

Hanako Coffey, Shiba Pioneer

1974-1989

by Pat Coffey



## Introduction

Late in December of 1974, my then husband Dewitt and I went to Fukuoka, Japan for his seven month sabbatical at Kyushu University. I had been to Japan once before as a tourist and loved the country and its people. We had been given a place to stay at the foreign visitor's quarters (Gaijin Shukusha) on the medical campus of Kyudai (Kyushu University). When we arrived in Fukuoka, we took a taxi from the airport to the Gaijin Shukusha. I remember looking in wonder at the neighborhood as we approached the medical campus. Then, after we entered the campus, we saw some very dilapidated buildings with broken windows with pigeons nesting in them. We knew that our rent was to be only Ni Man yen per month (at that time only \$60), and I was afraid that we had to stay in one of these buildings. My enthusiasm for staying in Japan waned as I thought of living the next seven months in a haunted house. But my fear was allayed when we turned a corner and stopped in front of a modern, clean building. "Gaijin Shukusha desu," said the taxi driver, and we got out. We had a nice two room apartment that became our home for the next seven months. It turned out that the old buildings we saw were built around the turn of the century during the Meiji era and were scheduled for demolition.

Dr. Hirota, the chemist with whom Dewitt was to do his sabbatical research, took us to dinner and showed us around town -- where to catch the trolley and where to catch the train. We arrived late in December, so were able to enjoy new years in Fukuoka. Dr. Hirota invited us to his home for a new years dinner complete with the traditional zoni (a soup with mochi in it). Mochi is made with pounded sticky rice and looks like a small brown and serve roll before it is baked. It is very dense and very sticky, so Dewitt called the soup 'bubble gum soup'. We had many other encounters with mochi in Japan, and, by the time we left, I was very fond of it.

Dewitt didn't start to work until after the New Years break, which was about five days into January. The Gaijin Shukusha was quite close to Hakozaki Shrine and we saw the densha (trolleys) filled to overflowing with men and women dressed in kimono on New Years day. We walked to Hakozaki and saw the throngs of people there. It was a wonderland to me. A few days later a friend suggested that we go to Dazaifu -- another shrine about thirty miles away. We took an incredibly crowded train and enjoyed the festivities there too. After Dazaifu, we got used to riding on trolleys and trains where we were jammed in like sardines. Americans are not used to close packing of people on public transportation.

During that enchanted time, there was a small festival in Higashi Koen, the park across the street from the Gaijin Shukusha. There were all kinds of stands selling food, souvenirs, and folk craft. I bought a beautiful dish made in Onda, a nearby pottery village. I was in a winter wonderland and enjoyed every minute of our adventure.

One day we took the densha down to Tenjin, the main shopping district to have lunch. We went into a sushi bar and were greeted with a very loud "irashaimase" from the employees. We had studied a little Japanese and knew that the suffix "masen" gives a negative meaning to any verb. Naturally we assumed that whatever they said meant "it's not" and thought the restaurant wasn't open yet. We turned heel and

left and stood outside wondering what to do. Then a couple of businessmen went in, the employees shouted "irashimase" at them, and they sat down at the sushi bar and ordered their lunch. Dewitt and I then re-entered the restaurant and sat down. I have always wondered what the employees thought when they all said "welcome" (irashimase) and these foreigners (gaijin) turned around and left.

Eating out was an adventure at first. We didn't know what anything was, couldn't read the menu, and couldn't speak Japanese very well. Fortunately, most of the restaurants have wax replicas of the food they serve in the front window. We would see something that looked good, draw the Japanese characters to the best of our ability, and give the paper to the waitress. Then we'd ask how to say it, and, from then on we could order that dish in Japanese. One of our first adventures in eating was called "katsudon". The wax version looked good and the real thing tasted even better. Katsudon is made of fried breaded pork cutlet (tonkatsu), onions, and egg served on a bowl of rice (donburi). Katsudon became one of our favorites. I have ordered it several times in the States, but here the egg is almost always over-cooked, and I am usually disappointed. Writing this makes me want to fly immediately to Japan just to eat katsudon.

Once Dewitt started to go to work every day, I found myself playing the part of a housewife for the first time in my life. Life in Japan was very interesting; going shopping was always an adventure. Everywhere I went there were new sights and sounds. One of my favorite places was the Daiei Department store in Tenjin. They had seven stories of goodies including a big supermarket in the basement. Since I couldn't speak Japanese well, shopping at the supermarket where I could help myself was easier than trying to converse with a shopkeeper. Compared to their U.S. counterparts, Japanese Department stores are quite noisy. There were always announcements over the loudspeaker preceded by electronic chimes. In the food department, there were hawkers shouting "irashiyai, irashiyai" as they displayed their goods.

