BECOMING CANADIANS

Pioneer Sikhs In Their Own Words





Sarjeet Singh Jagpal

$29.95

All of the Sikhs living in Canada today—more than 200,000 men, women and children—can trace their roots to the courageous pioneers who first came to British Columbia at the beginning of this century. It was these early immigrants, many of whom had never before left their farming villages in the Punjab, who first undertook the arduous journey from India to Canada and faced the myriad challenges that awaited them here.

Becoming Canadians is their story, a rich, intricate history of Canada's Sikhs, told in their own words and illustrated with their precious family photographs and documents, which are published here for the first time. The author, a Canadian-born Sikh and a trusted insider, gathered those words and documents and has woven them together with historical background and archival images.

The pioneers describe their trip by rail to Calcutta, then by ship to Hong Kong and by ocean liner to Canada; they remember their struggle to give up the outward symbols of their religion in order to fit in with other Canadians, to learn the English language, to finish school when it seemed futile; they share their frustration at being refused service, jobs, white men's wages and even the right to vote, even though they were British subjects. And they also describe their joyful celebrations when families were reunited on Canadian soil after years of waiting; the open hearts and open hands that everyone in the community offered to any Sikh who needed help; the strength of the gurdwara (temple)—the centre of Sikhs' spiritual life; the patience and determination that fuelled their forty-year struggle for the right to vote; the delights and challenges they and their children and grandchildren live every day.

"The voices in *Becoming Canadians* speak loud and clear to all of us who want to be good Canadians, but no longer understand quite what this means. With their determination, commitment to their new country and willingness to accommodate in order to belong, pioneer Sikhs were ideal Canadian immigrants. These men and women of an earlier time have much to teach us today at the end of the twentieth century."

—from the Foreword by Jean Barman

Becoming Canadians

my Book -

Sanj Singh Jagpal



Becoming Canadians

Pioneer Sikhs in their own words

Sarjeet Singh Jagpal

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To the pioneers, whose dreams we live today

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Foreword

BECOMING CANADIANS is an important book. The immigrant experience in Canada has almost always been conceived as European in impetus. The sea voyage of our imagination has been across the Atlantic Ocean to Halifax or Montreal. It is far past time we look in the other direction to understand how Canada has been enriched by the men and women who crossed the Pacific Ocean to reach our shores.

Sarjeet Singh Jagpal tells the story of pioneer Sikh immigrants to Canada in their own words. The men and women whose voices Sarj has so eloquently captured in print speak honestly and openly about their lives in Canada during the first half of the century. We relive the long rail voyage from a remote Punjab farming village to the bustling city of Calcutta, on to Hong Kong and then by ship, possibly one of the Empress liners, to Vancouver. We are welcomed into communities of pioneers scattered across British Columbia and participate in everyday life centred around hard work, mutual support and respect for the family. We also learn what it was like for single men to work long hours in a sawmill and go home only to a communal bunkhouse. We enter the gurdwara, or temple, and come to understand why religion has been, and remains, so central in Sikh society. We experience subtle and overt discrimination, and agonize over the decision whether or not to continue wearing a turban or, for both men and women, to dress in traditional style. We share in the determination of the second generation to secure an education. And we come to realize how very important it was to these men, women and children to become Canadians. Citizenship was long denied to the Sikhs, the franchise being granted in 1947 through the efforts of the very individuals whose immigrant experiences Sarjeet Singh Jagpal has rescued from obscurity.

The intimacy that we feel with these pioneer Canadians is possible because Sarj is among their offspring. As he explains in the preface, it was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Komagata Maru* incident in

1914, when a boatload of prospective immigrants from India was prohibited from landing in Vancouver, that made him realize his parents' generation was fast passing away. Stories heard from the time of his childhood were being lost forever. A longtime Vancouver schoolteacher, Sarj decided to do something about it, and set out with tape recorder in hand. Invitations to visit led not only to long conversations but to precious photo albums and documents being brought out for display. Sarj's fluency in Punjabi was critical to women, as well as men, feeling comfortable in sharing their experiences, and the text is noteworthy for its sensitivity to gender. Perhaps more than anything, it was Sarj Singh Jagpal's willingness to listen and his passion to understand that opened up the Sikh community to him. The photograph that he took of each interviewee underlines the great respect he accorded his parents' generation and his determination that they be front-and-centre in their story. We owe Sarjeet Singh a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The voices in *Becoming Canadians* speak loud and clear to all of us who want to be good Canadians, but no longer understand quite what this means. With their determination, commitment to their new country and willingness to accommodate in order to belong, pioneer Sikhs were ideal Canadian immigrants. Despite obstacles, they survived and thrived. And they achieved their goal of becoming Canadians. These men and women of an earlier time have much to teach us today at the end of the twentieth century.

—Jean Barman

Preface

On May 20, 1989, the India Cultural Society of British Columbia held a dinner at the Pan Pacific Hotel in Vancouver to observe the seventy-fifth anniversary of the *Komagata Maru* incident. The sons and daughters of British Columbia's original Sikh pioneers from 1904–1908, now in their seventies and eighties, were the guests of honour among more than 2000 people in attendance. In the group photograph we see these proud survivors gathered together for the first time.

During this event, as the younger people were brought in touch with their elders' past, we all realized that everything we had in this rich and abundant country was due to the valiant efforts of these brave survivors who were assembled before us. Their history, and in turn our history, was full and valuable. It needed to be preserved, documented and made available to everyone. These people were the living link to the past, but because of their age and frailty they were slowly fading away.

As stories and memories were exchanged, I realized how oral our culture is and how much we depend on this way of communicating. An ordinary history book could never capture the faltering voices, the emotional expressions and the shifts in pitch and intonation that I experienced that day listening to these men and women reminisce. It was then that I decided to undertake an oral history project, because it would allow these people to tell their stories in their own words. It would add another dimension to the study of their history. The medium of oral history, says Derek Reimer, "is the recorded human voice which conveys meaning beyond the actual words. This additional meaning includes information about age, mood, accent, ethnic group, regional and class background, sex of the speaker and personality traits. Each voice has qualities which distinguish it from others giving oral history interviews a personal presence that no written record can match."

Time was a critical factor: it was vital that these life histories be taped and preserved soon, before our pioneers left us forever. The tapes would be a tribute to the men and women who survived and thrived in spite of tremendous obstacles. Their stories would live on long after they were gone.

Over the next five years, I began to gather the stories of our elders, from when they first immigrated in 1904–1908 until they were permitted to become Canadians in 1947. I conducted thirty interviews and transcribed seven interviews stored in the Simon Fraser University Archives. My subjects and I spoke either Punjabi or English, whichever language the individual felt most comfortable using. Most preferred Punjabi. I tape-recorded our conversations and took notes as well.

The interview process was a very powerful one. Each conversation was unique, particularly because so many of the men and women mentioned members of my own family and thereby involved me in their personal histories. At times the interviews were very emotional because of the memories being stirred after so long a time. There were some very touching moments, some tears, some silence and meditation, and much humour. There were many painful moments as well, when they searched their memories for a forgotten name or date. Sometimes their voices were full of emotion as they spoke of a fond memory or recalled a difficult time.

At the end of each interview, I asked for any old documents, letters or photographs the person might have that would clarify some of the things we had discussed. They were very willing to share their cherished pictures and documents, and they seemed pleased that someone was taking an interest in their lives and history. It made them feel important. At the end of the interview, I always took a colour photograph of the person as a visual record.

As soon as possible after each interview, I made a copy of the tape and stored the original in a safe place. I used the copy to make a summary of the interview—not a transcription but a written record of the highlights, main points, important quotes, names and dates. As the interviews progressed, common themes, issues, names and events emerged. These were to become chapters in the book.

Many of the photographs, documents and letters included in this book have never before been seen by anyone other than family members. They are treasured mementos of the past and serve in this history as corroboration of memory. A careful look at the photographs reveals many important insights: the composition of the community (males,



Sikh pioneers (with invited politicians and dignitaries) on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Komagata Maru *incident. Pan Pacific Hotel, Vancouver, May 20, 1989.*

females, children), degree of Canadianization, and the role of work and the temple. It is also important to note the date of each photograph, to see the changes over time. Pages from the newspaper *India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information*, edited by Kartar Singh, chronicle the social events in the Sikh community from 1929–36 and further verify the events described in the interviews.

It is the insider's perspective that gives this book special significance. The history of the Sikhs in British Columbia has most often been written from an outsider's perspective, by non-Sikhs. I wanted to offer an insider's view to provide a more balanced account. Communication, the key to any successful interview, is greatly increased when both parties are from the same social, cultural and religious background. Interviewees may be reluctant to speak candidly with an outsider, especially a member of a group which has traditionally looked down upon them and mistreated them. I was able to gain the trust and confidence of the elderly Sikhs since they know my parents, I speak their language and I understand the subtle ways of their nonverbal communication system. I am one of them.

It is important to remember that memory is selective; the people I interviewed could not tell me everything. Consciously or unconsciously, they picked and chose what they told me. Then I picked and chose

from what they told me. They emphasized certain events, people and circumstances that had special importance for them, and these provided me with focal points for my writing.

The experience of talking to the elders was a powerful one for me, too powerful to be translated directly into words. The rhythm of the individual voices, the pauses, the laughter, the waves of emotion; the sounds and sights and "feel" of their homes as they sat surrounded by a lifetime of precious belongings and mementos, entrusting their memories to me—no medium could capture the intensity of this experience. At the same time, working with these men and women made me even more profoundly aware of how important it is to record their stories, publish their photographs and documents, and make their memories available to all Canadians. Their experiences are the very essence of history and culture.

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A Note on the Sikh Religion

The Sikh religion was founded by Guru Nanak about 500 years ago in the province of Punjab in northern India. Nine Gurus succeeded him and established the tenets of Sikhism. It was Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru, who established the Khalsa, or brotherhood. He organized the Sikhs into a fighting force because they suffered persecution at the hands of the Moghuls, who were trying to eliminate all opposing faiths. The Khalsa gives the Sikhs their group identity, represented by their observance of the 5K's:

Kesh: unshorn hair with head covering
Kanga: a small comb
Kara: a bangle
Kirpan: a ceremonial sword for self-defence
Kacha: breeches

Khalsa men do not cut their hair, and they wear turbans. Khalsa women also do not cut their hair, and they wear scarves or head coverings. This is all in accordance with the 5K's, which dictate Sikhs' physical appearance by providing them with symbols of their faith.

All male Sikhs use the name "Singh," meaning lion, as a middle name, and the female Sikhs use the name "Kaur," meaning princess, as their middle name. There is a strict code of conduct: daily meditation on the attributes of God, done by repeating his name; being honest and truthful in thoughts, words and actions; earning an honest living; and sharing with the needy whenever possible.

The Sikhs believe in the teachings of the ten Gurus, contained in the holy scriptures called the Guru Granth, respected as "the living or true Guru." The Sikhs worship in temples called gurdwaras: the top floor is the hall of worship and the bottom floor is the communal kitchen (langar) where all are welcome to eat and socialize. The gurdwara is far more than a place of worship, it is a social and community centre, a safe haven.

The 15 million Sikhs living in India are a minority group comprising only about 2 percent of the population. There are now about 200,000 Sikhs living in Canada, over half of whom live in British Columbia.





1 Setting the Scene

Previous page: Sikh soldiers, part of the Hong Kong Regiment, visiting Vancouver en route to London to celebrate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. (VPL 3027)

Below: Sikhs just landed in Canada, taking their possessions from the ship and loading them into wagons. Vancouver, c. 1907. (VPL 9426)

PROBABLY THE first Sikhs to see British Columbia were the Punjabi soldiers from the Hong Kong regiments travelling through Canada after celebrating Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in London, England in 1897. They were impressed with the majestic landscape, the rich vegetation, and the favourable climate; all quite similar to their homeland, the Punjab province in India. Word travelled fast about the opportunities in this new land and adventurous Sikhs soon started making travel plans.

The Sikhs' arrival in Canada began with the first wave of immigration in 1904–1908. At this time about 5,000 East Indians, virtually all of them male Sikhs from the province of Punjab, came to British





Above: Railway workers dumping truckloads of debris, Frank, Alberta, 1903. (NAC PA-125115)



Right: Sikhs newly arrived in Canada, with their trunks and bedrolls. CPR Station, Frank, Alberta, 1903. (NAC PA-125113)

Columbia to do labouring jobs on railway construction, in the lumber mills and in forestry. Even though they were unskilled and uneducated, they were favoured by employers because they were hardworking and reliable and because employers could pay the Sikhs less than white men for the same work.

These pioneer Sikhs did not intend to stay here long since they did not receive a warm welcome from their hosts. Their intention was to make money and return to India. They came to a cold and hostile environment, both literally and figuratively. Besides language problems, poor education, lack of proper housing and health care, and culture shock, they faced racial discrimination and segregation. There

When my father, Nand Singh Sangha, first came out in 1907 he worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway. Mehar Singh, his fellow villager, worked with him. Mehar Singh was a foreman of the Sikh workers on a different section gang. My father was working up at Rogers Pass, he used to stoke the fires for the engines. He stayed with the CPR for about eight years. Then he started to work in the sawmills. Many of our old-timers started working with the CPR, then got into the sawmills.

—Mr. Naranjan S. Sangha

The old-timers worked on the Canadian Pacific Railway to extend the line. It was very cold and harsh during the winters. They slept in horse barns along the line that they were clearing.

—Mr. Hari S. Manhas

When our people first came from India they used to sleep on pillows filled with sawdust. The one thing our people always brought was their own quilt or blanket from India to keep them warm in winter. They made their beds from rough wooden planks they got from the sawmills, which they covered over with hay.

— Mr. Kartar S. Ghag

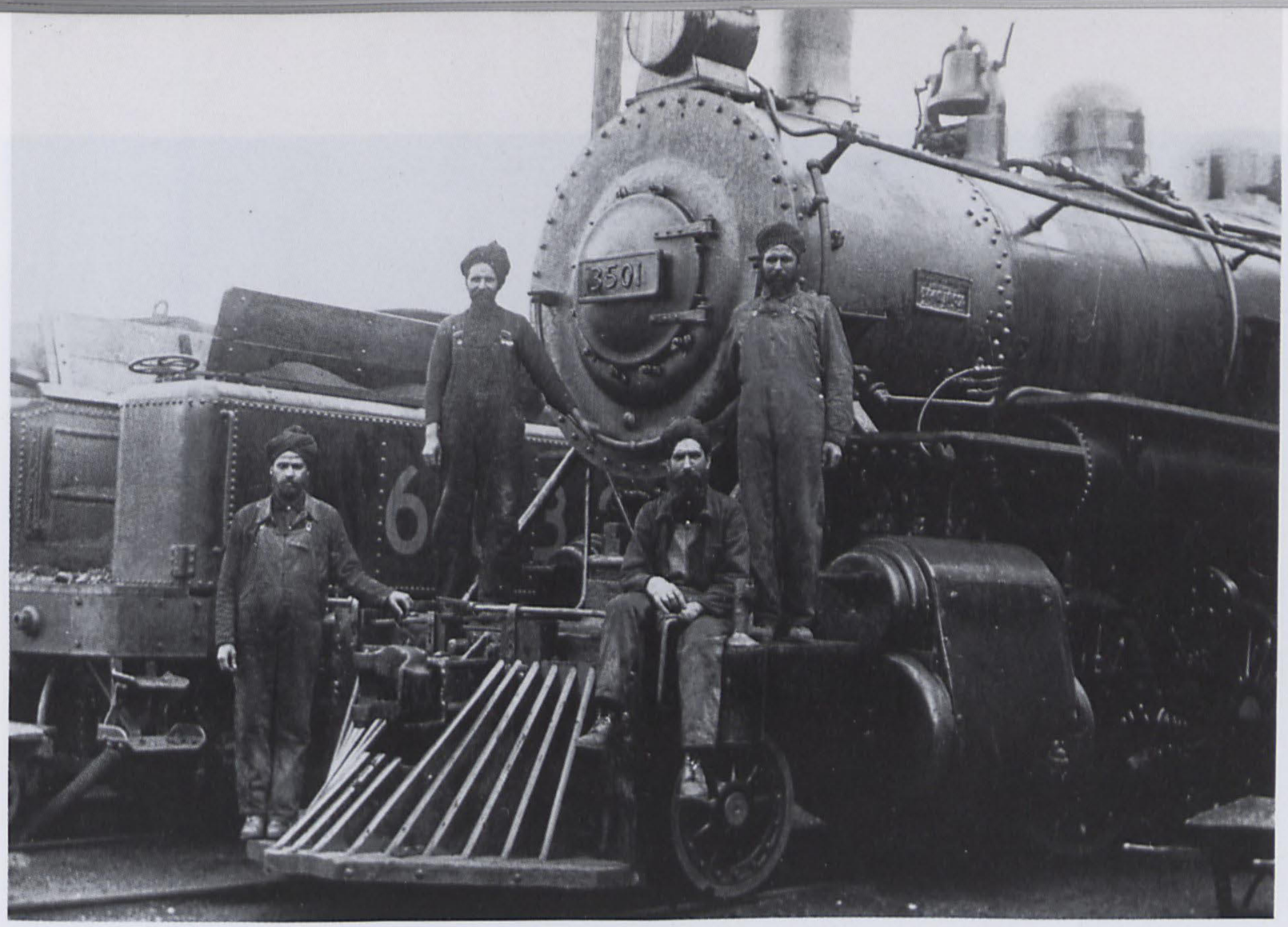


Above: Millworker lifting heavy timbers at a lumber mill in Vancouver, c. 1910. (NAC PA-122652)

