



Manga on Wheels (with Snacks)

Creativity soars when the economy crashes, and during the Great Depression in 1930, a Japanese street performer hit on a brilliant idea: he drew up a stack of large, colorful cards to enhance his storytelling — one card per scene. This *kamishibai* (paper theater) proved so popular that within a year, there were 2,000 *kamishibai* men in Tokyo alone.

Operating from bicycle-mounted stages, they sold crackers and candy to their audiences before starting the stories; whoever bought snacks got to stand closest. By the 1950s, it's estimated there were 50,000 *kamishibai* men in Japan, entertaining 5 million children a day. But then TV arrived, and the street performers disappeared almost overnight.

Last summer, my wife and I toured with **Tameharu Nagata**, 82, one of the last surviving *kamishibai* men in Tokyo. Nagata, who stands about 4-foot-11, rides a bike that weighs 100 pounds with the *kamishibai* stage installed. It has two drawers filled with rice crackers, gooey candy, and his wife Yoshi's homemade pickles, plus a flip-up frame for the story cards.

Nagata sets up on street corners, sells snacks, and tells a story called "Tetsu no Tsume" ("Claws of Steel"), a cliffhanger featuring an Asian Superman/James Bond character. (It's easy to see how the colorful, paneled graphics of *kamishibai* directly influenced manga comics.)

Performing the story itself takes Nagata less than four minutes; the bulk of his time is spent selling snacks in inventive ways — quizzes, contests, and skill tests, such as breaking a brittle pink wafer into more than ten pieces with a single blow. The kids love it.

"Once in a while, thinking about my age, I say that I should quit," he confides. "But every time I say that, kids come to our door to tell me to continue. I don't want to disappoint them, so I decided to keep on performing until I really cannot ride a bicycle. It's my life's work."

—David Battino

❖ **Photos of Nagata-san's Bicycle Stage and Performance:** storycardtheater.com/nagata

➤ **"Storytelling Man" Profile:** makezine.com/go/nagata