Another activity was walking and running in the park. I was very fortunate to live so close to such a lovely park. I jogged every day that it didn't rain and the park 'regulars' soon got used to seeing this Gaijin lady running down its paths. Today, most of the park has been taken over by prefectural government buildings, so it seems that Japan has a problem with conserving open space similar to our own.

## Enter the Pup

One day when I returned from shopping, there was a large cardboard box on the front porch of the Gaijin Shukusha. I could hear a crying sound coming from the box, and, when I got closer, I discovered the cutest puppy I had ever seen. I ran upstairs to park my groceries and grab my cameras. I didn't know



whose dog this was; I just wanted to take pictures of her. The puppy was tan and white, with perky ears that flopped over on the end. She had an oversized collar around her neck and her tail was tipped with white. One of my cameras had black and white film in it and the other had color slide film in it. I took lots of pictures of this adorable little girl. I held her in my arms and let her nibble on my fingers. I'm sure it was love at first sight, but I wondered whose puppy this was and whether I would ever see her again.

Later on that day, I bumped into our neighbors, Wolfgang and Trixie Michel. Wolf was a German professor at Kyudai. I asked Wolf about the pup, and he said that he had found it wandering around the Gaijin Shukusha, and that he had put her in the box. Since nobody came to claim her, this puppy soon became everyone's pet. Dogs were not allowed in the Gaijin Shukusha, so 'Puppy Chan' just stayed in a box at the back door. Everyone loved Puppy Chan. Since we lived in the foreign visitors' quarters, people from all over the world lived there. Puppy Chan was spoken to in many languages including English, German, Latvian, Japanese, Vietnamese and Thai. I noticed that she was fed sausage by Wolf and Trixie, rice and fish by the Takahashis, and dog food by us. Until Puppy Chan arrived on the scene, I did not realize that I was a bit lonely. I had worked my entire adult life, and I wasn't accustomed to being by myself. I didn't speak Japanese, so making friends was difficult. Puppy Chan soon became my best friend.

One morning I awoke and found that it had snowed during the night. Coming from San Diego, snow is a memorable occasion. I got up and checked on Puppy Chan who had been sleeping outdoors. She thought that the snow was put there for her pleasure. She ran, jumped, and tunneled through the snow. I took her with me when I took pictures in the park. I don't know who enjoyed the snow more, Puppy Chan or me.

## Where, oh Where has my Little Dog Gone?

One day, after we had Puppy Chan for about a month, she disappeared. All of us looked everywhere for her. I had Mieko Takahashi make a poster for us in Japanese giving her phone number if Puppy Chan was found. I had some photographs duplicated and pasted them to the posters. The Takahashis thought it was strange that we would go to all that trouble for a stray dog, but we were heartbroken. The collar we had bought for her had a bell on it, and every time I heard the sound of a bell, I would follow it, thinking it might be Puppy Chan. It was then that I discovered that Japanese women often carry charms with little bells on them. I hope I didn't frighten any of them when I followed the sound of their bells. I followed the bells and followed every dog sound I heard. Since we lived on the medical campus, there were a lot of dogs used for research. I asked where they got these dogs, and found out it was the dog pound on the other side of town. So I got on the densha, and ventured out to the Fukuoka dog pound at Mae no Hama. There were all kinds of dogs there, but no Puppy Chan. There was a box of adorable puppies that looked a little like our dear Puppy Chan, but they looked like they would grow up to be bigger dogs. I returned from the dog pound dejected; I had lost my best friend.

The next month was horrible. I realized that Puppy Chan had been my best friend and that she was gone and that I would probably never see her again. I kept looking wistfully at her photographs and continued to follow the sounds of bells and barking dogs. I finally reconciled myself to the fact that my dear Puppy Chan was gone forever. I hoped that she had found a good home somewhere and was making another family happy, but I had my doubts. One day Mr. Takahashi phoned me and said that one of the campus police guards had found the dog and he was going to pick her up. Soon he returned with a very thin and dirty Puppy Chan. I brought her to our apartment and gave her a bath in our bathtub. I think this was her first bath ever, and she cried like she thought she was being drowned. Wolf and Trixie came over when they heard the ruckus, and were elated that Puppy Chan was back again. We had a family conference, and decided that Puppy Chan's free running days were over. I went downtown and bought her a chain and Dewitt strung a rope from the back wall of the Gaijin Shukusha to a nearby wall and fashioned a dog run for her. This way she could run back and forth as well as sideways, but she could not get away.