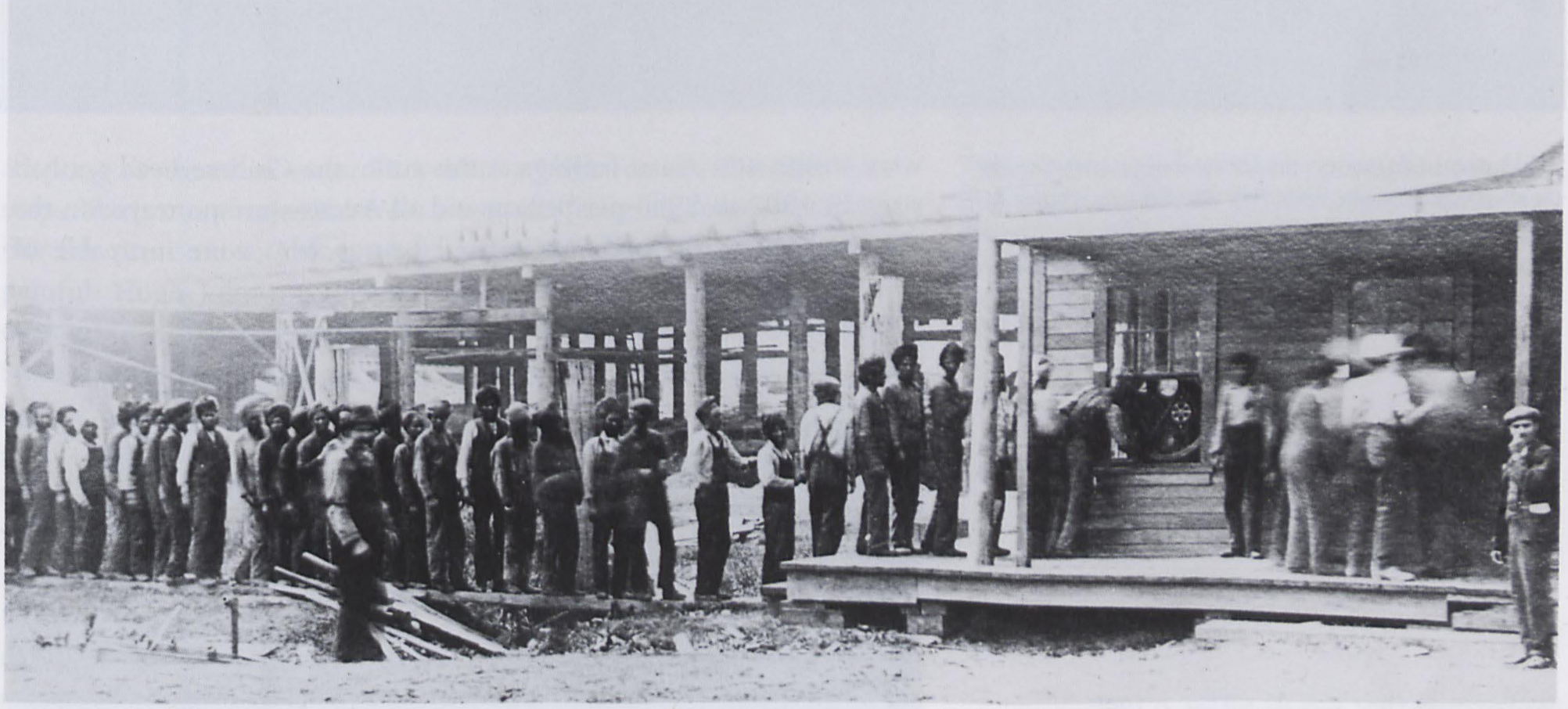




Right and above right: Sikh millworkers at North Pacific Lumber Company, Barnet BC, c. 1905. (VPL 7647, 7641)



Four railway workers employed by the CPR, posing on a locomotive, c. 1910.



Workers line up at a sawmill office, probably on payday. (UBC 489/8)



A Sikh man (right) surveys the damage done to Asian shops in the aftermath of an anti-Asian riot. Powell Street, Vancouver, 1907. (UBC BC XXXVI-17)

were strong anti-Asian feelings at this time: the Chinese head tax had risen in 1903 to $500 per person and all Asians were portrayed in the media as dirty, diseased, uncivilized beings who were incapable of



Workers clearing land along the rail line, c. 1905. (NAC PA-139833)



The first Sikh immigrants to Canada, camping on Hastings Street in Vancouver (in front of Stark's Glasgow House, between Abbott and Carrall Streets), November 1905. The photographer's notes refer to "Hindus in Vancouver" and report that "the temperature was below freezing." (CVA Port P1551, N862)

adapting to Canadian ways. They were a blight on the Canadian landscape. Racism and injustice were a fact of life for all Asians in Canada, but for these men, being apart from their families was especially painful. Hugh Johnston writes: "Constantly in the company of their own countrymen—at work and in their lodging or bunkhouses—Sikhs were isolated by their pattern of life as well as by language, culture, and the attitude of the host population. Family life, with children going to school and contacts with neighbours, would have reduced that isolation, but this was an adult male population since only nine women immigrated between 1904 and 1920."

As British subjects, Sikhs had the right to vote in all elections. This was viewed as posing a threat to the existing government, since it meant that a significant block of votes—there were 5,000 Sikhs—might go to another political party more sensitive to human rights, immigration and fair play. So in 1907, the government of British



Sikhs on the Coal Harbour Bridge, leaving a Sunday afternoon band concert at Stanley Park. Vancouver, c. 1904. (CVA St Pk P157, N217)

> *I do not care what language a man speaks, or what religion he professes. If he is honest and law-abiding, if he will go on that land and make a living for himself and his family, he is a desirable settler for the Dominion of Canada.*
>
> —Clifford Sifton, Minister of the Interior (minister responsible for immigration), 1896–1905.

Columbia passed a bill to disenfranchise all natives of India not born of Anglo-Saxon parents. Sikhs were denied the municipal, the provincial and then the federal right to vote, even though they were British subjects. The implications of these actions were far-reaching. Until 1947, South Asians would remain excluded from the political process in British Columbia and from becoming Canadian citizens. They could not vote for or become school trustees or trustees of improvement districts; neither could they be elected to provincial public office or serve on juries. Although exclusion from the voters' list did not legally restrict Sikhs from public service, this became the rule. Public works contracts specified that they not be employed. The same restriction applied to the sale of Crown timber, and many professions such as law and pharmacy were informally closed to them.

The loss of the vote and its implications probably did not bother the Sikhs, since most were uneducated and unable to take full advantage of



A Sikh man working on the docks in Vancouver, c. 1908. (VPL 2052)

such rights and privileges. But the next move was devastating. Fed by the strong anti-Asian feelings among trade unionists, politicians and the media, the Canadian government adopted a new policy and issued an order-in-council on January 8, 1908 designed to stop all immigration from India. All immigrants seeking entry had to come to Canada by continuous journey and with through-tickets from the country of their birth or nationality or citizenship. At this time, there was no direct passage from India to Canada. An immigrant from India also had to have in his possession $200, while immigrants from Europe needed only $25. They were obliged to undergo medical and sanitary examination upon arrival in Canada, and their landing in Canada was subject to favourable labour conditions prevailing at the time. The harsh effect of this legislation was dramatic: from 1908 to 1920 only 118 immigrants from India entered Canada.

In 1908, there was even an effort to deport all those who remained in Canada to British Honduras in order to effectively rid the country of "Hindoos" in order to "keep Canada white." H. H. Stevens, the



Well-dressed men walking along the street in New Westminster, c. 1908. (VPL 5236)

leader of the Asiatic Exclusion League and a City of Vancouver alderman, said in 1907: "We contend that the destiny of Canada is best left in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race, and are 'unalterably and irrevocably' opposed to any move which threatens in the slightest degree this position. . . . As far as Canada is concerned, it shall remain white, and our doors shall be closed to Hindoos as well as to other Orientals." The federal government paid a delegation to go to British Honduras and investigate employment opportunities, economic conditions and possibilities of settlement for all of British Columbia's Sikhs. This delegation consisted of J. B. Harkin of the Interior Ministry of the federal government, William Hopkinson, a Vancouver immigration official and interpreter, and two local Sikhs, Nagar Singh and

Balwant Singh Atwal was the first priest of the 2nd Avenue gurdwara. This was long before I came, but I heard his story from my dad and other pioneers. He was a very gentle man and well respected in the Sikh community. He was very knowledgeable, a very good man. His son, Hardial Singh Atwal, was born here in 1912 at the temple, the first Canadian-born Sikh. He lives in Duncan now. In 1914, Balwant Singh's wife, Kartar Kaur, got sick here so they all decided to go back to India with their young son. This was about the time of the Komagata Maru incident.

Whenever Sikhs travelled at this time they had trouble because of the fight for freedom and the Ghadr movement. Balwant Singh got stopped along the way and jailed in Singapore. He kept telling the authorities that he was not a revolutionary, but a priest at the Vancouver temple. So the British sent a letter to Vancouver to seek verification from the Khalsa Diwan Society as to his priesthood. For some reason this letter was mislaid or lost and was found some time later by Jagar Singh Johal, the temple secretary. If the letter had been replied to in time he might possibly have been freed. He was jailed for several years and finally tried, convicted and hung in Lahore in 1917. His crime was sedition and political agitation against the British government.

—Mr. Sardara S. Gill

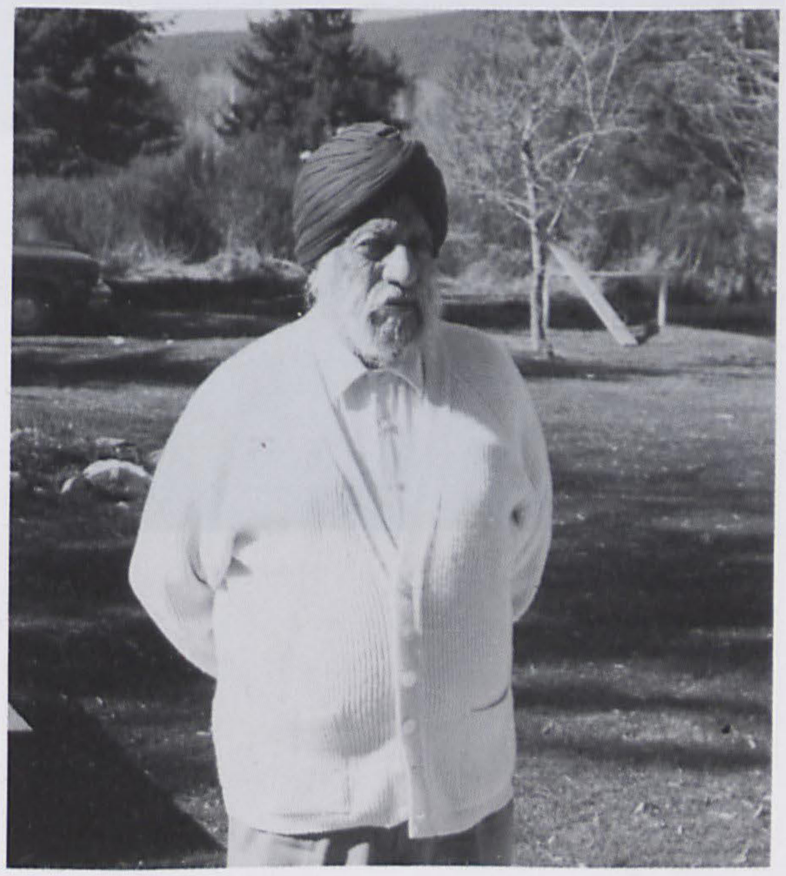


Balwant Singh Atwal (left) with friend.

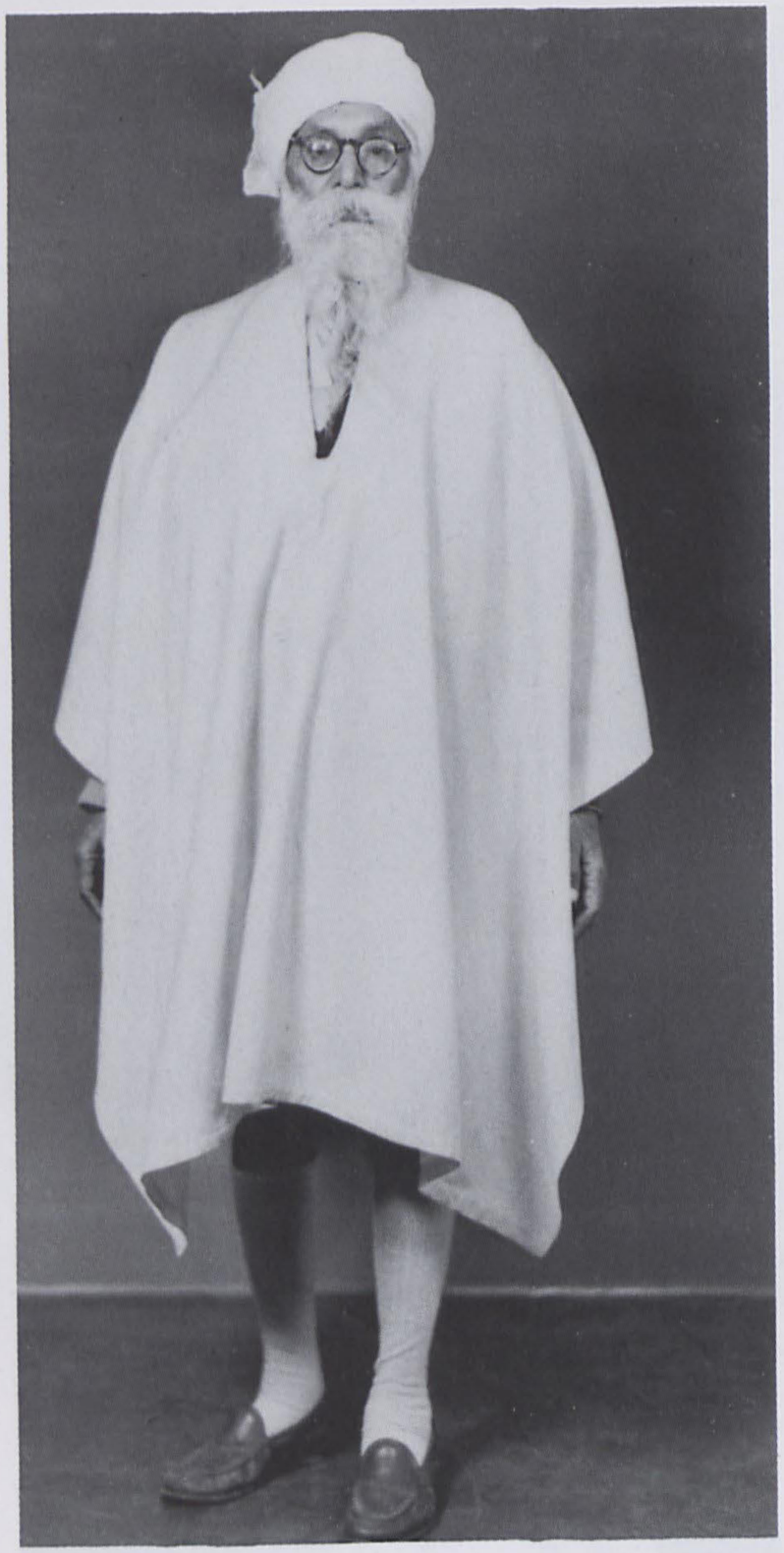
Sham Singh. When the Sikhs returned and reported back to the community about the unsuitability and poor living and economic conditions of British Honduras, the local Sikhs unanimously rejected the proposal and steadfastly declared their intention to stay in Canada. This plan was probably far too extreme ever to have succeeded, but it does give an indication of the intensity of the anti-Asian sentiments of that time, and the stance of all levels of government on the issue.

Another government scheme to get rid of the Sikhs in Canada was more subtle. Whenever a Sikh went back to India to get married or visit his family, he faced difficulties on his return because he could not prove previous residence in Canada. The Canadian immigration department did not provide East Indians with the proper documentation when they left Canada, although they systematically registered outgoing Chinese. The policy was deliberately designed to make return more difficult.

The Sikhs had come here to work and to better themselves, not to fight a continuing battle with the Canadian authorities, but fight they must because it was not in the Sikhs' nature to let injustice go unchallenged. Still, it was an unfamiliar battle. They were used to fighting face to face; here their adversary assumed many forms and disguises.



Hardial Singh Atwal, son of Balwant Singh Atwal, now living in Duncan, BC. He was the first Sikh born in Canada, on August 28, 1912.



Professor Teja Singh, 1956.

This called for a different strategy and a change in tactics. In 1909, the Sikhs in British Columbia called in an educated Sikh, Professor Teja Singh, to lead them in their fight for rights. He had been educated in India as well as in the United States, where he had earned a Master of Arts degree at Harvard. He possessed the knowledge, skills and experience to help the Sikhs in British Columbia, having already established temples (gurdwaras) and Sikh communities in many North American cities.

