

Yokote's Winter Festival

Yokote's Winter Festival is held each year on February 15, 16, and 17 as a celebration of the first lunar month. The first two days are centered on *kamakura*—large snow domes furnished with woven mats, a small brazier, and an altar for the water god. *Kamakura* that house small shrines are built in different parts of the city and along the Yokote River. On the last day, groups of representatives from each neighborhood carry *bonden* (decorated staves) through the city to Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine to pray for a safe and prosperous year.

In the early 1900s, *kamakura* existed mainly as small snow domes that were built for children by individual households. Today, the *kamakura* are built for the Winter Festival by professional craftsmen and are 3 meters in height. Roughly 80 *kamakura* are built and displayed during the festival, and thousands of miniature *kamakura* cover the riverbed below Janosaki Bridge.

The decorated staves called *bonden* make their appearance in the final two days of the festival. *Bonden* are physical objects that act as a temporary abode for kami, but they are also fancifully decorated representations of the neighborhoods that made them. Every year on February 17, each *bonden* is carried to Asahiokayama-jinja Shrine by a relay of participants who take turns bringing it up the steep mountain roads leading to the shrine. At the shrine entrance, the men carrying the *bonden* jostle against one another while trying to force their way through the crowded gates. Finally, the *bonden* are presented in the main hall on behalf of the community.