When we first got acquainted with her, Puppy Chan had folded ears and we wondered if her ears would eventually stand up. Just before she disappeared, one ear was erect, and the other was almost erect; just the tip gently flopped down. When she returned, both ears were folded down again. In the month of her absence, she had not gained any weight, but she gained 2 kilograms (4.4 pounds) during her first week back. Since she was a small dog, I am sure she was very malnourished during her disappearance.

## Growing up with Puppy

By the time April rolled around, I was more comfortable with my surroundings. In the beginning, I was afraid to answer the phone, since often the caller couldn't speak English and I couldn't understand Japanese. I finally figured out that most of these calls were wrong numbers and that if I repeated my phone number in Japanese, the person would thank me and hang up. Similarly, I was afraid to call anyone, for fear that a non-English speaking person would answer. Our apartment was furnished with a pay phone, and once a month Mrs. Takahashi would come in to empty the coin box. The first month she was surprised to find just 2 coins in the box -- that's how afraid I was to use the phone. By April, there were plenty of coins in the box for Mrs. Takahashi to collect. A friend of mine explained how to use a Japanese pay phone. The phone can hold up to 5 coins and these coins drop into the coin box at a rate determined by the distance called and the excess coins are returned at the end of the call. This method seemed confusing at first, but after I got used to it, it seemed more reasonable than the way our pay phones work. Every time you hear a coin drop, you just add another coin. The more expensive the toll call, the faster the coins drop.

Dr. Hirota's wife told me about the Fukuoka International Women's Club, and I became a member. This club met once a month and I met two of my very best friends there -- Kumiko Sekoguchi and Yoko Takeda.



I tutored Kumiko's daughter Maki in English once a week in exchange for Japanese lessons and looked forward to these weekly visits. A couple of students from Kyudai also came to visit weekly to teach us Japanese and these students, Yuko Oba and Masahiro Ieki also became our friends. Kumiko knew of my interest in pottery and told me about two pottery classes in Fukuoka. I started going to these and met more people. My life was now full of activity and friendships. None of my friends could come for a visit without seeing Puppy Chan. She was a very important family member by now.

I kept asking the Takahashis what to do about registering Puppy Chan. Even though she was chained to her dog run, I was afraid the dog catchers would get her. Mieko finally told me that they were registering dogs in Higashi Koen and that she would go with me to get her registered. So the three of us, Puppy, Pat and Mieko went merrily off and got Puppy Chan her rabies shot and registration tags. In Fukuoka, when you register a dog, you get a sticker for your front gate with the character for dog on it. I stuck this sticker in the front window of the Gaijin Shukusha and it became a "one dog Shukusha".

Puppy Chan belonged to everyone in the Gaijin Shukusha, and everyone spoke to her in their own languages. I don't know of many dogs who are fluent in so many languages. We all took turns feeding

her and taking her on walks. One of my favorite activities was to walk Puppy Chan in the park. She would always attract a bunch of children who wanted to pet her. I thought that most of these kids probably lived in places that didn't allow animals, so I was especially happy when they could play with her. By the time June rolled around, I started thinking about the fact that our sabbatical would soon be over, and what about Puppy? I asked her other family members if it would be okay to bring her to San Diego with us, and everyone agreed. So I contacted our consulate and got the regulations for bringing home an animal. They sent me a brochure that said that as long as she wasn't pregnant or she didn't have any diseases that were communicable to man, an adult dog could be brought into the country. I realized that being an outside dog, Puppy Chan might either get pregnant or even have puppies just before we left Japan. Mr. Takahashi told me the Fukuoka Dog and Cat Hospital was down the street, so Trixie, Puppy and I walked down there and made arrangements to have her spayed. When we picked her up, she was one sick Puppy and we got permission to keep her inside until she recovered. I felt bad taking a healthy, happy pup and bringing home such a sick dog. In a short time however, she was back to her happy self, so outside she went.

One of the things I needed was a 'certificate of good health' that certified that she had her rabies shot and had no diseases. The first step of this procedure was to get a paper from the vet. I had to take this paper to the Department of Animal Control (back to the dog pound) and get another paper from them with all the appropriate seals on it. All these papers were in Japanese, so the final Certificate of Good Health had to be obtained at the airport.

When I tried to book passage for the three of us, I really had trouble. The man at the airline agency said that she would have to fit in a very small carrier that would fit under the seat. We bought the carrier, but Puppy Chan was too big to fit inside. I phoned my friend Yoko Takeda, who's husband worked for Japan Airlines for help. She arranged passage via Nitsu Express. We brought Puppy Chan to the airport 12 hours before we departed, and she was put into a large cage. At that time, I obtained her 'Certificate of Good Health'.

