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ENED 379
JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

INTERVIEW - PHANGAN SINGH GILL

For the subject of my journal assignment I originally decided, as did many others, to interview students who are recent immigrants to Canada. I choose two students with two very different stories. The first is a grade twelve female student originally from Viet Nam who will graduate with honours in June and who has won a prestigious \$20,000 Pacific-Rim Scholarship. The second is a grade twelve male student also originally from Viet Nam, but who is having great difficulty with the academic and the social side of school. Both students have experienced more in their short lives than most of us

born and raised in Canada will
ever have to deal with. However, I
decided not to use either of them
as the subject of my journal and
have instead chosen to interview my
father, Phangan Singh Gill.

I like this!

I have always, as I'm sure

yes!
agree!

most people do, taken my father
for granted. Obviously I love and
respect him, but I never gave that
much thought as to how and why
he came to live in Canada. Over
the years, Dad would make references
to his life in India and to things
he did as a young man in Canada,
but he never went into any details
and I never pursued it. My

father is now in his seventies and many of the men he came to Canada with have recently passed away. Perhaps this is why he has begun to talk more about his childhood in India and about his life when he first came to Canada. Dad's stories are incredible and I've often talked about recording them. The journal assignment has provided the catalyst for doing this.

Nostalgia
is an
intimate
thought,
don't
it?

Dad was born in the Punjab in India, the seventh child in the family, but records were not that accurately kept, so he thinks the year was 1916. His father

This is an unusual practice in any known countries!

died - two months before Dad was born so he was spoiled by his family - his mother breast-fed him until he was five years old! This made it even more incredible when at the age of ten he left the village and accompanied by his second brother travelled to Calcutta on the first leg of his journey to Canada. He was chosen to emigrate because he was the "right age" to meet immigration requirements - that is, he travelled as the son of a man already living in Canada who had returned to the village ten years previously to visit - the year my father was

born. Immigration was at that time restricted to sons or daughters of people already in Canada. My father was one of many Sikhs who entered Canada on false passports.

So listening to his stories, it's difficult to remind yourself that he was only a child. He left his family at the age of ten and spent the next four years in Singapore where he learned to speak a little Malay, Cantonese and English from the other children he played with. The route he followed was one countless other men also covered on their journey from India to Canada.

Life must have been very hard on him!

Wherever Sikh travellers went, they found food and shelter at Sikh temples and often were guided there by Sikh policemen.

One of Dad's stories involves a fight on a freighter travelling from Singapore to Hong Kong. The Chinese crew would not let him cook his dinner as he was entitled to as part of his fare. So Dad, about fourteen years old at the time, "grabbed a poker from the stove and swung it at them until the chief officer came by and made them let me cook." This ability to stand up and take care of himself is a life-long trait.

March 1, 1930 was the day Dad arrived in Vancouver on board the Empress of Russia. His fare, including meals, from Hong Kong to Vancouver was \$90⁰⁰. Dad lived in a small sawmill town in Vancouver Island for two years with his cousin who had sponsored him as his son. Dad was then sent to Kamloops to work as a farm hand in the summer of 1932. Later that year, he moved to Ocean Falls and lied about his age to gain employment in the local mill. Wages in Ocean Falls were 42 cents an hour as compared to 10 cents an hour in Vancouver! Another one of his many stories

about standing up for what is right and for what you believe in is from Ocean Falls. The foreman at the mill expected to receive "gifts" from the men working at the mill. When Dad refused to pay, the foreman doubled Dad's work load, making him do the work normally done by two men. Dad refused to "buy gifts" and eventually quit his job and returned to Vancouver. When he left Ocean Falls, Dad brought with him the bible and the funds that had belong to the now defunct Sikh temple. At the age of eighteen he had been the vice president and

What an accomplishment

treasurer of the Temple. The bible
and the money were donated to
the main Sikh temple in Vancouver.

This began my father's association
with the Vancouver Sikh community,

where he eventually served four separate
terms as the president of the
Khalsa Diwan Society.

You must be very proud of him

When Dad returned to Vancouver,
he worked in lumber mills and eventually
bought his own wood truck and

went into business with his cousins.

In 1941 Dad was one of only a
handful of East-Indians to join the
Canadian Army. But he never saw
active duty and as he was
injured in training and in 1943



The I.W.A. has always led in championing workers' rights. In 1943, the Union sponsored a successful delegation to the B.C. Legislature in Victoria to demand voting rights for East Indians. Front row: Didar S. Bains, Naranjan S. Sidhu, Naginder S. Gill (Secretary of the Khasia Diwan Society), Garib S. Lehl, Phangan S. Gill, unknown. Back row: Sir Harold Holland, Harold Pritchett, Mohinder S. Sangha, Darshan S. Sangha, Arjan S. Rhandhawa, I.S. Garcha, "Tikka" S. Bains.

was discharged from the Army.

His trucking business grew, but problems between his cousins caused

them to leave the business and start over on his own in Langley

in 1946. There were so many "Gills" in the lumber business that Dad

became known as "Big Gill" - he was five-foot-ten inches tall and approximately 230 pounds. His

size was not the only reason for his nickname, Dad was often the one asked to resolve differences in the East Indian community.

He married my Mom in 1946 and I was born in 1947. The day I was born my father

There is always a prize to pay one goes into business a relative isn't it

How
narrow
minded!

received sympathy messages because his first born was a girl. My father informed his friends he didn't need their sympathy - that he was proud of his little girl. This was not the typical reaction for men of my father's generation. 1947 was also the year my father became involved with race horses.

You
are
right!

Dad's second nick-name came about in the 1950's. While racing in Victoria, Dad was approached by a native Indian who could not buy liquor as at that time it was illegal to sell alcohol to natives. The man asked Dad to tell the liquor store clerk that

he was East-Indian, not native Indian, that he was in effect Dad's cousin. Dad is still called "Cousin Jim" by race-trackers!

My father is now in his seventies and is still involved with his horses. He gets up every day at 4:30 AM to feed and train his horses and shows no sign of slowing down.

When I listened to his stories, I marvel at his sense of adventure and courage. How many of us would leave our family and home at the age of ten and travel half way across the world to start a new life? My father

Very few indeed!

says he always remembers what his brother said to him when he left Singapore - "Never lie, never cheat, and always protect your good name".

The difficulties he encountered are not that different from those encountered by immigrants today. He did not understand English, he had no family or job, he met discrimination and unfair treatment. He, however, choose to look at his new life as a challenge and to meet it head on. My only regret for my father is that he never returned to India and never again saw his family.

What a heart warming,
tender, moving
story of a
man

who made his bold
out his own
efforts, persistence,
faith and hard
work!
I salute,
him!

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