After meeting with Sikh leaders in Vancouver, Professor Teja Singh saw as his first mission the necessity to change the negative image of the Sikh in the eyes of the Canadian public. The idea of Sikhs as dirty, uncivilized, low-status rabble not worthy of being Canadians had to be eradicated. Sikhs must be seen as totally committed to living in Canada and as model citizens. Professor Singh began by establishing the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company to organize and secure the economic welfare of the Sikh community. The company's headquarters were at the Vancouver Sikh Temple at 1866 West 2nd Avenue. Its intentions were:

1. To establish the Sikhs, Hindus and Mohammedans in British Columbia, Canada and the United States on a firm footing; and gain a status for them as a self-respecting and independent people.

2. To bring the wives and children of as many immigrants as possible and settle them as independent farmers. This with a view to sweep aside one of the most virulent Canadian objections and also to render the lives of immigrants happier and to broaden the horizon and sympathies of the women and children.

3. To get as many share-holders of the company as possible to donate all or at least half of their profits for educational and missionary purposes.

According to the company charter of September 1909 its aims were:

1. To organize Guru Nanak Hostel for East Indian students.
2. To buy land for farming to settle unemployed workers.
3. To invest in mining to get employment for workers.
4. To organize their own Trust Company to look after the banking needs of the workers.
5. To open their own shopping market to import needed goods from India.
6. To organize a Canadian–Indian Supply and Trust company.
7. To organize a company of Canadian home builders.



Market Day, New Westminster, c. 1910. Farmers came from the Fraser Valley each Friday morning to sell their goods on Front Street. (CVA Out 1067, N606)

Professor Teja Singh led deputations to many levels of government, including Ottawa, where he explained to the Immigration Department that he represented over 5,000 East Indian males in British Columbia, who desired to have their wives and children join them. The Sikhs' prime concern was the breakup of their traditional family unit. They pleaded with the authorities to allow their families to join them, but met with no success. As Samuel Raj wrote in 1980: "The dominant society wanted to undo the 'wrong' that had already been done. By keeping the women out, it hoped to purge Canada of the East Indian element within a generation. For 'the comfort and happiness of the generations that are to succeed us,' it was argued, 'we must not permit their women to come in at all'. The exclusion of the women would induce many men to leave Canada and the ones who refused to leave would be prevented from 'defiling the land' with their progeny." (Raj was quoting the Vancouver *Sun* and the Vancouver *Province*, 1913 and 1912 respectively.)



The Hundal family, stranded in Hong Kong, awaiting clearance to come to Canada, 1912. Left to right: Atma, Iqbal, Bishan Kaur (the boys' grandmother), Teja, Jermeja.

Three prominent Sikhs, all directors of the Trust Company, left for India in 1910 promising to return with their families. They were Bhag Singh, Balwant Singh and Hakim Singh Hundal. They left India with their families a year later. When they landed in Hong Kong, the men were allowed to go on to Canada but their families were detained in Hong Kong by the Canadian Immigration Office. Hakim's mother, Bishan Kaur, and his four sons, Atma, Iqbal, Teja and Jermeja—all of Hakim's family, as he was a widower—spent two years living in the Hong Kong Sikh Temple awaiting immigration clearance to land in Canada. All three families eventually arrived in Canada in 1913 after a



Gurdit Singh (in white suit, with binoculars) aboard the Komagata Maru, 1914. He chartered the Japanese vessel to bring Sikh immigrants to Canada, to challenge the unfair immigration laws of the time. (VPL 136)

barrage of appeals to all levels of government. But the Act of Grace that allowed these families to enter Canada was not intended to set a precedent for future immigrants. It was based on compassionate and humanitarian grounds, and the existing continuous journey clause was still very much in effect.

This set the scene for the infamous *Komagata Maru* incident in 1914. Since immigrants were required to come to Canada via continuous passage, but there was no direct passage available from India to Canada at this time, an enterprising Sikh businessman named Gurdit



Hopeful passengers aboard the Komagata Maru, *awaiting immigration clearance, summer 1914. (VPL 6232)*

Singh chartered a Japanese freighter, the *Komagata Maru*, to challenge Canadian immigration laws, which discriminated against Indian immigrants.

Picking up passengers along the way in Hong Kong, Shanghai and Yokohama, Gurdit Singh arrived in Vancouver with 376 Sikhs on May 23, 1914. The ship also contained a cargo of coal loaded in Japan which was to be sold here in Canada. The immigration department would not let the ship dock, so it was anchored in the harbour. It was not long before the Khalsa Diwan Society got involved in the dispute.



A Canadian immigration official with members of the shore committee, which negotiated for the clearance of those aboard the Komagata Maru. Summer 1914. (CVA 7-127)

This society, an organization founded in 1907 to manage the affairs of the Vancouver gurdwara and later the other temples, represented the Sikhs in Canada, acting on their behalf in matters that involved any agency outside the community. Officials of the Society and Sikhs from the local temple appealed to the government's sense of justice, asking that the immigrants be allowed to land. The Vancouver Sikh community even promised to pay the required $200 per person. But the authorities would not relent. Only twenty-two Sikhs, all former residents of Canada, were allowed to land.

The legal wrangling went on for two months, at considerable expense to the Sikh community. The shore committee spent over $70,000 on food, supplies, charter costs and all other expenses for the immigrants during their internment aboard ship. Local people were not allowed near the *Komagata Maru*, and the Canadian Navy prevented any communication between shore and ship. The entire episode occurred in the heat of summer, and the conditions were at times intolerable. Tensions mounted on all sides when the police tried to board the ship and were stopped by the Sikhs, who pelted them with coal. Finally the Canadian government ordered the Navy cruiser *Rainbow* to blow up the ship if it did not leave Canada.

On July 23, 1914, the *Komagata Maru* was escorted out of Canadian waters by the *Rainbow* and left for India with its despondent passengers. During the return journey, Canada became involved in World War One, and months later when the *Komagata Maru* arrived in Calcutta, all aboard were charged with attempting to overthrow the British government. Troops opened fire on the unarmed men. Over fifty Sikhs died

East Indian Immigrants to Canada 1904–1971

1904	45	1938	14
1905	387	1939	11
1906	2,124	1940	6
1907	2,623	1941	3
1908	6	1942	0
1909	10	1943	0
1910	5	1944	0
1911	3	1945	1
1912	5	1946	7
1913	88	1947	130
1914	0	1948	63
1915	1	1949	52
1916	0	1950	93
1917	0	1951	81
1918	0	1952	173
1919	0	1953	170
1920	10	1954	175
1921	13	1955	245
1922	21	1956	330
1923	40	1957	324
1924	46	1958	451
1925	62	1959	716
1926	62	1960	673
1927	56	1961	744
1928	52	1962	529
1929	58	1963	737
1930	80	1964	1,154
1931	47	1965	2,241
1932	62	1966	2,233
1933	33	1967	3,966
1934	33	1968	3,229
1935	20	1969	5,395
1936	13	1970	5,670
1937	14	1971	5,313

from *The Sikhs of Vancouver*, James G. Chadney



Mewa Singh, a Sikh martyr, 1914.

Opposite: Vancouver Sikh Temple, 1866 West 2nd Avenue, c. 1917. There are no women in the picture, as immigration policies at the time placed restrictions on wives and children coming over from India. The three young boys in the foreground are probably the Hundal boys, who were permitted entry in 1913 after a concerted lobbying effort by the Sikh community.

in the ensuing battle, the rest were imprisoned and tortured, many were hanged.

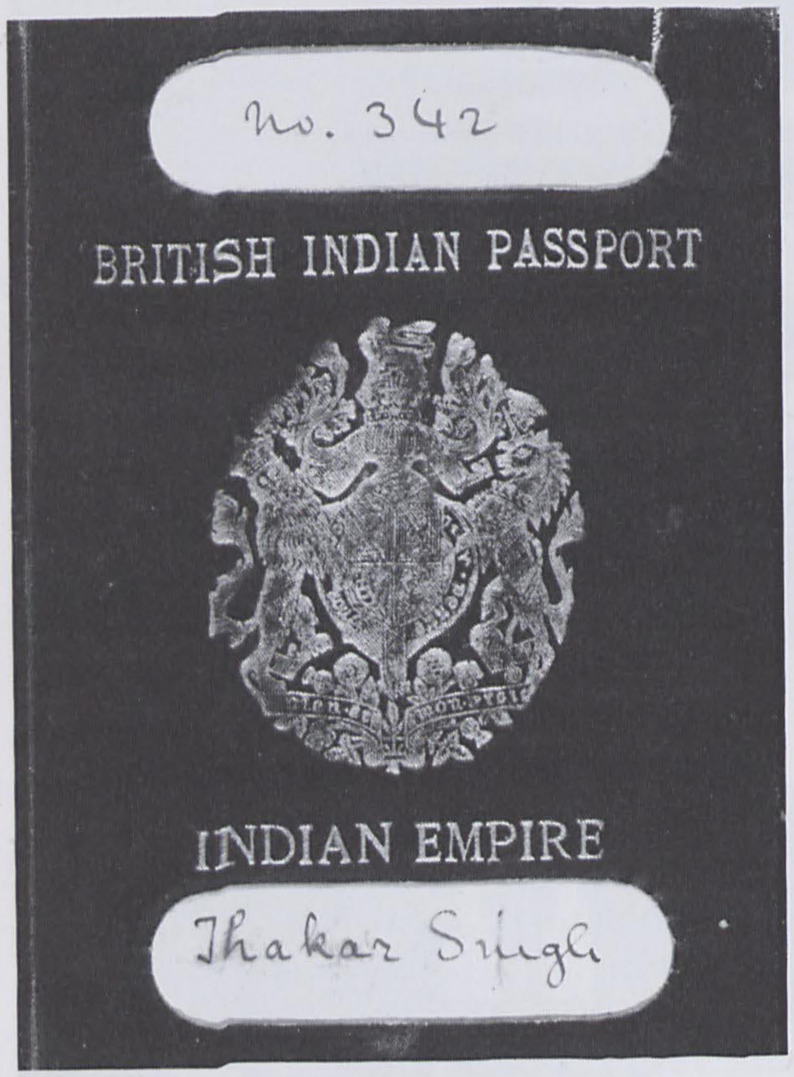
There were serious repercussions in Canada as well. The entire Sikh community in British Columbia was devastated by the departure of the *Komagata Maru*. Morale was at an all-time low as most Sikhs lost faith in Canada and its institutions. Their economic resources were depleted and a split in the Vancouver Sikh community developed. Many Sikhs died in the communal in-fighting. A corrupt immigration official, William Hopkinson, was shot to death and a Sikh named Mewa Singh was hanged for his murder.

In the aftermath, many Sikhs were so upset by the recent events and the attitude of the Canadian government that they went back to India to help overthrow British rule. They felt that their situation in Canada would not improve until they had their independence in India. Many others went to the United States in search of better social and economic conditions. By 1918, the Sikh population in British Columbia had dropped to a low of about 700 people. These were the survivors who weathered the storm and remained here when the future looked bleakest. The numerous challenges to the immigration bar, the infamous *Komagata Maru* incident, the many legal manoeuvrings and the injustices they faced on a daily basis had left them sad and disillusioned. So they banded together and became stronger as a community, with the temple becoming a substitute for the family life that they were all lacking. With community rebuilding, group solidarity and religious devotion, they would win the fight against oppression. The temple was their headquarters; every strategy and ploy was planned there. The Khalsa Diwan Society was the collective agency that coordinated and spearheaded all activity, now having temples in Vancouver, Victoria, New Westminster, Fraser Mills, Golden, Abbotsford and Paldi.

The collective efforts of British Columbia's Sikh communities eventually paid off when, in 1919, the immigration restrictions on bringing out wives and children under eighteen years old were lifted. Family reunification would be a very slow process—it was not until 1920 that women and children started coming out from India—but the Sikhs finally had a sense of hope for their future in Canada.


SIKH TEMPLE.

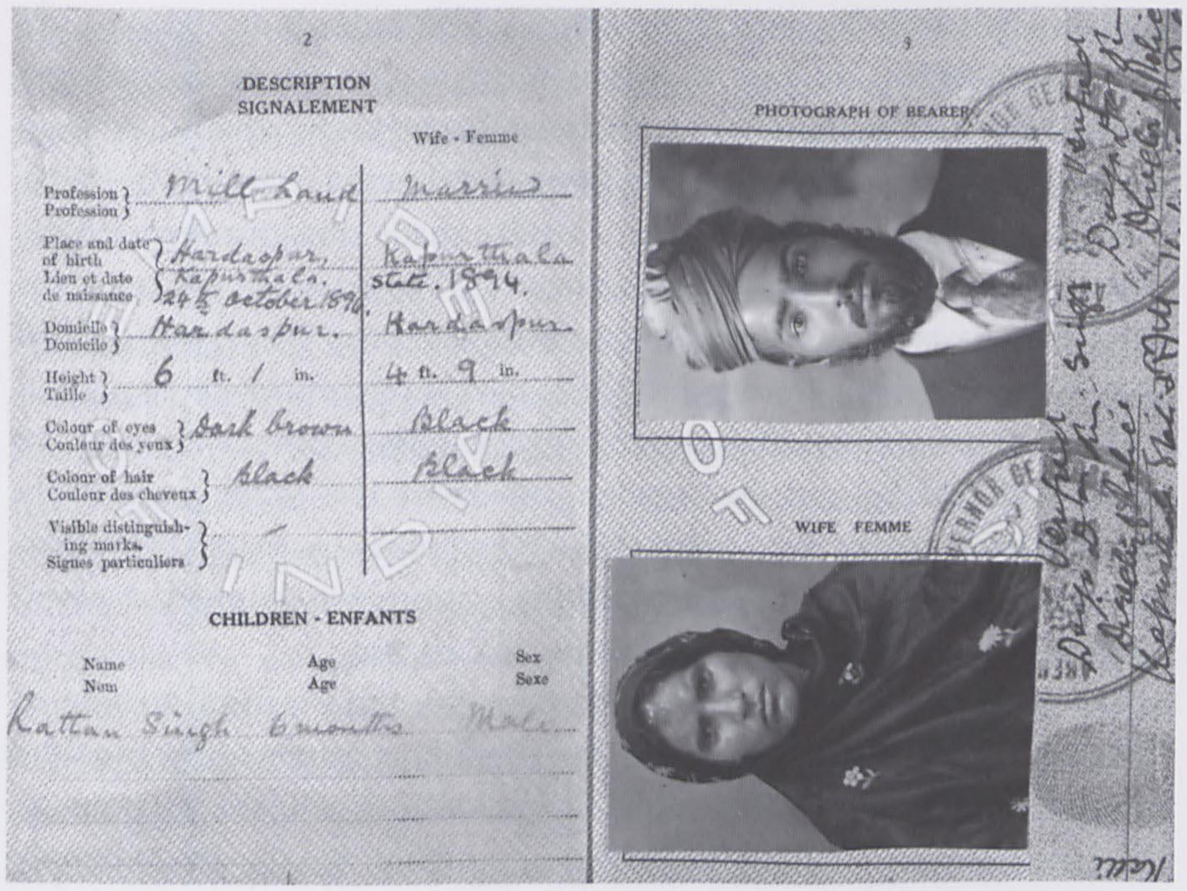
2 The Journey Over



THE SIKHS who left India for Canada in the 1920s and 1930s came from the northern province of Punjab, from rural farming villages. They were unskilled and uneducated, and they worked on family-owned farms. At the time they left, family fortunes had risen to an all-time high. There was plenty to eat and living conditions were very good. This was because the Sikhs who had come to Canada earlier had sent a good portion of their earnings back to India for their families to acquire more land and to upgrade their housing.

But all of India was under British colonial rule and domination, so Indians' rights and freedoms were limited. According to Mr. Gurdave S. Billan, who emigrated in 1932, "The British were the boss, they ran things, ran everything, even in the villages they picked the head guy." Many Sikhs actively opposed this domination. Mr. Kuldeep S. Bains describes a political gathering in his village: "There was a big movement going on for independence, everybody was following Gandhi, Nehru and some were even following Subhas Chandra Bose, he was a little more radical in the Congress party at that time. I remember in 1937 we had a conference for about a week. There must have been about a hundred thousand people coming from all over, the nearby places. The final speaker was Nehru. Some of the radicals and the Congress people were all together. Day and night the conference was going for seven days and Nehru came for about half a day there. This was in Mahalpur, it's a big village, you couldn't accommodate those people in any hall, this was in the open air, in the summer time." Even though there were concerted efforts for independence, relief was not in sight. Canada represented a chance for a brighter social and economic future.

For most of these people all they had ever known was the land that had been handed down to them for generations and on which they had lived and worked since they were born. This was their only world; this was the only geography they knew. The only picture they had of



Canada was the faces of the loved ones from whom they had been apart for so long. They could not know what to expect, except that the Canadian Sikhs needed them and had fought long and hard in order that they might join them. They knew that they would encounter an arduous journey but there would be a place to stay and support for them on their arrival in Canada. What further helped sustain them was the realization that they were going to Canada with far more than their predecessors had when they went during 1904–1908.

Few of these emigrants made the journey on their own. They were typically accompanied by their sponsor, a villager or family friend who had gone back to India for the purpose of ensuring their safety along the way. Some Canadian Sikhs had made the journey several times and had become seasoned travellers who knew how to deal with the many problems associated with the voyage. They provided not only the social and emotional support needed for the forty-five- to sixty-day trip but the economic support as well. Many financed the total cost of the trip, $200–$300 per person, in Canadian funds.