Dewitt and I thought that 'Puppy Chan' was a fine name for a dog in Japan, but it sound kind of silly in America. Our friend Yuko suggested that we call her Hanako once we returned home. Hanako means 'Little Flower' in Japanese. Hanako sounded like a fine name, so we started calling her Hanako. It took us a long time to stop thinking of her as 'Puppy Chan'.

We had incredibly bad luck when we arrived in Tokyo on our way home. It was Obon in Japan and everyone was traveling. Our flight to Los Angeles was over booked, and they made us ride in the first class cabin. First Class on Japan Airlines! what a treat!

## Welcome to America Hanako Coffey

When we arrived in Los Angeles, I was concerned about our dear Puppy Chan passing quarantine. She had a minor skin rash in Fukuoka, and I was afraid that that would keep her out. When we got to the agricultural inspection area, poor Hanako had been in the cage for about twenty-four hours and smelled terrible. The agricultural inspector made a quick pass by the smelly cage and said, "That dog looks okay." So out we went and loaded the smelly cage in the back of my brother's station wagon. We drove down to Orange County to my mother's place where my mother had spent a week getting the house ready for our return. She had put all her best towels in the bathroom. Naturally, the first thing we did was give our poor dog a bath and dry her with mother's best towels. Somehow, mother has never forgotten the arrival of Hana Chan in America.

The next day, we drove to San Diego and introduced Hanako to her new home. She was very nervous as a result of the ordeal of her trip, so she was quite shaky for about a month. I wondered if the wonderful, laid back, gentle Hanako would ever come back. Gradually, she did. I felt sorry for her; how could she understand such an ordeal? She always was her loving self, but she seemed jumpy.

Before we knew it, however, she adjusted to San Diego just fine. We installed a puppy door for her so she could get into the back yard. She was quite an escape artist, and every time she got out of the yard, we would block another escape route. She was a very good hunter and no living thing could enter our back yard and escape alive. One day when I returned from work, Hanako was barking. When I went to see what all the commotion was about, she had cornered a skunk. I quickly scooped her up and fled into the house. That was a very close call for both of us.

The years passed, and one day I noticed that her eyes were getting cloudy. I brought her to the vet, and he said that that was very common in geriatric dogs. 'Geriatric?' I asked myself -- why she is just a puppy. Then I realized that she had come to America ten years before. She no longer tried to escape from the back yard; in fact, she could no longer jump to the top of the first wall.

During that time, Dewitt and I slowly drifted apart, and finally decided to end our fourteen-year marriage. A few years later, I found a new friend, Sandy, and she and I got along so well, we decided to combine households, including all our pets. So Hanako and Hildy (my geriatric cat) got a second mother, as did Friskie, Sandy's red Cockapoo. Hanako had always liked to chase poor Hildy, and Friskie somehow explained to Hanako that chasing cats was improper behavior for a dog. At last, poor Hildy could roam the house without fear of being chased by a overly playful dog.

It was then that we decided to add a little blue-cream Persian, Misty Boy, and a pure orange-striped Alley, Taffy Cat, to our household. By now Hana knew that cats were okay so she accepted the kittens graciously and our "family" grew to five little furry friends. About a year later, at age nineteen years and nine months Hildy went to "Cat Heaven". The following year, Friskie, now age fifteen went to "Dog Heaven". Again, Hana had to adjust to a new family member, Buffy, an apricot poodle. Poor Hana, that little puppy chased her, chewed on her ears, ate her food and did all the things that 'children' do to drive adults crazy. But they also loved each other dearly, shared the same bed and played gently and sweetly



with each other.

I always wondered what breed Hanako was. She looked very much like a fox with her short legs, alert, pointed ears and reddish-tan coat. Her fluffy tail curled up in a gentle arch over her back; of course, foxes tails are straight. When I'd take her on a walk, people would often ask what kind of dog she was and comment on how fox-like she looked. I would proudly say that she was a Japanese Zashu (zashu means mongrel in Japanese). I thought she might be part corgi or part spitz. Then, one day I was watching the 'Today Show' and they were showing unusual pets. On came Rick Tomita with a dog that looked a lot like Hanako that they said was very rare in the U.S. They said there were around thirty of these Japanese Shiba Inu in the whole country. I jumped up off the couch and said, "Thirty-one!, thirty-one!". I knew Hanako wasn't 100% Shiba, but mostly Shiba she was for sure.

Hanako continued to age and become more and more mellow. The vet warned us about kidney problems, so we fed her a special low protein diet that consisted mainly of Kokuho Rose rice (my special favorite kind, too). One day, she acted like she had vertigo, even her eyes twirled. After a week of trying to medicate her, we made the difficult decision to put her to sleep. She was so dizzy she couldn't even stand up. So as I held her in my arms, and talked to her gently, I saw her draw her last breath. She was finally at peace. I'll never forget my dear Hanako.