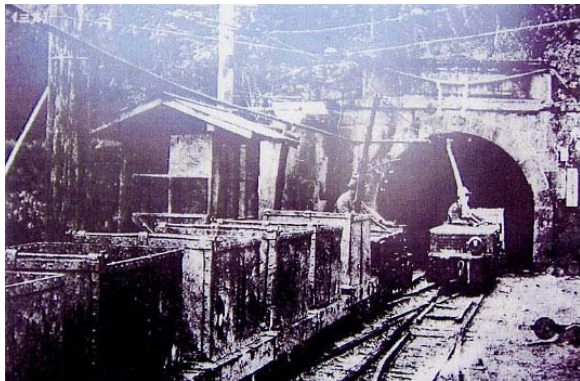


Photo 4. (a) One of Yamagano Factories, and (b) mechanized electric mine cars, in the Meiji Era (1868-1912).

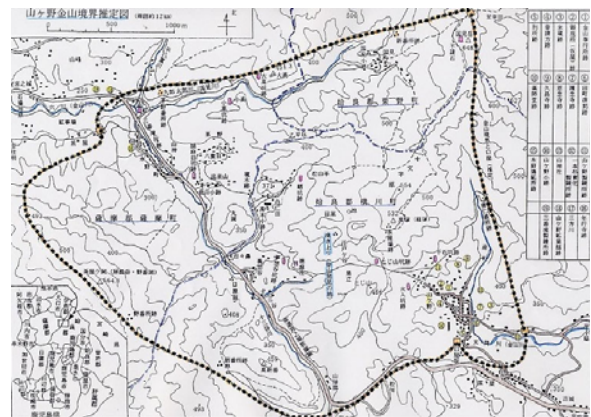


Photo 6. Estimated boundary of the gold mine indicated by a broken line.

## 2. THE HISTORY OF YAMAGANO GOLD MINE

Discovered in 1640 by the lord Shimadzu Hisamichi, the Yamagano Gold Mine was in operation for 223 years during the Edo Period. During the Meiji period, which started in the middle of the 19th century, mining machinery was introduced. The mine closed in 1953 after 310 years in operation. The Yamagano Gold Mine was one of the top three gold-producing



mines in Japan, after the Hishikari and Sado Gold Mines. During its operation Yamagano produced about 80 tons of gold.

The profits from mining supported the finances of the Satsuma Domain and were used to repay debts, offer imperial tributes to Kyoto and Tokyo, and to develop new rice fields. Records show that the Kokubu and Shimizu River course diversion projects required 137 Kan of silver, which would be equivalent to 2 billion yen today.

The gold mining area covers an area of about 12 km in circumference and includes the towns of Yokogawa, former Satsuma and former Kurino. Originally, 20,000 people gathered here to dig the earth. (For reference, in those days the population of the whole domain was said to be about 350,000, Kokubu with a population of 9,000 and Yokogawa with a population of 1,900.)

Initially, about 30 gold mining engineers were invited from the Hiji Domain of Oita Prefecture together with other engineers from other parts of Japan. In the city center of Yamagano Town, there were many shops, and the town was busy with merchants. Puppet shows and the cheerful atmosphere of the town, attracting not only the town's residence but also visitors from other towns including

inspecting officials from the Shogunate Government. Many people also enjoyed the Festival of the Local Mountain Shrine.

A great volume of goods was consumed in those days. While gold mining was flourishing, materials such as soy bean paste, salt and sake were merchandized, which resulting in a total annual sale of around 3.6 billion yen.

After modernization took place during the Meiji Period of the late 19th century, advanced technologies were introduced

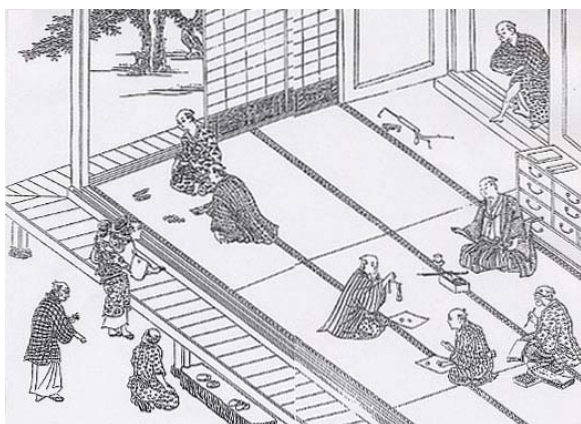
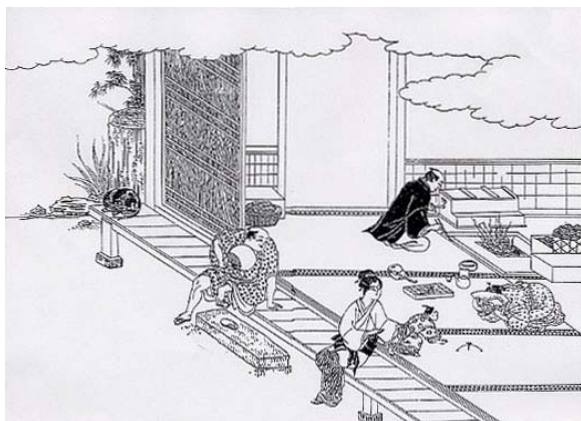
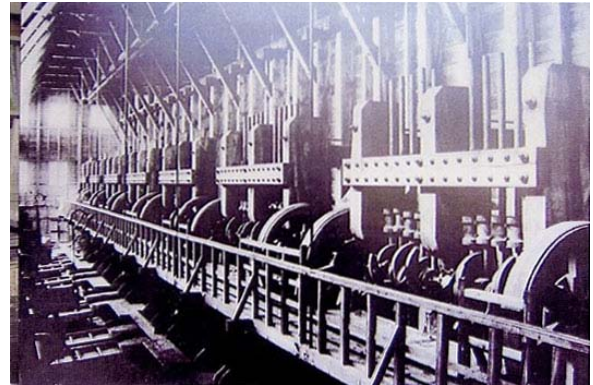


