

The Meeting: Seto and Shigaraki

In the summer of 1988, we had a summer residency at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana, doing lots of making and wood firing.

While firing the wood kiln, we were helped by a jolly Japanese potter, Michio Sugiyama. He was a long term resident at the Bray, whose name, "Michio" came from the fact that he was born in Michigan. His father had been teaching there.

Michio was creating huge, chunky, tooth-like sculptures that were prone to cracking. He would say, "Clack.....no ploblem", as he applied the magic medicine called QF 180.

A few years later we had visitors from Japan, Yasuo and Teppie Terada, a father and son from Seto. Yasuo was building a kiln in Northern Alberta for Bibi Clement, who had met him when she travelled to Japan years before.

Teppie and his father came to our pottery to borrow some large kiln shelves for the new kiln. The firing was a bust as the kiln was built on permafrost which melted during the firing and the kiln fell apart, destroying the work and our shelves.

In 2002, after working in Goshogawara in Northern Japan, we toured around Japan visiting Seto, one of the traditional Japanese kiln sites, reconnecting with Yasuo and Teppie at their wonderful 4th generation family pottery.

We told Yasuo that our next stop was Shigaraki, another famous Japanese kiln site, where our friend, Michio Sugiyama, was director of the Shigaraki Work Centre, a very prestigious international position.

We planned to take the train, but were pleasantly surprised when Teppie said, "No, we are taking you!" It was an hour and a half drive over Japan's mountainous terrain.

We wondered why Yasuo wanted to do this and Teppie explained that Japanese potters working in their own strict traditions have little chance to meet, except when foreigner's visits present the opportunity. We experienced this when meeting Tatsuzo Shimaoka and Matsuzaki Ken and other Japanese potters.

Upon meeting, Yasuo and Michio exchanged omiyagi gifts with each other but seemed very formal and somewhat strained. Carol asked Teppie if they liked each other or were getting along and he explained that Michio might be intimidated by his father's 4th generation potter status and that Yasuo was intimidated by Michio's international ceramic status.

We all went out to a traditional Japanese dinner where Michio and Yasuo faced each other across the table over plenty of good food and saké and got to know each other.

We were in our own room in the restaurant and backed by huge windows with a view of the traditional garden where the staff said they fed several tanuki each night. The tanuki is the small racoon dog that is the symbol of Shigaraki. We really enjoyed seeing them in the garden.

We now understand that Shigaraki and Michigan are connected because Shiga prefecture and Michigan state are twinned international states.