The journey to Canada was made in four stages: the train from the village to Calcutta, the boat trip from Calcutta to Hong Kong, the stopover in Hong Kong and the final boat trip from Hong Kong to Canada. Travel began with a prayer at the village temple for a safe journey. Then the emigrants would take the train from the village to

> *The old-timers knew what they were doing. They usually made a point of coming back to Canada around March. They left India in January or February so that they would get into Canada about March or April. The journey took about two months to get here. By that time the good weather was in and the forests were opening up and the jobs were available. They always had that plan. When they went to India they always left around October, so they'd be there for the cooler weather. They'd contact each other so they could go together on a certain ship at a certain time. They had it all figured out.*
>
> —Mr. Karm S. Manak

Calcutta. This train journey, from 1000–1500 miles long, taking anywhere from two to six days, was itself a traumatic experience for these people, who had seldom seen unfamiliar faces except when they went to a neighbouring village for a wedding or religious festival. Mr. Dedar S. Sihota, who in 1936 at the age of twelve made this journey with his father and brother, tells what happened: "We travelled by train for about two days. It was from Jullunder to Calcutta. We travelled third class, as most Indians travelled in those days. I remember getting up to sleep at night, up on the upper luggage compartment, where we would just curl up and go to sleep, otherwise the trains were really packed. It was a very interesting trip for us, for many years afterwards, I could remember the names of all the stations we stopped at along the way because it was something new and exciting."

The train ended its journey at the Howrah train station outside of Calcutta. Here officials from the nearby Sikh temple often met the weary travellers. Mrs. Gurdial K. Oppal, who made the journey in 1934, remembers: "These people were so caring, the gurdwara people would be standing there waiting at the station, waiting to take us to the nearby temple, so we had a safe place to stay. They did not take any money, they would take us to the temple just to help us. Lots of our people who were going to and fro, travellers, would be met by two or



Mr. Dedar Singh Sihota, October 12, 1990.



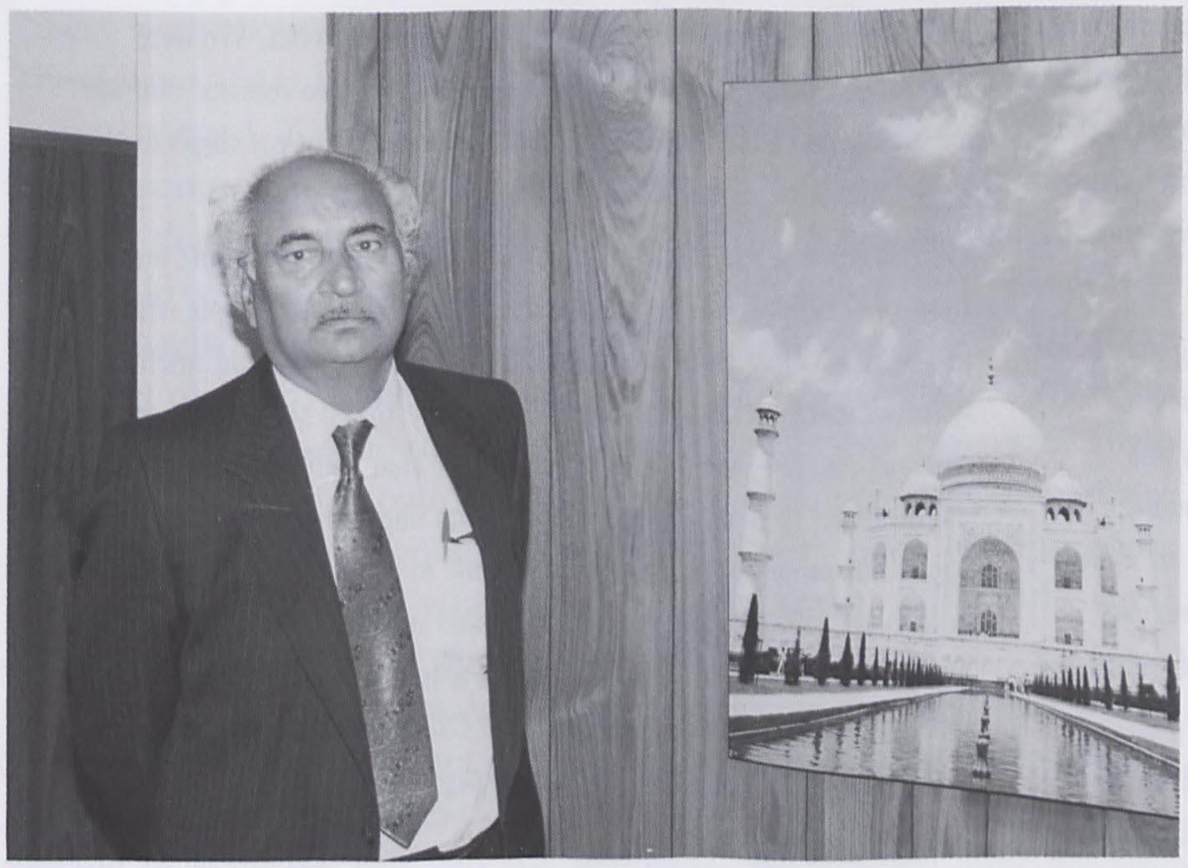
Mrs. Gurdial Kaur Oppal, December 27, 1989.

three people, who would insist that they go with them. The temple there was very nice, clean and comfortable, there were rooms set aside for us to stay. This is where people would stay, eat and rest. We did not eat at the temple, we ate out but stayed three days there. It took us that long to get a boat."

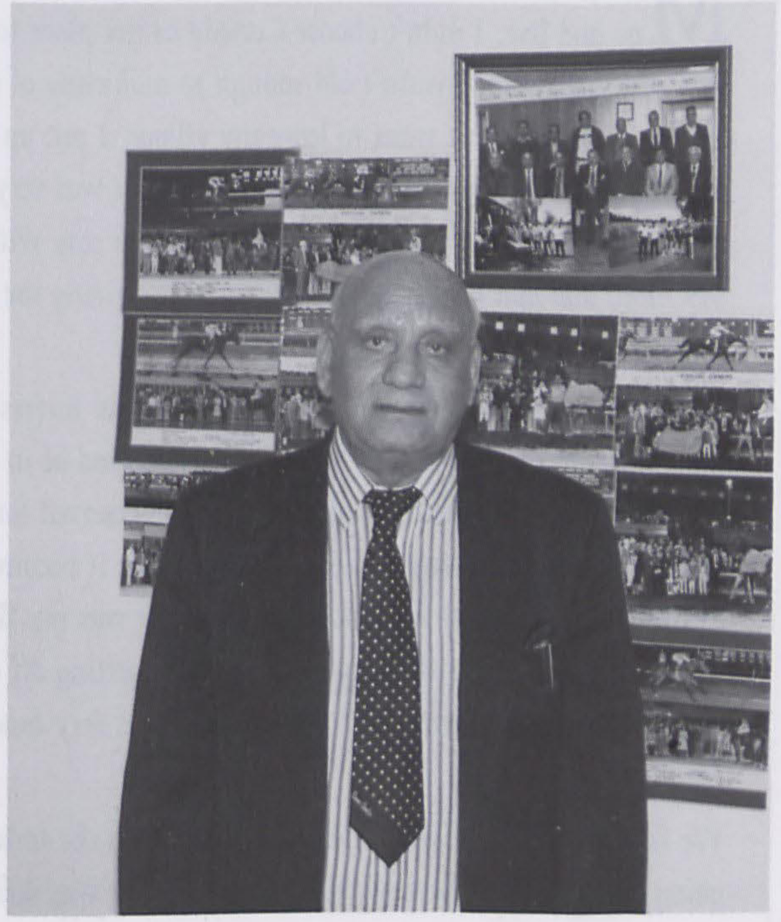
There was often a long wait in Calcutta for the boat to Hong Kong, because there was no established schedule for passengers between the two ports. Several shipping companies served this area: the BA line, the Dollar line, the Jardine line and the Mackenzie line. Mr. Kuldeep Bains remembers: "We stayed in a place in Calcutta for about two weeks. The ship was a freighter, every day we had to check in with the brokers as to when the ship would sail after loading. We had no idea otherwise. We stayed there for about two weeks. There were no passenger ships at all, even if there had been, I don't think anybody could have afforded it. I remember I went to see the dock, there was someone shipping their car, a white guy. You know how kids are sort of inquisitive? I started looking around the car, feeling the fancy car. In India, in the area we come from, there were buses all right but not fancy cars. Only the rich people had that in the cities, not in the villages. So I touched the car and this white guy he slapped me for touching the car! I'll never forget that."

It wasn't scary for me seeing a ship for the first time, but I know it was for some other people from our village who came with my dad in 1906. Two of them went back to the village from Calcutta when they saw the ocean and the ship in the harbour. They got frightened. It didn't look very safe. They thought that it might sink in the water and that would be the end of them. They saw the ship moving around a bit in the water with the tide, they said we're not going to go on that! So my dad came to Canada and the other two went back to the village.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak



Mr. Kuldeep Singh Bains, October 16, 1990.



Mr. Gurdave Singh Billan, January 13, 1991.

As freight was their main concern, passenger services and accommodations were poor on these shipping lines. The journey to Hong Kong could take anywhere from fifteen to twenty days depending on the number and length of the stopovers. The fare was about $20–$30 Canadian. Living conditions were substandard since these ships also carried livestock throughout Asia. "They gave you the bottom grade, the basement," Gurdave Billan says. "That's the only place they had." Kuldeep Bains describes the conditions: "Before we left, we had to buy some groceries, portable beds, a stove and some coal. We prepared our own meal on the deck, we slept on the deck. There were no staterooms at all. There must have been over a hundred Sikhs staying on the deck. All night long and day long we stayed on the deck. If it rained, we would put a little tent up there. We made our own meals there. There was a small dispensary, I think there was a doctor on board too, he gave me some pills. I got sick, I had never seen the ocean in my whole life."

Mr. Dedar Sihota and his brother and father "happened to be coming across at the time of the monsoon rains and the typhoon weather.

Most people will tell you that they chose Canada as their place to go and live. I didn't choose Canada as my place to live. Being only nine years old, I wasn't old enough to make any of these choices anyways. But I didn't want to leave my village. I put up the biggest fuss that anybody has ever heard in Halwara. It was very early in the morning and I didn't want to leave, I wanted to stay with my uncle. My mom and dad bribed me in various ways, giving me sweets and that sort of thing.

The train trip from Ludhiana to Calcutta was an interesting one, I had never seen anything like that before. We were kind of in a box, a compartment, a roomette or whatever, it was reserved for us and private. It wasn't private for long, after a while it became public because everybody just forced themselves in. It was my first time sleeping on the bunk and travelling by train, then getting off at various places to buy some sweets and so on. And I was very fond of sweets and fruit.

We finally came to Calcutta after three days on the train. I recall going down to the wharf with my father and he was dickering with this Japanese sea captain. He was throwing rupees on the cement floor. I don't know exactly why, I suppose to make sure that they were sound, the real thing. Then we got on this narrow boat. We were travelling steerage, as all our people travelled, for two reasons: one was for money and the other was for food. We would not eat ship's food, we wanted our roti and dahl and all that sort of stuff.

We had some interesting stories aboard ship. There were some people from the Philippines I think, maybe some other place, people who were non-whites. They loved spicy food and of course they could smell it when we were cooking it on deck. Every day they'd show up at eating time, of course—our people were the type that could not eat without offering food to them. But this became an ongoing problem. So one day one of our people came up with a scheme to get rid of these guys. We didn't have enough food for ourselves, this was stuff we had bought and brought on ourselves. So he just took a whole bunch of red chillies and put them in the stuff he gave to them. Of course they were going up and down the walls. They got the message.

—Mr. Ranjit S. Hall

We hit very, very heavy seas, but that didn't keep me away from the deck very often. This would have been September, October, because we got here in December and we spent some time in Hong Kong. It wasn't a very large ship, we were down in the hold of the ship. And we of course had all our bedding, all our food and all our cooking things. You had to carry all that with you.

"In the heavy, heavy seas I can remember the people on one side of the deck just sliding across the flat deck to the other side as the ship rolled. And then when it reversed the roll everybody shifted to the other side of the deck. All your belongings, all your utensils, yourself, all kind of slid from one side to the other. Ever since then I have never seen such heavy seas. The waves must have been 20 to 30 feet high and the ship wasn't that large anyway. As the ship dove into the hollow all you could see all around was water. And when it got to the top all you could see was the sky, you couldn't see the water at all."

Mrs. Rattan Kaur Thauli describes an amusing incident when she first boarded the ship in Calcutta in 1923 and had her first real contact with people of other races. When she saw two Oriental ladies in the ship's washroom, "they both started screaming when they saw us, they were scared, we must have looked strange to them but they looked equally strange to us."

Mr. Sardara S. Gill, who made the trip in 1925, remembers that "there were about thirty to forty Sikhs altogether, five or six ladies too. There were about twenty Canadian Sikhs and about twenty of us newcomers aboard. The women and children were all newcomers. On the deck, because it was hot we made shelter in the form of a platform to provide shade. Under this we set our cots. There were lots of Chinese, maybe three hundred to four hundred, I don't know from where they came, maybe Calcutta. Their ladies were with them. Underneath there was a lot of cargo, some sheep and animals. There was a bad smell but we did not go down there. We had brought our groceries from Calcutta and did our own cooking on the deck on small coal stoves. The men did all the cooking, all the old-timers knew how to cook. They had been cooking while they were in Canada. I didn't do any, I did not know how to, I'd always had it all done for me."

There were several stops along the way where the freighters would load and unload their cargo, at times taking two to three days to do so. Kuldeep Bains remembers some of these stopovers: "We came to Penang in Malaysia, this was the first port. We stopped there for two days. Right on the boat the money-changer came to exchange for

Sometimes the boat was completely covered with walls of water. We thought we would never arrive at our destination [laughs]. One day I cried because I slipped on the stairs, they were wet and I hurt my leg. Then Hookma Singh and Jagir Tiwana, two old-timers, told me to stay downstairs and not to go out on deck. I would get nervous and think about the village and get lonesome. It wasn't the hurt leg as much as being homesick that made me cry.

The old-timers, who had made this journey several times before, comforted us and said that everything would be fine. They said that this was a big ship, in the old days they had travelled on smaller, poorer ships and got through okay. There were four of them with us and they'd seen all this before.

—Mr. Manga S. Jagpal



The Hong Kong gurdwara (Sikh temple), c. 1915. All Sikhs who travelled from India to Canada at this time had to stop over in Hong Kong. Many of them lived there for months or even years, awaiting clearance to go on to Canada. Note the uniformed army and police officers in this photograph.

Malaysian money. Then we came to Singapore. We stayed two or three days, this was the first time we got off the boat. We had a meal there and went back, two days after the ship sailed. Some of the people got off here. People were working there, there was quite a settlement of Indian people. At that time there were policemen and guards in big buildings. Every shop had a guard there, a Sikh person. They were in the police force too in Singapore."

Mr. Harnam Singh describes stopping in Rangoon, Burma when the passengers had to take all their possessions onto shore and spread them out on the ground to have them steam-cleaned and sprayed with a disinfectant. This was a precaution the Burmese government took against disease and sickness that might be brought into their country. Someone back in the village had warned Mr. Singh not to take a thick quilt on the journey because it would be ruined by the steam and moisture. He was glad he had heeded this advice. He just took a blanket and sheet for his bedroll; these would dry easily.

