

I The Early Days of Seibu Railway (1892–1969)

Part 3

Railway Business Deregulation Forms Backdrop to the Establishment of Musashino Railway

In 2012, Seibu Railway held a number of events and campaigns under the title “100th year anniversary.” Musashino Railway, which laid the current Ikebukuro lines, was established 100 years earlier in 1912, as mentioned above. Here we discuss the background to the birth of Musashino Railway as well as its development. First, we will turn our attention to major changes to railway administration that were happening at the time.

In 1906, the Railway Nationalization Act was promulgated. The private railways that were the core railway infrastructure came under government control. As privately owned businesses were limited to local lines, margins thinned and investors turned away from the railway business and looked for other investment options. Also, conditions for starting a business under the Private Railway Act were so onerous that new railway construction virtually disappeared.

Railways were indispensable for regional development, but the government could not use the national budget, so in trying to rectify the situation turned to what we know today as “deregulation.” In 1910, construction terms were greatly loosened with the promulgation of the Light Railway Act. This sparked the spread of private railway networks nationwide.

In 1911 there was an application for a railway license originating from Sugamo Station on the Yamanote Line to Hannocho, via Shakujimura, Kiyosemura, Tokorozawacho, and Toyookacho. At the time of the application the venture was known as Musashino Light Railway, but when founded

in May the next year it became Musashino Railway.

Expectations for direct routes to Tokyo became clear after birth of Kawagoe Railway

Leading figures in Hannocho, which had been left out of the Kawagoe Railway routes, spearheaded the plans. Previously, the closest station to the town had been Kawagoe Railway's Irumagawa (currently Sayamashi) Station, with a horse-drawn railway connecting the town and station. Amid a nationwide light rail boom, it is easy to imagine that it was only natural for a town separated from the railway to want construction. Further, in places such as Tokorozawa which already had Kawagoe Railway stations, many people had high hopes for a direct connection to Tokyo via the Musashino Railway, rather than a roundabout route via Kokubunji. As the plan started taking shape, residents of the current Tokyo areas of Nerima Ward, Hoya, Kiyose, and Higashi-Kurume joined the founders.

Incidentally, at the application stage the starting point of the Musashino Railway on the Tokyo side was Sugamo Station. Sugamo was a temple town along the Nakasendo trail, and the liveliest commercial district in the northern suburbs of Tokyo. At that time, many railway plans extending to the northwestern suburbs of Tokyo originated at Sugamo. However in December 1912, Musashino Railway applied to change the starting point to Ikebukuro and received approval the same month. Since the Yamanote Line



Route map not long after Musashino Railway began operations



On the left is the first electric locomotive company introduced following electrification by Musashino Railway. Three units were built in the USA by Westinghouse and imported. The No. 13 locomotive pictured was subsequently transferred to Konan Railway in Aomori Prefecture, and it remains in active duty. Below is a Musashino Railway semi express bound for Hanno.



station was built in 1903, a number of settlements sprang up in Ikebukuro, but there are no materials remaining which explain in detail the process of why the starting point was changed.

Aggressive management style exemplified by first electrification in the capital region

In 1915, three years following the company's establishment, Musashino Railway opened the 43.7 km Ikebukuro–Hanno section. Stations in operation at the time included: Ikebukuro, Higashi-Nagasaki, Nerima, Shakujii, Hoya, Higashi-Kurume, Kotesashi (currently Nishi-Tokorozawa), Moto-Sayama (Mikajimamura; currently Sayamagaoka), Toyookamachi (currently Irumashi), Bushi and Hanno. There were fewer than half the number of stations that exist today. According to a timetable from September 1 the year it opened, there were just eight through train roundtrips daily over the entire line, with no local trains. From Ikebukuro the trip took 54–56 minutes to Tokorozawa and 96–129 minutes to Hanno. At the time, on Kawagoe Railway, connections varied markedly for trains on the Tokorozawa–Kokubunji–Shinjuku route, so it took between 68–106 minutes. From its first year of operation, Musashino Railway outdid Kawagoe Railway in cargo, and surpassed it in passenger numbers in its third year.

At the time of establishment, the landscape was of the typical rural variety, but urbanization proceeded as the waves of national modernization and the convenience of railways washed over. In 1920, Japan's first census revealed that the population of Nagasakimura Village (currently western Toshima Ward) was around 3,500, but this had roughly quadrupled five years later. The Great Kanto Earthquake sparked an exodus of dwellers from the city to the suburbs, and five years later, in 1930, the population had swelled to nearly 30,000.

At that time, the suburbs had spread to as far as Nerima, but in 1922, Musashino Railway had had the foresight to be the first to electrify steam operations in the metropolitan region (the Ikebukuro–Tokorozawa section). It began run-

ning a mix of electric and steam trains and extended electrification to Hanno in 1925. The number of trains grew to double that of the steam era. This clarified their role as suburban trains, which they maintain to the present day.

Tokorozawa Station the stage for competition between the Musashino and Kawagoe Railways

An anecdote highlights the rivalry between Musashino Railway and Kawagoe Railway (later to become the former Seibu Railway): The former Seibu Railway, contracted by Musashino Railway, operated Tokorozawa Station, where the two lines crossed. Some passengers wanted to go to Tokyo but did not specify the route. The former Seibu Railway sold its own tickets to these passengers without reservation. However some passengers used these tickets to ride Musashino Railway trains, so Musashino Railway complained to the former Seibu Railway. In the end, some employees stormed into Tokorozawa Station and started operating the station themselves.

Competition between the two had a major impact on the urbanization of Tokyo's northwest suburbs. Urbanization in turn gave birth to a new phenomenon, leisure time. Toshima Park opened in 1926, and Musashino Railway had the idea that its trains would not be used just to convey commuters and goods but thought that an increasing number of people would use the railway for leisure. In 1927, it opened a branch line between Nerima and Toshima (currently Toshimaen).

In addition, tourism development was occurring in a reservoir zone known as Tamako and Sayamako. This gave rise to competition between Musashino Railway and the former Seibu Railway. However, in 1928 Tamako Railway was launched by someone who had an eye on tourism resources in advance of these two companies. That person was Yasujiro Tsutsumi.