

The Suzuki Yohei Legacy

No history of Shimizu Port would be complete without considering the Suzuyo Corporation. Over the course of two centuries, this company has grown from an obscure family coastal transport operation into a powerful industrial consortium. This article outlines some of the key developments in the history of the Suzuyo Corporation and offers a few glimpses of the eight men called "Suzuki Yohei" who have guided this enterprise.

Early Years

After Tokugawa Ieyasu crushed the Toyotomi clan in 1615, he granted coastal shipping rights to 42 local families. Those privileges were handed down from father to eldest son for generations and, somewhat like medieval European guild rights, could be sold.

In 1801 a person known as Harimaya Yohei purchased shipping rights from a local merchant to start a coastal transport business. Twelve years later a shipping, storage, and handling operation was formally launched. When Harimaya Yohei passed away in 1820, his son handled the family trade. Substantial growth occurred after Suzuki Yohei III took control in 1841. When an earthquake in 1854 devastated much of Shimizu port, Suzuki Yohei III secured a loan and his company was the first to resume operations following this catastrophe.

When Suzuki Yohei IV took the helm in 1869, there were only nineteen families left in the shipping/transport business in Shimizu. Suzuki Yohei IV strengthened operations by offering immediate payments in cash. In an age of rampant inflation and instability, this was a smart policy. Local merchants came to rely on him and he made a nice profit shipping tea, fruits, salt, charcoal, sulphur, and rice. When a rice shortage occurred in the 1880's, he imported rice from China and sold it at a handsome profit. Suzuki Yohei IV also worked closely with the Mitsubishi Corporation to make Shimizu a major shipping port.

A Growing Power

In 1898 Suzuyo's maritime insurance operations expanded under Suzuki Yohei V's control. Under his aegis, the Suzuyo company also became a major energy supplier in this area, dealing in coal and charcoal as well as food products such as salt and fruit. In a way hard to imagine today, salt sales were especially profitable. At that time salt was a controlled monopoly and major source of government revenue, not unlike tobacco is now.

Suzuki Yohei VI became Suzuyo's head honcho in 1917. Under his guidance, the company launched the SSK Canning Corporation in 1929. The first cannery in Japan was built by this company and a small canning museum still stands on the Miho peninsula. In 1932 Suzuyo began selling petrol products in this region.

Suzuki Yohei VI was passionate about politics; he held six terms in Shimizu Town Council and two terms in the Prefectural Assembly. In 1930 he helped establish the Shimizu Chamber of Commerce. In 1939 Suzuki Yohei VI reached the height of his political career by becoming a member of the Imperial Diet.

Suzuki Yohei VII served as CEO from 1940. During the war years all operations were under government supervision. Some Suzuyo affiliates produced insulin and pharmaceuticals; others manufactured canned goods. An earthquake in March 1944 damaged many local production facilities and the subsequent American bombing reduced most facilities to shambles.

Following WWII, the Suzuyo's operations were rebuilt and modernized. In 1949 a construction company was launched and the following year an automotive transport and trucking concern began. Not all of Suzuyo's ventures met with success. A travel agency and taxi company were sold when they proved unprofitable.

During the 1970s the Suzuyo & Co. Ltd. expanded its overseas network, establishing offices in North America, Europe, and Asia. In 1988 they moved into the air cargo business. With the advent of the information age, a decision was made in 1990 to launch a software and information networking company. Their office is a prominent landmark not far from Kusanagi JR Station.

Suzuki Yohei VII was noted for his charitable activities and became an honorary citizen of Shimizu in 1990. Active in the Red Cross and many other philanthropies, he donated money to help build the Shimizu municipal library, hospital, and gymnasium. In 1991 Suzuki Yohei VII provided funds to create the Verkehr Museum, which depicts the maritime history of this area.

Suzuyo Today

In 1993, Suzuki Michihiro – the eldest son of Suzuki Yohei VII – became chair of the Suzuyo Group. There are over one hundred companies in that group, and many other closely affiliated with Suzuyo. In recent years, Suzuyo has expanded its hardware and storage facilities, established a ferry service to the Izu peninsula, and become a leading sponsor of the Shimizu S Pulse soccer team. With about 6,000 employees and an annual gross sales somewhere in the 365 trillion yen ballpark, Suzuyo has begun its second century of operations from a position of diversity and increasing global sophistication.

- Tim Newfields

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