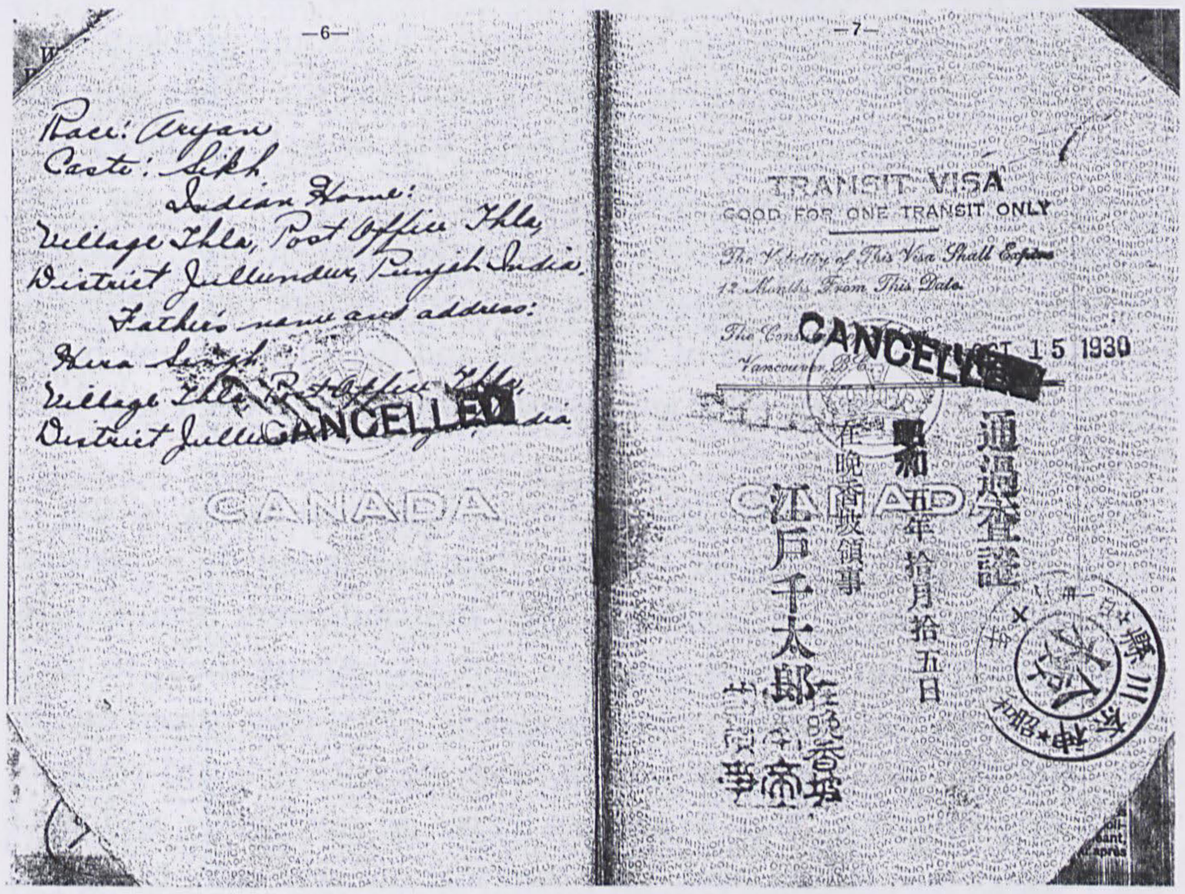
Mrs. Gurdial K. Oppal liked these stopovers because she enjoyed touring these strange and exotic cities. "When we knew that the boat was about to dock, we would all get dressed up, and get in line to go on shore. We toured the whole city, we only went back on board when the boat was going to leave. We did the same at every port, first came Rangoon, then Penang and Singapore and finally Hong Kong."

Hong Kong was a vital stop for all emigrants to Canada for it was here they received their clearance to proceed. There was no Canadian Immigration Office in India, so all immigration matters were handled here. This included the medical examination, documentation and interviewing. It was for this reason that a sizable Sikh population and a gurdwara had been established. Kuldeep Bains explains: "They have a Sikh temple and they have designated a Chinese man and his wife to welcome newcomers. He had proper credentials from the temple. The ship would dock on the Kowloon side, and as soon as the ship docks, he would go on board and introduce himself in Punjabi. You leave your luggage with him and come across the channel with the other people. Your luggage will automatically be transferred to the temple. The Canadian Sikhs had raised money for some rooms with beds on the lower floor of the temple for the exclusive use of travellers going between India and Canada. They had already sent a huge cooking

We stayed at the gurdwara in Hong Kong, it was a beautiful place, everything first class. Everyone stayed there going to and fro. We had tea every morning and lots to eat during the day. The accommodations were excellent. Three or four men shared a clean and spacious room. They gave us a key to lock our room if we went out sightseeing. We could come and go as we pleased. There were no restrictions. If we wanted to eat the food that was there, that was fine, or we could make our own food according to our personal tastes.

Every Sunday the military people, the police and watchmen would come and join us at the temple and there would be considerable action and excitement. They would have tea, cookies and biscuits for everyone in the morning as well as the regular langar. It was great. When we left we gave donations of five, ten dollars or whatever we could afford.

—Mr. Lachman S. Thandi





Mr. Harnam Singh, February 22, 1992.

The Hong Kong Sikh temple as it looks today. The temple has changed very little in appearance since the pioneer Sikhs stayed there in the early years of the century.



stove for cooking food as well. You could cook twenty to twenty-five rotis at a time, it was always busy, especially in a place like Hong Kong, people are travelling through transit. Nobody stayed in hotels in those days. I stayed about two months here, I had some problem with my passport and it took a long time to clear this up. When you left you made a contribution to the gurdwara, $10 or $15, whatever you could afford. I could even speak a bit of Chinese and do my own shopping. Fortunately, I received my clearance just in time, I caught the boat and arrived in Canada just two days before my eighteenth birthday. I came on the 9th of September and the 11th was my birthday. If I had been delayed for any reason, I would have been sent back to India."

Mrs. Gurdial Kaur Oppal tells of two Sikh women having to stay in Hong Kong for over a year because they had failed their medical examinations due to eye problems. Their husbands went from Canada to help them gain medical clearance and accompany them to their new home, at considerable personal expense. "First they passed me for my medical," Mrs. Oppal says, "but once we got on board ready to leave, they failed me. They would not let me go any further, and all of our luggage was on the boat. They said that my eyes were not good.

So my husband said that his time would run out for being out of Canada too long. He could not re-enter if he stayed out for over a year. They knew all this of course, so we paid $10 to the ship's doctor and some Chinese money to the Chinese official. So they let us go and I kept putting medicine in my eyes. We were afraid all the way that we would get caught and be sent back, but we made it over without any further problems."

Dedar Sihota describes another immigration delay: "We stayed at the Sikh temple for fifteen to twenty days while arrangements were made to go on to Vancouver. We had some difficulty with Canadian Immigration. Although my dad had been here since 1907, and had travelled back and forth numerous times, maybe five or six times, there was some problem with documentation. The immigration people in Canada were saying that his permit to return to Canada had run out. The time had expired. We managed to get the passage booked in time to arrive in Victoria prior to this date. There was some question as to whether the ship would get here on time. In those days they were trying everything they could to exclude our people from entering, so any little technicality or anything like that was used to keep us out."

The gurdwara in Hong Kong was a refuge, a safe haven for Sikhs travelling through Asia. They could be with their own people in a land where the customs, language and laws were unfamiliar. The gurdwara provided not only food and accommodation but trust, security and fellowship. There were temple officials whose sole function was to expedite and ensure safe travel through the port for all Sikhs. They knew how to handle the multitude of problems that inevitably arose. They helped with immigration and financial matters, health and medical concerns and assisted in booking passage for the final leg of the journey.

At this time the Canadian Pacific Railway operated an Empress Passenger Line, which most travellers going from Hong Kong to Canada took. It cost $100–$200 in Canadian funds depending on the type of accommodation. "There were four CPR boats that travelled this route to Canada," explains Sardara Gill, who travelled on the *Empress of Asia* in 1925. "The *Empress of Asia*, the *Empress of Japan*, the *Empress of Canada* and the *Empress of Russia*. Every fifteen days one was leaving or arriving in Hong Kong or Vancouver. I think we paid about $100 Canadian. Our first stop was Japan, Tokyo and Nagasaki, then on to Honolulu. The journey was very rough leaving Japan, I could not eat much, I got

It was fun for me to stay at the Hong Kong gurdwara. Everybody stayed there, coming or going. While they waited for their ship, there was accommodation, roti, langar for them all the time. There were quite a few Indians living in Hong Kong at that time. Most of them were watchmen or policemen. Of course the British had an army station there too. My dad had some friends who were in the army and they'd invite us over to their place to visit. In the temple, every Sunday, there was a gathering of maybe seventy to eighty people who were either visitors-in-transit or residents of Hong Kong.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak



Canadian Pacific Empress Line advertisement for the Empress of Asia, c. 1930. (Collection of Dr. Wally Chung)

sick. From Honolulu on it was better. Then we landed in Victoria and on to Vancouver."

Accommodations and services improved on this part of the journey since now the Sikhs were travelling on passenger ships rather than on freighters. At extra cost, they could get better rooms and their food prepared and eaten in the dining room. Dedar Sihota remembers leaving Hong Kong on the *Empress of Canada*. "We had better accommodations, the compartments were small. We were in the lower berths, maybe fifteen to twenty people in a room. The food was served, we

didn't have to prepare our own food. The Sikhs all stayed together and even the arrangements to feed us were of that type. We never had the occasion to sit in the dining room with the Europeans. It was the Asiatic people together, we might sit with the Chinese. The Chinese in the same dining room would be off by themselves and the people from India would be eating in another section of the dining room by themselves, segregated.

"The food on that particular ship, of course, was Canadian. I was not used to eating meat or eggs and it felt very strange. When the food was brought I found very little that I could actually eat, potatoes, rice and vegetables. Occasionally, I would take an egg, but it was not in my religion to eat that and I found it rather difficult to deal with that.

"I do remember going up on the deck, as the ship was travelling, watching the flying fish and watching the other fish swimming by the boat. That journey took about a month."

The Empress of Canada *in Burrard Inlet, Vancouver, 1927. (Stuart Thomson photo, CVA 99-1618)*

Official government certificate of registration for one of the first Sikh women to come to Canada. It is signed by Malcolm Reid, an immigration agent appointed in 1912 through the patronage of H. H. Stevens, a Conservative MP.

862-H.

CERTIFICATE OF REGISTRATION

Department of Immigration and Colonization, Canada

The bearer Mustt Santi wife of ~~x~~ Indar Singh hereby declares as follows :—

1. That she was born at ~~Mukundpur~~ Makundpur, Village, Hoshiarpur District Punjab, India. Country ;

2. That she entered Canada at the port of Victoria, B.C., ex SS. "Empress of Russia" on May 16th 1921 ;

3. ~~That she has resided in Canada between the following dates :—~~

From 1921 to Date resided at Victoria, B.C.

From to resided at

From to resided at

From to resided at

4. That since her original entry to Canada she has resided in other countries as hereunder stated :—

From ----- to ----- resided at -----

From to resided at

From to resided at

5. That she intends returning to Canada on or before the 12th day of November 1926

The above named will be permitted to re-enter Canada on or before the 12th day of November 1926, on presentation of this Registration Certificate, providing the statements made above are correct and on satisfying the Immigration Officer-in-charge that she is the person to whom the Certificate was issued and providing further that ~~this Registration Certificate shall~~ correspond in all particulars with the duplicate, which shall be kept on file in the office of the Dominion Immigration Agent, Victoria, B.C.

In the event of mis-statement or misrepresentation being made in the above declaration this Certificate of Registration shall immediately become invalid.

Nationality British East Indian. Age 47

Height 5'

Personal description Scar on right foot.

Route and date of departure "Empress of Asia"

November 12th, 1925

Witness:

Mustt Santi

Her Mark.

Signature of Registrant.



Issued at Victoria, B.C., this 10th day November 1925, by

Dominion Immigration Agent.

Route and date of return

Signature on return.

Identified on return by

Immigration Officer.

Passport No. 3333 Issued at Simla, India Date August 21st 1920

Renewed at Ottawa valid until Aug. 21/1930

Because of dietary restrictions many Sikhs chose to do their own cooking, an option that was available when there were sufficient numbers of them on board. Mr. Naranjan S. Sangha, who travelled with ten of his villagers and a dozen other Sikhs in 1929, describes how they cooked and ate aboard the *Empress of Russia*: "We had third class tickets and food was all included. The crew was very generous. The ship captain said that if we did not like the European-style food, we could cook our own food. They would supply us with the groceries, but we'd have to do our own cooking. So we did that, we made our own dahl and roti. They would give us the flour, butter, onions, everything we needed, with no restrictions. They gave us a stove to use and the pots, pans and utensils. My dad [Nand Singh] did most of the cooking. We did not even have to wash the pots and pans or dirty dishes, they had the washer there for that."

The Sikhs almost always travelled together, but at times this was not possible and some had to make the boat trip alone. Kuldeep Bains describes his ordeal: "When I got on the *Empress of Canada*, I was the only Indian guy. There was a big room, up and down, just like the army, lots of bunks. There must have been thirty-five to forty beds in there, all occupied except one, which I took. They were all Filipinos.

"In Hong Kong, they used to tell stories about the Filipinos, how they were bad and vicious. I did not get a good impression about the people from the Philippines. I lay there but I could not sleep all night. You have this fear instilled in you. This was the first time I came in contact with foreigners, living with them day and night. You see them on the street, it's a different story. I was scared like hell.

"Gradually, you would chum around with them, actually they were very nice to me. They were to get off in Honolulu, and the night before getting there, nobody slept in the ship. We were partying, talking and everything. They all got off. I saw them getting off the gangplank and then the ship sailed. I came back to my empty room. I never cried when I left home, or in Calcutta, or anywhere else along the way. This is the first time I cried, when I was left alone in that big room there. I was all by myself, I was really scared."

Mrs. Bhani K. Johal came over in 1927 with her son Bunta, who was not quite three years old at the time. "My baby boy and I had a private room, where all the white people stayed. We weren't with the other Asians. It didn't cost us that much more. We ate Canadian food, no problem. On the first day I missed breakfast. Someone knocked on our door early in the morning, but I did not answer, thinking that



Mrs. Bhani Kaur Johal, March 20, 1990.

they had done it by mistake. The steward went to the other Sikhs and told Ralla Singh that the lady did not come for her breakfast. So he came to me and explained the procedure for coming to the dining room for the meals."

Finally, after being in transit for several months, the Sikhs saw Canada for the first time. Mr. Manga S. Jagpal describes his initial impressions of his new homeland, as seen from the ship: "When our boat was still out in the harbour and we approached the city of Victoria, I thought what kind of a place is this? I didn't see any farms or crops, just forest, like a jungle. Where do they get their food? What am I going to do in such a poor country? All I saw were trees, I couldn't see any big buildings yet, just tiny little shacks. Can this be Canada?"



Mr. Manga Singh Jagpal (left) and Mr. Nand Singh Langrhoa, March 24, 1994.

(THIRD CLASS)

IMMIGRATION IDENTIFICATION CARD

THIS CARD MUST BE SHOWN TO THE EXAMINING OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Name of passenger HARI SINGH

Name of ship EMPRESS OF JAPAN

Name appears on Return. sheet ... *line* ...

Medical Examination Stamp

Medical Examination Stamp

CANADIAN IMMIGRATION
DEC 4 1934
VANCOUVER, B.C.
ADMITTED
Returned Canadian

(See back)

CANADIAN PACIFIC STEAMSHIPS, LIMITED

R.M.S. ... Voyage No.

No. 6142 NOV 14 1934 193 .

The Bearer Hari Singh

having surrendered a Passage Ticket from HONGKONG to VANCOUVER is entitled to One Third Class Passage in this ship, and for this voyage only. The holder of this card will be required to present it at the gangway both upon leaving and coming on board at intermediate ports, and to surrender it to the proper officers at destination.

HK 330—1000/6/33 ..... *Purser*

(THIRD CLASS)

IMMIGRATION IDENTIFICATION CARD

THIS CARD MUST BE SHOWN TO THE EXAMINING OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Name of passenger GURDIAL KOUR

Name of ship EMPRESS OF JAPAN

Name appears on Return. sheet ... *line* ...

Medical Examination Stamp

Medical Examination Stamp

CANADIAN IMMIGRATION
DEC 4 1934
VANCOUVER, B.C.
ADMITTED
Immigrant

(See back)

Immigration identification cards of Hari Singh Oppal and Gurdial Kaur Oppal. They are the parents of the Hon. Wallace Oppal, a BC Supreme Court Justice.

3 Getting Established

When I first landed in Vancouver in 1925, the immigration officer said, "You are nineteen years old, so you are over by one year, you'll have to go back to India." I said, "No, I am eighteen." He said, "No, you have to go into quarantine, we'll take you over there." So he took me into an office. My father was not there to receive me, he could not get leave from his job in the mill. So he sent one of his friends who could speak some English, his name was Ganda Singh.

Then three immigration officers examined my passport and they all said I was too old to enter Canada. I said, "No it is not right, I'm eighteen. I won't be nineteen for two more months." I said today it is May 18, 1925, and I won't have my nineteenth birthday until August. But they all disagreed with me until I counted out the years using my fingers from 1907 when I was born until today to prove to them that I was only eighteen. Ganda Singh said, "You outsmarted them, my goodness, how did you do that?" I answered, "You think I don't even know my own age!" That's how I got to stay in Canada.

—Mr. Sardara S. Gill

THIS WAS Canada, the end of the Sikhs' long journey. It was a new land and it appeared strange at first. "When we arrived in Victoria," Mr. Darshan S. Sangha remembers, "the workers began to unload the cargo from the front of the ship. They were unloading heavy things. It was the month of March and the workers wore navy blue coveralls made of denim and thick wool jackets. They were struggling with the heavy loads and their clothes were filthy from their labouring. This was the first time in my life that I had seen white people working like this; everywhere I had been in India and along the way, coloured people did all the work. This was very strange to me, I couldn't believe it. I asked my uncle who these people were. He said they are goras [white people], they are Canadians."

The newcomers would land and join their loved ones in either Victoria or Vancouver, both of which had Sikh communities in the early days. The Vancouver Sikh Temple on West 2nd Avenue was built in 1908 by Mrs. Dhan Kaur Johal's husband, Chanan, and the other pioneers: "Our elders built this temple by carrying rocks in baskets on their heads to clear the land. They moved huge rocks by hand, going to great pains to level and prepare the land for construction. There was a lot of bush and forest that had to be cleared first, big huge trees cut and cleared away by hand. It was a lot of work but they built this temple with pride so that we would have a place of our own here." The Victoria Temple was built soon after in 1912. A small Sikh temple was established in Paldi, on Vancouver Island, in 1918, by the Mayo Lumber Company. On the mainland, in Abbotsford and New Westminster, two temples were built in 1912 by the Sikh community. At Fraser Mills, there was a company-built temple. Temples were also built in Nanaimo and Golden.