Photo 7. Customs at the gold mine in the Edo Era from “Sangoku Meisho Zukai” compiled in 1843 (ca. 1700).

(a)



(b)

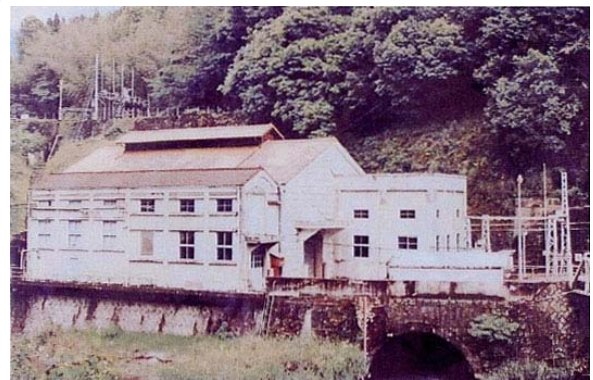


Photo 8. (a) Mine-pounding machine set up for the gold mine, and (b) its power plant.

(a)



(b)



(c)



Photo 9. Gold mining tools used at that time, which are



from western nations to increase production. Foreign engineers were invited, and modern machines were introduced. In order to carry coal, a new road for horse and carriage was opened between the Kajiki Port and the gold mine.

In 1908, the Sutenbuchi Power Station was established along the Amori River, and electricity services were provided, even to ordinary houses ahead of other places. One negative aspect of the power station though, was a disease known as Heppe disease. The director of the power station, Kikujiro Saigo, opened a special school known as the Kogyoukan School where he educated the local children. This helped inspire the local people to have an interest in education.

Along with the opening of the Japan Railway Kagoshima Line, Yokogawa town became an active commerce town, with both loading and unloading at the gold mine and the circulation of daily commodities.

As mentioned previously, since the discovery of the gold mine, Yamagano has been busy with high volumes of people and goods because the businesses of Yamagano were unique in comparison to those from the other domains, farming districts, and villages. There were four elementary schools, but soon after closing the production, these schools were closed as well.

### 3.BEGINNING OF WAKING TOUR

Historic sites are located in three towns. In Yamagano and Yokogawa town alone, there are 50 sites. These historic sites add a unique landscape to the natural environment of the river source for the Amori River. In addition, tools used in gold mining and historic photographs can also be seen.

Regarding the recognition of Yamagano Gold mine history and the activities to protect historic sites, our predecessors in

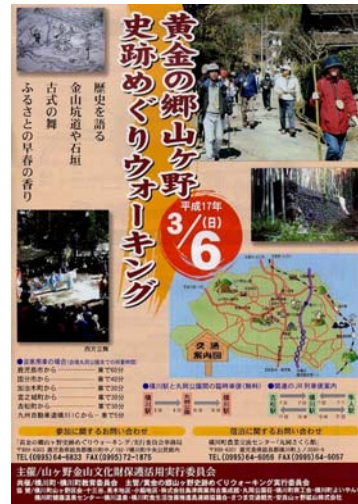


Photo 11. Pamphlet inviting to a walking tour visiting historic sites.

