

Tsuru no Yu

An origin story for a high-pedigree hot spring

Most old hot springs have an origin story. Many involve wounded animals being miraculously cured by a dip in the hot-spring water. Tsuru no Yu goes one better with a story that combines an animal legend with real historical figures from the seventeenth century.

Once upon a time, a wealthy old man fell ill and became impoverished. While his son was scavenging for mountain vegetables for his father to eat, he came across a hot spring where a crane (*tsuru* in Japanese) was tending its wounds. Impressed by the spring's curative power, the son brought his father, who was soon cured. Word got out among the local people and they, too, started flocking to the spring. But then a wicked old man turned them away, claiming the spring was his and his alone. At that point, the local feudal lord swung into action, informing the selfish old man that the spring was not his private property but belonged to everyone. The hot spring became known as Tsuru no Yu.

The historical version of Tsuru no Yu's origins involves the Satake clan. The first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, deprived lord Satake Yoshinobu (1570–1633) of a large domain in modern-day Ibaraki Prefecture and sent him to a smaller domain in Akita far to the north to punish him for his lukewarm support in the Battle of Sekigahara (1600). Yoshinobu's adopted son Satake Yoshitake (1609–1672) suffered from gout. When he asked someone from the neighboring Nanbu clan if they knew of a good hot spring for his complaint, he was informed that the best place was on his own lands. In 1638, Yoshitake (who corresponds to the lord in the crane legend) sailed across Lake Tazawa and made his way to the spring, ordering the construction of roads to make it more accessible. The records do indeed show that Tsuru no Yu started admitting ordinary people at the end of the seventeenth century, as in the folk tale.

These aristocratic origins explain why Tsuru no Yu had both a primary inn (*honjin*, now the *shin-honjin*) for daimyo lords, nobles, and shogunal officials, and a secondary inn (*waki-honjin*, now the *honjin*) for travelers of a slightly lower rank. The current *honjin* – a long, single-story thatched building of dark wood – is the most atmospheric place to stay, while the *shin-honjin* has the most luxurious accommodations.