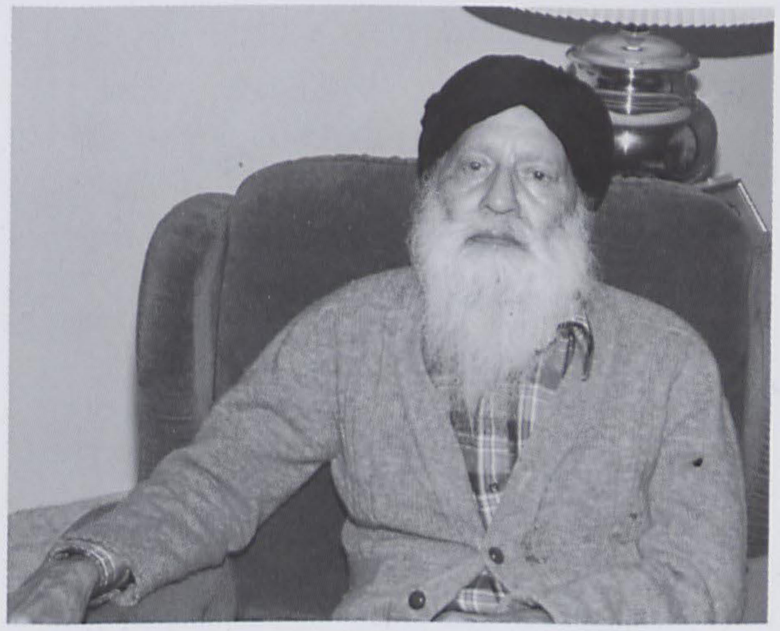
The total Sikh population in British Columbia in the early 1920s was just over 1,000, but there was an imbalance in the community, as Mr. Gurbachan S. Johl explains. "When I came in 1921, there were no



Sikhs clearing land in Vancouver, c. 1908. (CVA 312-21)

boys in this area [Vancouver]. Two boys lived in Abbotsford, Pritam Singh and Nand Singh [Langrhoa]. Then when four of us boys landed together the Canadian Sikhs were so happy. They kept saying, 'Our boys, our boys.' They couldn't do enough for us. I felt so much love for these people, they treated us so well. Whenever I went to the 2nd Avenue gurdwara, they treated me so special. The first time I stood in line to eat roti in the langar [eating hall], one old-timer took me by the arm and took me in to the centre of the hall in front of everybody. He said to me, 'My son, we want you to serve us roti so that all of us can get to see and meet you. You'll get to know us and we'll get to know you.' When I went around serving the roti they made me feel so special. They were such loving people.

"There were only three or four women in this area then. Four ladies came on the boat with me, so that made a total of eight in 1921. Then



Mr. Gurbachan S. Johl, April 10, 1991.

The BC Sikh community sending a Jatha—a group of ten Sikh martyrs—off to the Punjab, to protest practices of the British government. They are wearing garlands and traditional dress. Vancouver Sikh Temple, July 13, 1924.



I remember Amar Chand had a store on 2nd Avenue, a little grocery store. He had a brother, Hookam Chand, he came later on. He was married and had a wife named Malavi, a very good-looking fair lady. There were not even a dozen ladies here in 1923, then they started to come in 1924 when my mother came. When I came in 1921 there were only three women in Vancouver: Dalip Kaur from Samari, Bhagwan Kaur from Raipurdabba. And there was the Jagirdar's lady, the Hundal brothers' grandmother living by UBC.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak


SIKH TEMPLE
VANCOUVER B.C.

they came in ones and twos. The men always did all the cooking and work in the gurdwara kitchen then. In 1924 one old-timer named Sham Singh got up in the temple in front of the congregation and made a speech. He had noticed that there were fifteen to sixteen ladies present that day. He said that it was with great difficulty that the men had brought the ladies over to Canada to join them. They had saved money through great sacrifice and spent it on their behalf, pleaded with the authorities and finally succeeded. So now, could the ladies please help the men in the kitchen prepare the food. Everyone laughed. And from that day on the ladies began working in the kitchen."

The infusion of the new Sikhs was a long-awaited and welcome event. British Columbia's Sikh community saw the arrival of their women and children as their future. The age and gender imbalance would soon be corrected.

The temple played an important role in helping the newcomers. On landing, it was usually their first stop. Here they could seek spiritual strength and salvation. They would thank God for their safe journey, offer a donation, eat a meal and check in with the temple officials. Here they could connect with relatives and friends who would find them housing and work. Accommodations were also available until such time as the newcomers could establish themselves.



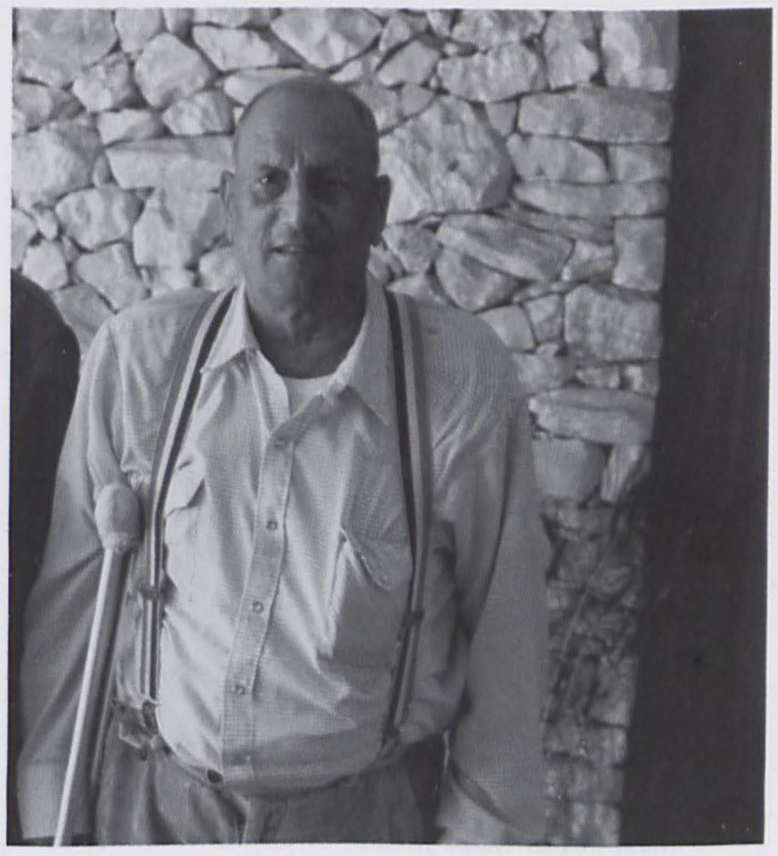
Mrs. Paritam Kaur Sangha, October 1, 1990.

Soon after landing, the routine of "Canadianization" usually began, with the women going out with their husbands to shop for new clothes. It was the custom then to dress Western style in public, saving their Indian dress for inside the home. This was strictly upheld in those days. "On the day that I arrived in 1932," Mrs. Paritam K. Sangha remembers, "my husband took me to the shop to get new clothes right away. I pleaded with him that I hadn't had anything to eat and that I was starving, but he did not listen. First, we got the new dresses then later we got something to eat. It was the rule then to dress like the white ladies and keep our hair covered with a scarf at all times."

All of the women who remember those days agree that the situation was not like today when Indian women can be seen in ethnic dress in public. This was unheard of in the old days. Some women even adopted western dress en route. "When we stopped in Hong Kong I bought some dresses," says Mrs. Pritam K. Johl. "Everybody said that we couldn't land unless we dressed properly. The pioneers insisted that we dress like the other Canadian people. They would not let anyone dress differently, we had to show that we could fit in and be just like the white people."

In keeping with this philosophy of conforming to the Canadian ways, most young men got their hair cut and bought new clothes. Almost all of them came wearing turbans and had never cut their hair because of their strict religious upbringing. Devout Sikhs never cut their hair, so this decision was very difficult for some men. But there was strong pressure from outside to conform: from family, friends and the dominant society. For Mr. Mawa S. Mangat it was very traumatic: "My dad made me cut my hair. Right after I got off the ship he took me to the Japanese barber at Fraser Mills. I cried all the way through it, I couldn't sleep for a couple of nights. I'll never forget that." Mr. Kuldeep S. Bains had a similar experience: "My two brothers were working at Sooke Lake in the sawmill. They came to see me the day after I landed in Victoria. First thing in the morning, Bunt said, 'Let's go to town.' We went to town to a Japanese barber. They made me sit down and get a haircut. He said, 'I don't want you to wear this turban around here.' He then took me to buy some new clothes, thicker clothes for winter."

White barbers would not cut the hair of Asian people, so Sikhs had to go to Japanese or Chinese barbers. This practice persisted well into the 1940s. "I went to the Canadian barber at one point," Mr. Dedar



Mr. Mawa Singh Mangat, July 4, 1991.

Before the war there was a Japanese barber shop here in Duncan. That was the only place that would cut Asiatics' hair, as well as the local Indians' hair. There were only two white barber shops here at that time and they would never cut our hair, so we went to the Japanese barber. During the war the Japanese were moved, so there was no one who would cut our hair. My own experience, I went to one of the white barbers, I went in and he said, "I'm busy now," but he was just dusting the place. So I realized he wouldn't cut my hair. I knew one guy who owned a half share of one of the barber shops and his partner wanted to leave. So I bought half interest in the barber shop [laughs], so that way we got our family's and our people's hair cut there. That solved the barber shop problem [laughs].

—Mr. Karm S. Manak

There was an East Indian grocery store in the 1600 block of 2nd Avenue. We could get different dahls, butter, vegetables, flour and whatever we needed. We all bought from them. We would phone in our order and the nice fellow would deliver it to our homes. It was not just for our people. Whites and Chinese shopped there as well, the people who lived close by. But mostly our people who lived on 2nd Avenue shopped there.

—Mrs. Dhan Kaur Johal

Sihota remembers. "I sat and they kept taking other people and ignoring me. I said I want a haircut. He said, 'Sorry, we don't cut your hair.' They would not cut the hair of any Chinese, Japanese or East Indian. This was in 1943."

The Sikhs made these concessions in order to fit in with other Canadians. They would always stand out because of their skin colour, but at least they tried to fit in with the dominant culture. Most Sikhs felt that these were simply surface changes and that they had not changed in any fundamental way. "Canadianization" was the price they had to pay for coming to this country, an offering given to make life in Canada a little easier.

Now the newcomers were prepared to get on with their lives. All of them had a place to go since their sponsors, the original pioneers, had gained a foothold here by establishing small communities around the temples and places of work. Many immigrants went to live in their own homes or rented homes; some moved into company-owned bunkhouses.

The largest community was in Vancouver, centred around the Sikh Temple at 1866 West 2nd Avenue in Kitsilano. It had its roots in the 1904–1908 time period when most of the first Sikh immigrants found employment in the many lumber mills located in the False Creek area. Some men lived in their own homes; others lived communally in rented homes. Brothers Chanan, Bawa and Nand Singh Johl, who came to Canada in 1905 and 1906, were among the first to establish themselves in this area. After working in the lumber mills for many years, they started a lumber cartage business in 1918 at Cedar Cove Sawmill on West 6th Avenue. Nand Singh Johl's son Karnail describes his family's experiences: "My family bought our first house in 1911, at 1785 West 2nd Avenue. It was about half a block from the temple. They paid $275 at that time. Then they bought another house across the street, it was 1768 West 2nd Avenue, in 1914. They used to tell us they paid around $475 for that one. Wages at that time when they first came out were about 10 cents an hour. Then later they said wages went down when the war was on, then they were getting 50 cents a day. They bought the house on those wages, so that was a lot of money at that time.

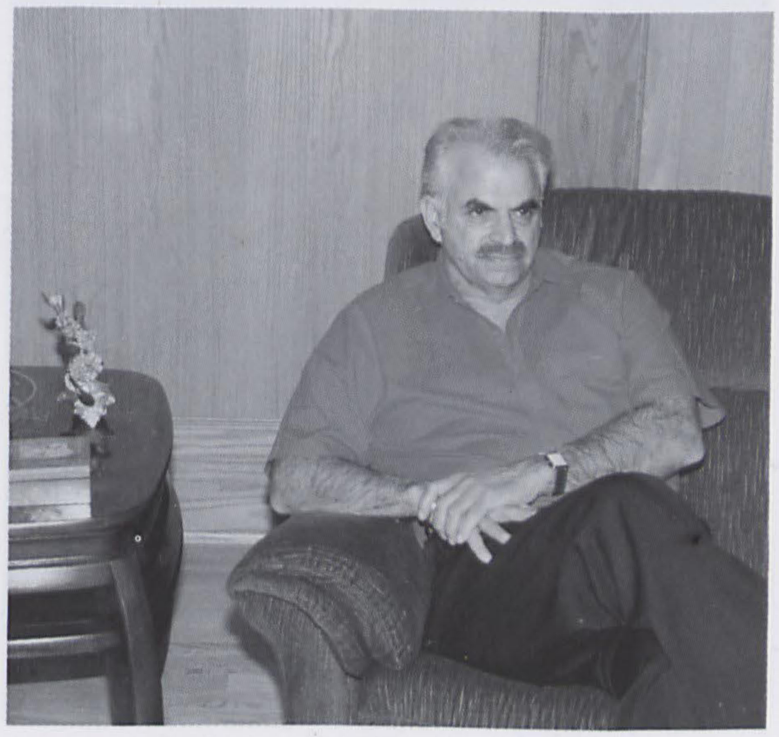
"They got their first contract at the Cedar Cove Sawmill. This was for hauling wood. They had their own trucks and their own horses and buggies. They acquired the trucks in 1918, but first they hauled the wood with the horse and buggy. They were the only ones, of our



The Johl family lumber business at Cedar Cove Sawmills on False Creek, Vancouver, 1924. Brothers Chanan, Bawa and Nand Singh Johl are shown with their wives and children.

people, who had a big contract with the sawmills. They used to get the wood from the sawmill and go from house to house to sell it for firewood because everybody used to burn wood. Then lots of our people got into the wood business after us.

"About twelve of our people worked in this particular mill in the early days. But they also worked in Hemby Sawmills and Giroday Sawmills which were both close by, and Alberta Sawmills which was right there too. Quite a few of them used to work at Robertson and Hackett. These mills were around the Granville Bridge. Giroday and Hemby were on one side. Robertson and Hackett was on the other side of the bridge, this was where most of our people worked. Quite a few of them worked at Alberta Sawmills which was just a little further down from Cedar Cove. They used to have a cookhouse and bunkhouse there for our people. They used to also have a cookhouse/bunkhouse at Robertson and Hackett, there were about thirty



Mr. Karnail Singh Johl, March 8, 1990.



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to forty people living there. There were actually small mills all along there but these were the big ones."

Mr. Giani Harnam Singh, the priest at the 2nd Avenue temple, was one of the original pioneers who came to Canada in 1906. He arrived from India educated in English and Sanskrit, enabling him to read and write letters for his Sikh neighbours on 2nd Avenue. This kept him in touch with events in the villages and in Canada and he lectured at the temple about politics, religion and social affairs. He owned several properties in the temple area which he rented to fellow Sikhs. At age forty-seven, he returned to India to marry and in 1929 returned with his wife, Jagdish Kaur Singh. "When we arrived here everything was already set for us," she remembers. "My husband owned three houses and several wood trucks and horses and buggies for hauling wood. He had parked the trucks and left everything in the hands of Chanan and Nand Singh Johl. They looked after all the houses and rents, they paid all the taxes and bills while my husband was away. We lived at 1847 West 2nd Avenue and the other houses were on 3rd Avenue, rented to our people. I was lucky, everything was all set, no problem. Next to the house, on half an acre there was a large wood storage lot and a large barn where the trucks and horses and buggies were stored. Our business was all set on my arrival, I was too lucky.