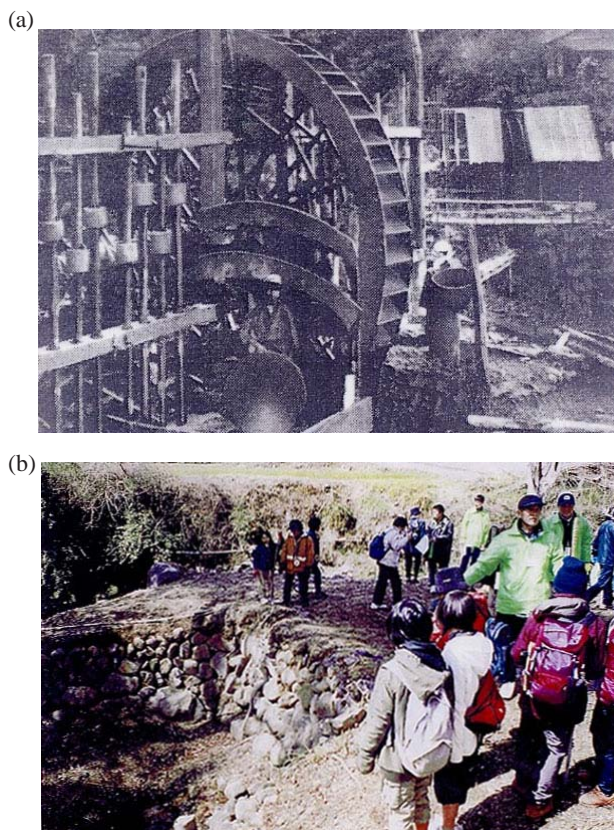


Photo 10. (a) One of about 500 water-wheels actively used in the Meiji Era , and (b) its ruin.



Photo 12. Tours around the ruins of the gold mine.



Yamagano made great efforts to highlight the gold mining heritage. The miners have published three books about history of the Yamagano Gold Mine [1] [2] [3]. In our community center, a gold mining related materials room was established, and signboards for the historic-sites were installed.

In order to pass on these activities and with the young people of the Yamagano area in mind, The Executive Committee to Protect the Cultural Assets of the Yamagano Gold Mine was established in 2001. The result of this work can be seen by the young people who are now leading in these activities to make people aware of the town's history.

Beginning with a walking tour of the gold mining village of Yamagano March 2002, which has been held a total of four times, people have come to realize the positive aspects of the Yamagano Gold Mine and its local community. The Yamagano town government is also working for improvements.

Local people and volunteers from three towns for a total of 200 people who were involved organize the walking tour. The number of participants for the tour is 200, and the walking distance is about 13 km.



Photo 13. (a) Tours around Yamagano Village, and (b) preparation of tea for visitors.



Photo 14. (a) Sifyodati dance , and (b) Tanokami dance performed at Yasura Shrine for visitors on 7 March 2004.

Our goal for the tour was:

To teach the history of the area and of the specific sites. We did prepare for the course through our guiding methods, brochures, tea and souvenirs.

Results were as follows:

1. As the environment improved, historic sites, which were hidden under the brush, appeared. This was a surprise to local people, and we were able to deepen our understanding of the gold mine.
2. Local people worked to erect a Yakata gate, a bamboo hedge and a torii gate.
3. Cultural activities like panning for gold, and performances of the divine dance were enjoyed and the participants welcomed souvenirs such as stone mortars, miniature straw bags of charcoal, and bamboo baskets.



Photo 15. Guiding to historic sites for junior and senior high school students.

4. Through the walking tour, people from diverse backgrounds came to know each other better. People are looking forward to the next event.
5. Presentations made by young students were warmly accepted and the students were very willing to participate. Elementary school children, invited to the tour, expressed enjoyment of the activities as well. This walking tour provides a significant educational aspect and at the same time, it passes on our cultural assets to the next generation.
6. The gatherings between the visitors to Yamagano and those who welcome them are well received and enjoyable by both groups.
7. The guide map "Gold Town, Yamagano" meets the need of visitors to Yamagano.
8. People in town and other places are becoming aware of the protection of the Yamagano gold mine site.

#### 4. FUTURE ISSUES OF OUR COMMITTEE

1. Collaboration with the City of Kirishima, after the consolidation of municipalities. Autonomous activities of our committee should also be examined.
2. In order to organize and collaborate with other groups. Our committee members is responsible for each portion

of more than three tasks. It would be helpful if more people were able to share in these tasks. Collaboration with other groups would also be helpful for idea generation and could provide a model for organizing our own group.

The Kokubu Castle Town Illustrations Group [4] is a group that we started to work with after having studied the history along the Amori River.

3. When children join our activities, the local area becomes more vibrant. We want the elementary, junior-high and senior-high students to become involved with the walking tour, so we are working to develop this tour with their interests in mind.
4. As a volunteer group, we are developing techniques for investigating and studying the history of this area and, are working towards learning the history of the sites around the Yamagano Gold Mine. In addition to conducting walking tours, we hold gatherings for learning the history of gold mine, so that participants and the local people can learn together, and area to be designated as a gold mine historic site.

While the reexamination of the Yamagano Gold Mine has just begun, every member of The Executive Committee to Protect the Cultural Assets of the Yamagano Gold Mine is determined to continue our activities.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author expresses his appreciation of arrangement of materials in preparation of this manuscript by Yoshio Hamamoto and Jun Yoshii. Michiko Yamazaki, who acted as an instantaneous English translator at the 2nd International Symposium on Temporal Design in Architecture and the Environment held at the Civic Center in Kokubu opened for public on 27 July 2005, in cooperation with Jun-ichi Shigehisa and Haruyoshi Matsushita translated a manuscript into English.

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