"Many of our people at this time sold wood. They picked up wood

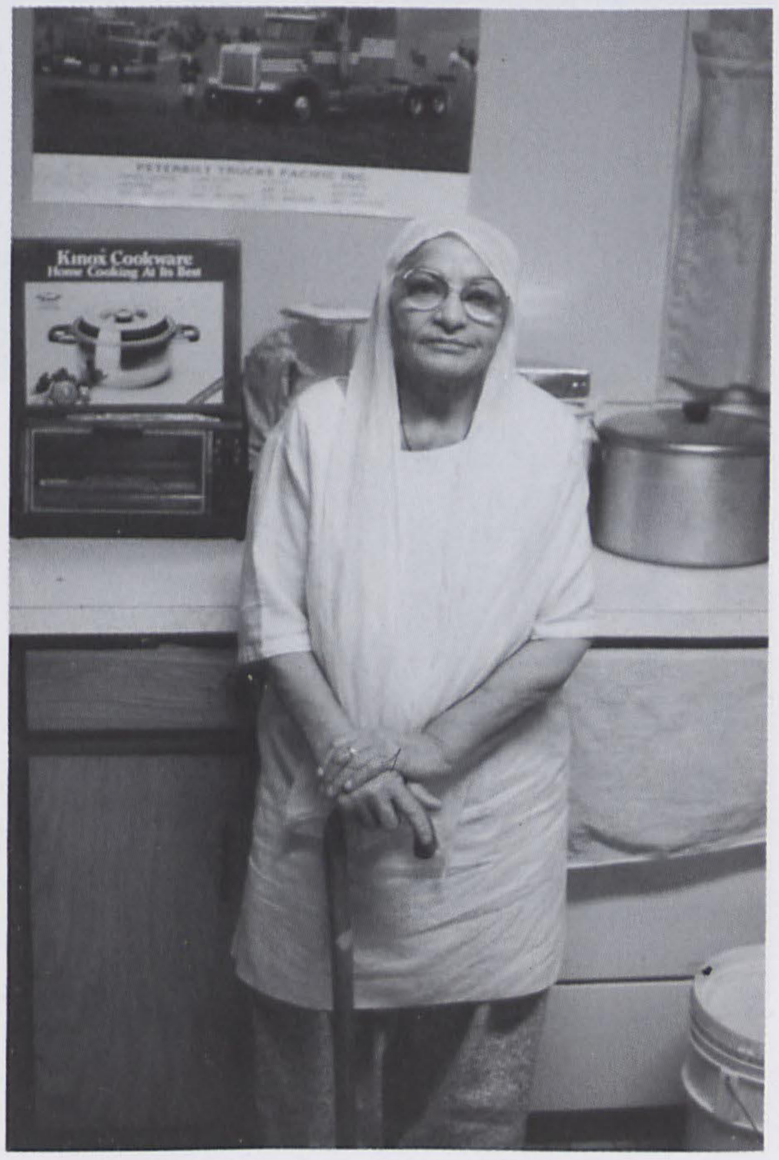
from the mills and went door to door and sold it for a profit. Most still had horses and buggies and some, if they could afford it, had trucks. Trucks were very expensive. We had several trucks, made of metal, even the wheels were metal. There were no doors though. He kept two drivers, Saran Singh and Tarlochan Singh. They made about four to five dollars a day. They were very good people, all of our people were good, very trustworthy. Everybody got along well then. They helped one another and respected each other, no fighting at all.

"I spent most of my time at the temple praying, cleaning and cooking in the kitchen. There were about twenty families in the temple area and the temple was the centre. Evenings and weekends were spent at the temple. We all socialized here, there was nowhere else to go. We rarely mixed with white people, unless they came to the house to order wood."

Before the arrival of the women and children, the men who lived on 2nd Avenue spent most of their time working and saving their money. The hours were long, the work was hard physical labour and they had lived a frugal life. But with the arrival of their families there was cause for joy and celebration. Many of the pioneers spent some of their hard-earned money for the betterment of their families, leaving rental and communal situations and buying homes, furniture and household goods for their wives and children. Two pioneers even bought cars. Prior to this time, such extravagance had been considered foolish, but now things had changed; they had a reason to celebrate. Their families had finally joined them.

There was so much closeness and caring in the 2nd Avenue community. It was like a large family, according to Mrs. Bhani Johal, whose extended family lived near the temple. "We lived in a three-story house with my in-laws and husband's cousin and his family. Whoever came to town stayed with us as well, it seemed that there was always someone staying with us, but that was the way it was in those days. Nobody minded, first they would come see us and then go wherever else they had to go. Everybody on 2nd Avenue was good, when the white men passed by they would tip their hats to us. There was a lot of respect then."

Not far from the temple, a few miles away, another group of Sikhs lived and worked at the Alberta Sawmills on 6th Avenue. During the 1930s, there was always one bunkhouse for the Sikhs, so there must have been about twenty to twenty-five men working there during this time. They lived in a bunkhouse and ate in a communal cookhouse



Mrs. Jagdish Kaur Singh, December 27, 1990.

My mom, Atri, came to Canada in 1924. I remember I went to Vancouver to pick her up. We were living in Queensborough, in New Westminster. My dad was working in Timberland Sawmill and I was going to school. Our neighbour Pritam Singh Langrhoa brought his wife over about the same time. And he brought her to New Westminster on a tram and from there he brought her by taxi to the south side where we all lived. We thought that was kind of special. When I went to get my mom I splurged. I got a taxi right from Vancouver, all the way to New Westminster! Some of the older people were laughing, they were joking, "Pritam brought his wife from New Westminster by taxi and Karm brought his mom all the way from Vancouver in a taxi." It cost 10 or 12 dollars, that was a lot of money. My dad was only making about 32 cents an hour working hard in the mill.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak



Mr. Karm Singh Manak, March 25, 1994.

provided by the company for its workers. This was a very common form of room and board for millworkers in the early days. Mr. Sardara S. Gill describes the Alberta Sawmills' bunkhouse as a long wooden structure divided into ten or twelve small rooms with two beds in each room. A long hall divided the bunkhouse, and the rooms were on either side of this hall. A small sitting area with a wood-burning stove—the only source of heat—was at one end of it. There was an outhouse a short distance away. There might be several of these bunkhouses at any one mill, depending on the size of the workforce, and each racial group lived in a separate bunkhouse.

The cookhouse was a separate building with a central kitchen where supplies were stored and food was prepared. Cookhouses were managed and run by elder Sikhs or men who were not otherwise employed. They would prepare the food for the workers and in turn be supported by the men who earned wages. All the men ate together and shared the costs. At some stage in his life, virtually every Sikh man of that generation lived in a bunkhouse and ate in a cookhouse. Darshan Sangha describes the management process: "It was established in the bunkhouses how many people could live in each room, usually two per room. They would each keep their rooms clean and tidy. The cook would be compensated for the time that he did not work by his group giving him the money he would have earned at his job. The workers would choose the cookhouse management themselves. They would put forward some names and then these people would form the management. Quite often older men would be the cooks. At Sooke Lake, Gurbachan Singh was the cook. He was there for a long time, he was a very wise man, very well respected. If there was an argument, he would calmly settle it. He showed compassion towards all men. He played a bigger role than a cook, he played a unifying role. He was there to guide and support the others.

"We all really cared and looked after one another. Of course we played jokes on each other, but only in good humour, never to hurt the other person's feelings. We would all share any newspaper that we would get. Sometimes we would even get a newspaper from India. One of the good things about our people at that time was that if someone had just come from India, we would help that person find a job. We would go from one mill to the next asking, and until the job was found, we would pitch in and pay their room and board. If someone was visiting from another area even then, we would not let them pay. If a fellow villager from India came, they would ask if he owed



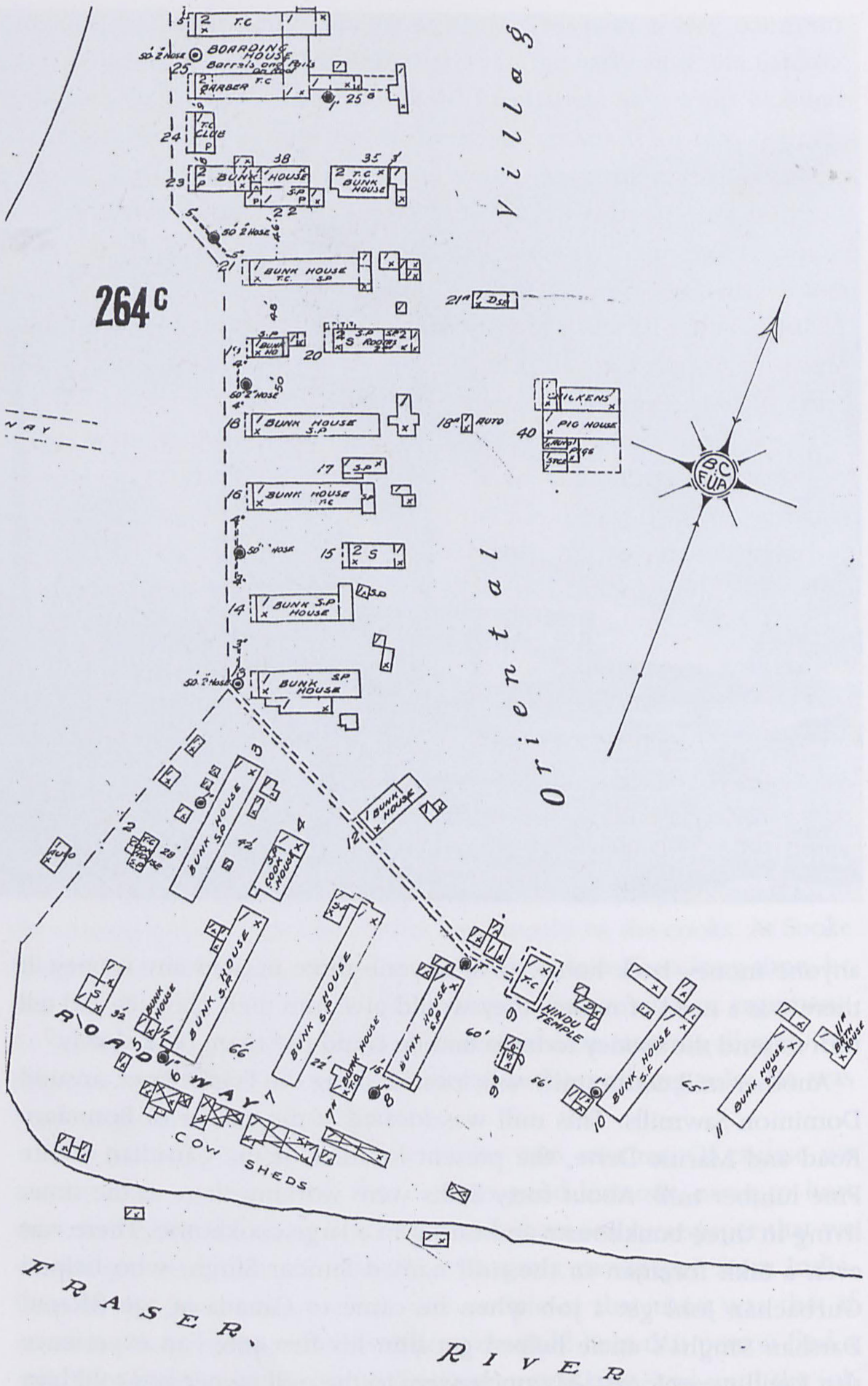
Typical millsite in the early 1900s, a working sawmill with piles of lumber in the background.

anyone money back home, or if anyone there needed any money. If there was a need of money they would give him their cheques and tell him to send the money to India and he could pay them back slowly."

Another mill community was located along the Fraser River, around Dominion Sawmills. This mill was located at the corner of Boundary Road and Marine Drive, the present location of the Canadian White Pine lumber mill. About forty Sikhs were working there at the time, living in three bunkhouses and eating in a large cookhouse. There was even a Sikh foreman in the mill named Sundar Singh, who helped Gurbachan Johl get a job when he came to Canada at age fifteen. Darshan Sangha's uncle helped get him his first job, "an experience that I will never forget. My uncle went to the mill owner and told him that his nephew had just arrived from India and that he needed a job. The owner kept stalling, but my uncle kept asking him over and over. Some twenty days passed in this way and finally my uncle said that I

Our people can work. They are not afraid of working hard. We'll work hard and not get tired like other people. And we work steady, we won't ever take a day off or come in late. We won't sit at home waiting for a job, we'll work at a lower-paying job until a better job comes along. If we can't get a job in town then we'll go out of town and work up north or on the Island.

—Mr. Manga S. Jagpal



Site plan of Fraser Mills, 1922. The diagram shows the "Oriental Village," referring to the Sikhs' bunkhouses and "Hindu Temple" (Sikh gurdwara). In the mid-1920s, more than 200 Sikh men lived and worked at Fraser Mills.

would start work on Monday. The day I started working, my uncle got laid off since it was his job that I had got. The owner had brought in a young horse to replace an old horse. My uncle worked in the yard managing the lumber and that was the job I was given. He had been making 30 cents an hour, and I got only 25 cents. Not only did he bring in younger blood but he saved himself 5 cents an hour. My uncle and I were both shocked, he then went off to Kelowna to work on the farms."

The largest mill community was located at Fraser Mills in New Westminster, close to Maillardville. The Sikhs called it "Millside." According to Mawa Mangat, who came to Canada in 1925, "There were only two families here then, the rest were all single men." The company even built a temple for its workers in about 1908. Sardara Gill, who came to join his father to live and work here in 1925, says that when he arrived, "there were between 200 and 300 Sikhs. They had four or five cookhouses and different sized bunkhouses, some had thirty, forty or fifty people living in them. That's how they lived then. We had our own temple, a small one built by the mill at their own expense. It was a very good company, but for wages there was a 5-cent difference between us and white people. We got 25 cents an hour and the whites got 30 cents for the same job.

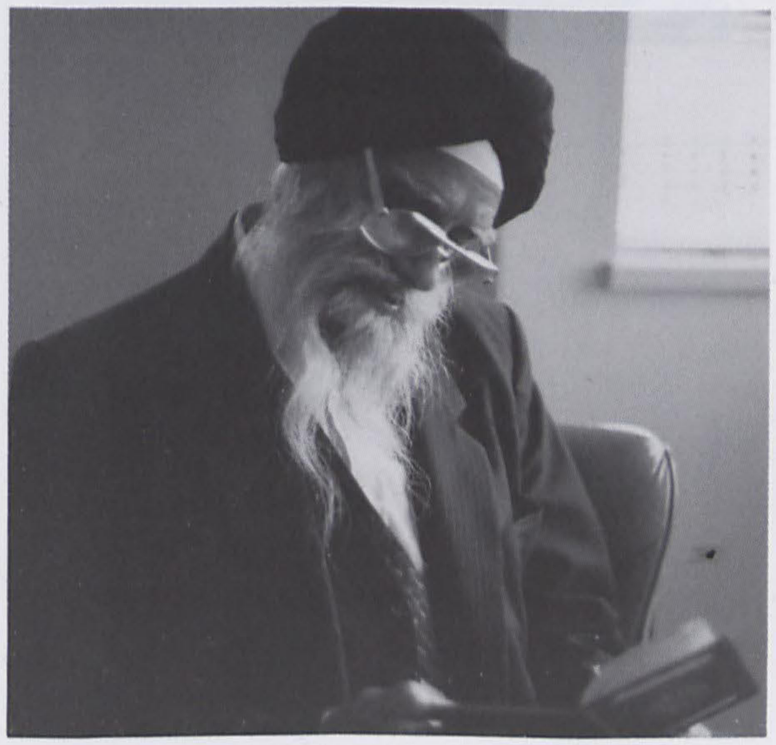
"My dad was pulling lumber on the greenchain, it was hard work. We'd start at 8 o'clock and finish at 5 o'clock. Sometimes I did five hours overtime, thirteen hours a day. Most Saturdays and Sundays I worked as well, so seven days a week. We did not get paid overtime in those days. We got a little extra for working on Sunday, we'd work eight hours and they'd pay us for ten hours.

"My first job was on the resaw. When they first took me to my job they introduced me to a Sikh foreman named Ranj. He said that if he showed me how to do a job could I do it? I said that I could. So I watched the other men do their jobs on the resaw and that's how I learned how to do it. He was a good man, several times I would leave and go elsewhere for better pay, he always took me back. I would go wherever there was better pay. There was better money on Vancouver Island, so I would go work at Mayo or Kapoor. They paid 35 cents an hour. We all did that, we'd move to better paying jobs."

Small groups of Sikhs lived around several other small lumber mills and lumber yards in different parts of the Lower Mainland. Clusters of four or five households were built on Main Street, Marine Drive and Fraser Street in Vancouver, on Mitchell Island in Richmond, and

Our people had a very strong social network. The people who were working always made a point of helping those who weren't. By word of mouth they'd say, "I think Fraser Mills needs a man, or Timberland needs a man." They moved to wherever they could find a job. Sometimes they'd contact one another even from India. They'd write: "I am coming on such and such boat at such and such time, keep an eye on a job for me." You could find a job sooner or later, always in a month or two. It was always hard work because that's what our people are noted for: they were hefty and strong. And they fitted right into the lumber business which was all manual work.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak



Mr. Sardara Singh Gill, February 27, 1991.



Sikh millworker in a lumberyard, c. 1908. (*VPL 14264*)

Dollarton in North Vancouver. Some Sikhs also lived in the Cedar Cottage area because of its central location for the wood truck business and the availability of lots for wood storage.

From the beginning, the Sikhs were respected as being very hard workers, reliable and trustworthy. This is why the mills would hire them. As time went on, Sikhs sought better wages and better working and living conditions. Because of their strong communication network, they knew what type of work and what wages were available throughout the province. They were enterprising and extremely mobile. They would travel great distances for better working conditions or to make better pay.

Other avenues of employment related to mill work started to open up in the mid-1930s. Besides the independent wood truck business based in Vancouver and Victoria, Sikhs started getting labour contracts in the mills: on the greenchain, loading boxcars, in the dry kiln, hauling wood or sawdust or cutting poles or ties. Some even had their own lumber mills, usually located out of Vancouver. This greatly



A Sikh land-clearing crew, Vancouver, 1910.

expanded their financial opportunities and gave them more economic freedom and autonomy.

The major Sikh mill owners were Mayo Singh and Kapoor Singh. Mayo Singh came from India in 1906 with little education. He first started working in the farms in Chilliwack and later in the lumber mills. Kapoor Singh, an educated man, graduated from high school in India and went to San Francisco in 1906. He travelled up and down the Pacific coast and later to Toronto. His interest in the lumber industry eventually brought him in contact with Mayo Singh. Their first joint business venture began when they became partners with other Sikhs and bought out a failing lumber mill in New Westminster in 1914. They had all been employees there and knew the work. The lumber market was poor due to the war, but with some luck and plenty of hard work the business became profitable. A few years later, Mayo and Kapoor expanded their business by moving their base of operations to Vancouver Island.

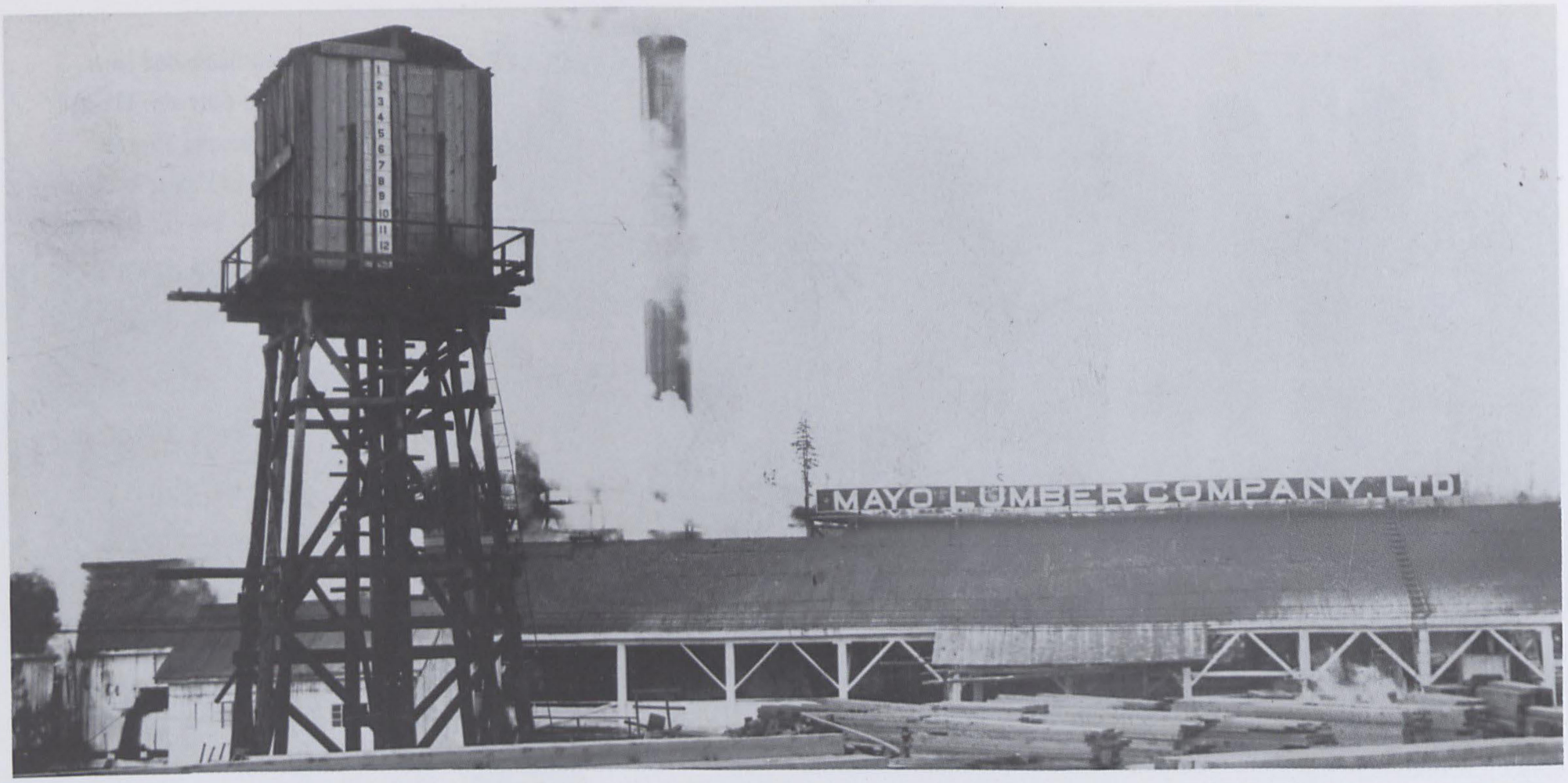
In 1918, the two men established the Mayo Lumber Company, a much larger mill near Duncan. A small mill town, called Paldi after Mayo's village in India, developed around this mill. Several hundred people worked there, and Mayo built a small Sikh temple for this community in 1918 and a much larger temple in 1928. By the mid-1930s

My dad and I had our own house and barn around Edmonds Street in Burnaby. We had a contract to clear a lot of land around Central Park. I had two teams of horses and quite a few of our people helped me on our crew. We cut the trees and used dynamite to blow up the tree stumps. There were about eight of us working as a crew. No one cared about the lumber then, we just burned it all, the idea was to clear the land. We did this for about three years and made pretty good money.

—Mr. Jagar S. Mahal



Mr. Jagar Singh Mahal, March 23, 1990.



Mayo Lumber Company Ltd., Paldi, BC, 1936. Mayo Singh came from India in 1906, worked for years on farms and lumber mills, and in 1918 established his own mill in Paldi, near Duncan (on Vancouver Island).

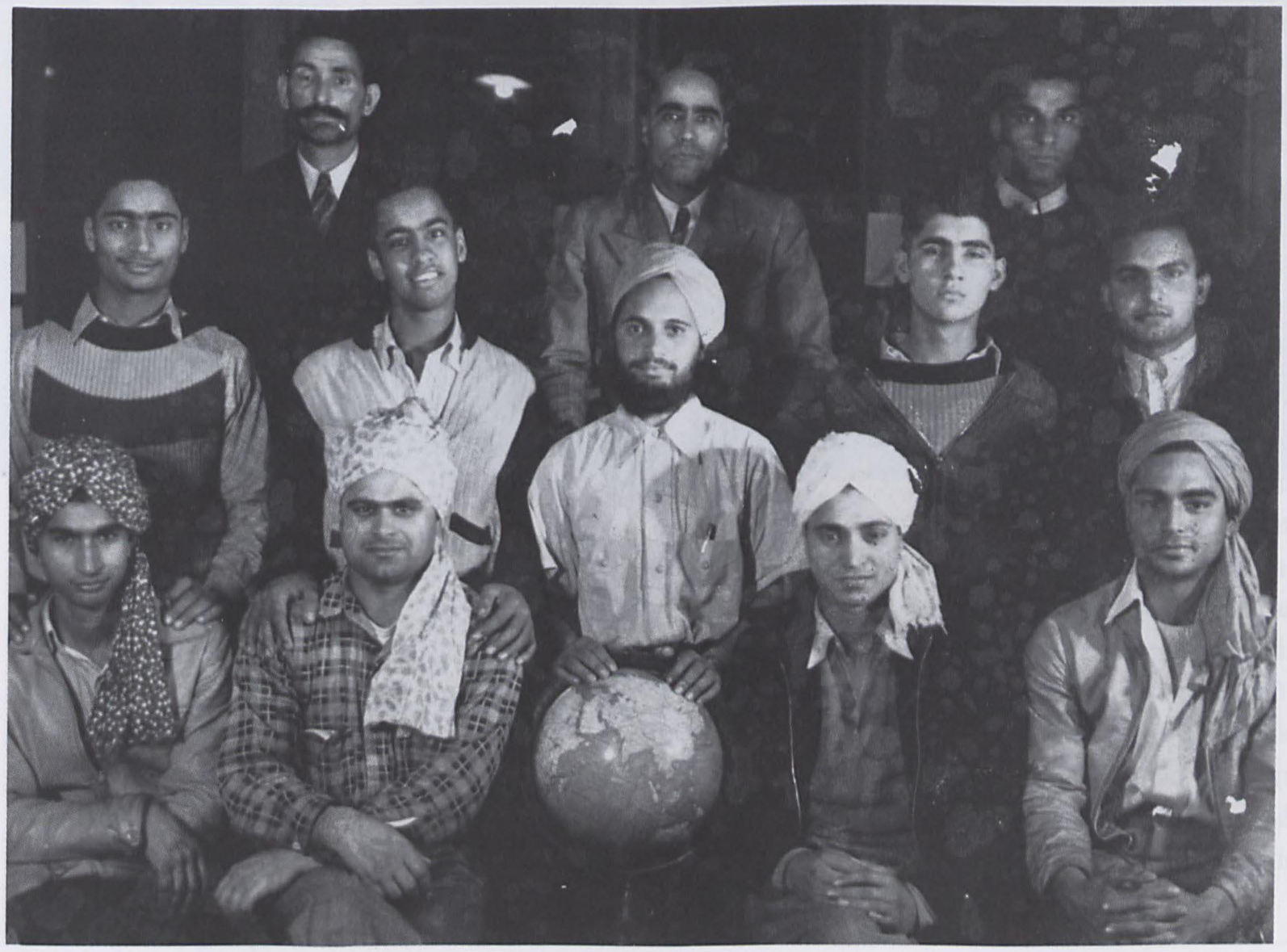
there was a fair-sized Sikh community in Paldi, with many women and children.

Another mill, the Kapoor Lumber Company, was started at Sooke Lake in the late 1920s. This mill also had a logging camp at Shawnigan Lake which employed about 300 men. The work force was divided into four groups, each of which occupied a separate camp: white men, Sikhs, Chinese and Japanese. A one-room schoolhouse served the whole community. In the late 1930s, according to Mr. Kuldeep S. Bains, only two Sikh families resided there. The rest were single men.

"Going to the mill was quite an experience," recalls Mr. Dedar S. Sihota. "It took practically a whole day from Victoria, to go by a rickety old vehicle, over logging roads, up and down, twisting, with big boulders in the way, before you could arrive at the mill. It was very isolated but there was a community right there. A lot of our people, Punjabis working in the mill, some Canadian people, some Chinese. There was a store, a little one-room school and in the school they had grades one to ten. We moved into a bunkhouse, about three of us in one small room. Two of us boys would be in a bed. The rooms would be 12 feet by 12 feet in the bunkhouses. In a long bunkhouse there



Above: Sikh women of Paldi, BC, gathered at the Mayo Lumber Company, 1938.



Left: Sawmill workers at Kapoor sawmill, Sooke Lake, BC, 1939. Kapoor Singh arrived in North America in 1906 and, after some joint business ventures with Mayo Singh, established the Kapoor Lumber Company at Sooke Lake, on Vancouver Island, in the late 1920s.

might be eight or ten such rooms, with a central area. A drum stove would keep the place warm in the wintertime. The washrooms, they'd be detached, away from the main bunkhouse. There would be a cookhouse nearby where all the food was prepared. There was a cook who prepared all the food and looked after purchasing and so on. The cost to each individual was shared, it was sort of a democratic household, run on that basis.

"There were a few women: Kapoor Singh's wife, two daughters, his brother's wife. There were some Canadian engineers and their families, as well."

Mayo and Kapoor Singh used their wealth for the benefit of their community. They provided jobs for the men, led the fight for equal rights, and financed many delegations to Ottawa to explain their problems to government officials. And they brought in speakers to inform and inspire the men. Kuldeep Bains says: "Once in a while in the

The following Canadian Press dispatch appeared in most of the Canadian papers which gives a brief picture of an East Indian who has risen to a very high position in the industry of this province. Mr. Kapoor Singh who was born a British subject, has shown every quality of character, mind and body, which is the heritage of a Canadian handed down by the early pioneers to the succeeding generations. Mr. Kapoor Singh has struggled as an immigrant in a way few struggle. He has made a tremendous success in the lumber industry, employs hundreds of men, is highly cultured and has a great stake in this province. With all his accomplishments, he cannot vote in the province of British Columbia, because he was born a British subject in British India. Such treatment is neither British nor Canadian. Canadians are not treated like that in India and India needs all the consideration from this most British province in Canada. Why should Canada treat an East Indian-Canadian who has adopted Canada and has fulfilled all the requirements of true Canadianism, in such a way. If the British Canadians in this province, some parts of which are said to be a duplication of England as far as the modes, living, manners and the psychology of the population is concerned, wish India to remain in the British Empire, something should be done to rectify this state of affairs. Here is the Canadian Press dispatch referred to:

DUNCAN, B.C. Dec. 31—Twenty-three years ago a young East Indian arrived in Canada and for several years tried with indifferent success to make a living on a northern Ontario homestead. His funds were so low that he was forced to seek occasional jobs on the road gangs, and he thought that he had found affluence when given a regular job on a section gang building the electric lines between Toronto and Newmarket.

Kapoor Singh was the young East Indian's name, and today he can afford to look back on those early days with a smile, for he has made progress since then. He is now one of the largest independent logging and lumber mill operators on Vancouver Island, which, incidentally, is the most important timber section in all Canada.

Kapoor Singh is now contemplating the construction of a new sawmill with a capacity of 75,000 feet of lumber daily, to cut timber off land recently acquired from the Canadian Pacific Railway. He already owns and operates a mill in the Sooke district, near Victoria. While some of his employees are Hindus, he also engages Europeans, Japanese and Chinese.

—from India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information, Vol. II, No. 1 (March 1930)

cookhouse they'd have speeches about politics and all that, what's happening in India and who's right and what the Congress party and the British are doing. Sadhu Singh Dhami used to come there and people from the Victoria and Vancouver gurdwaras would come as well. Sometimes to collect money. We'd give one or two dollars, it was a big deal in those days. If anything came up in India, some disaster, they'd raise money in this way."

These were two community leaders who cared for their workers. They would later be instrumental in getting the franchise for East Indians in Canada.

The Sikh community of Paldi, BC, at their temple in 1936.

Another very important Vancouver Island Sikh community was Hillcrest, situated about four miles from Duncan. Located here was a large mill owned by Carlton Stone called the Hillcrest Lumber Company. This mill was opened in 1912, when the first Sikhs started working there for Mr. Stone. He recognized the value of Sikh employees and encouraged them to work in his forestry operations. Hillcrest became a very close community, and Mr. Stone relied on his Sikh workers so much that in 1935 he built a gurdwara for them and their families. There was also a community hall built for the use of all of the workers. The white families lived in about thirty homes around the perimeter of the mill. Two teachers taught all the workers' children in one school building. At times, there were over fifty students in this one-room schoolhouse.

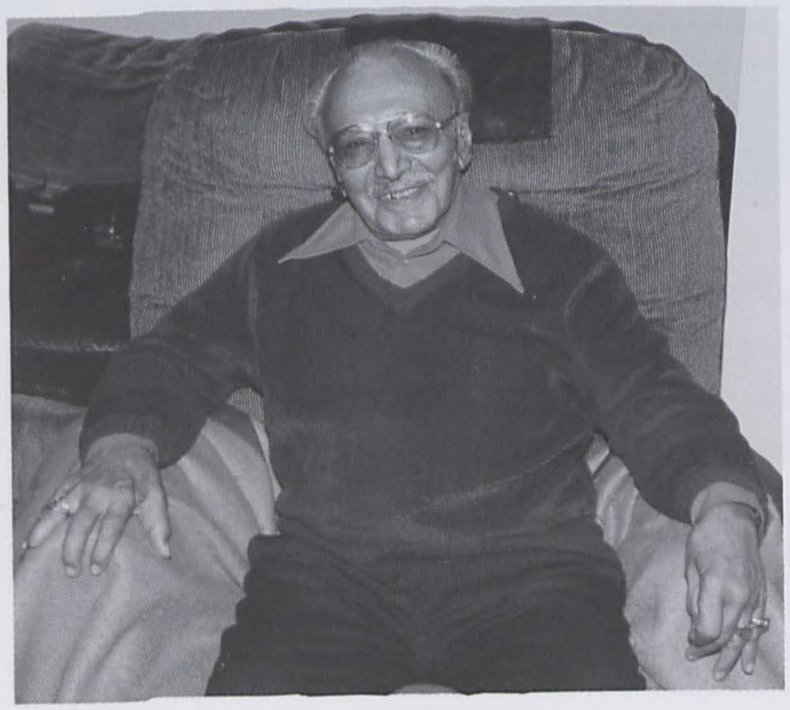
Over half of the people I interviewed had at one time worked at Hillcrest because it was a place where a Sikh could always get a job. Dedar Sihota describes working there in 1937: "I can remember a

There were about forty of our people there in 1929 when I first arrived in Hillcrest. They stayed in a bunkhouse, there was a Chinese bunkhouse, a Japanese bunkhouse, and our people's bunkhouse. There were three separate bunkhouses. There were four men who had their wives with them at this time: Kishan Singh, Inder Singh Akhara, Ralla Jhan, and Nama. They had no children at this time. After, they started their families. A little later Bhan Singh Gill came with his wife.

The Goras [white people] had their bunkhouse on the other side of the office, there were just a few. They were mostly married people: the Stone family, the manager's family, and someone else. There weren't very many Gora people, only four or five, mostly Asian people worked there.

Our people worked mostly on the greenchain, pulled the carts, and piled lumber in the yard. They made big piles to dry the lumber, they didn't have a dry kiln then, they built it later. When I first came, I started on the greenchain, then I went on the jump-roller. That's where I cut my damn finger off. Then I went to feeding the resaw and then I became the charge hand of the greenchain. My duties were to keep everything going. Our head man was Tara Singh Kauni, he assisted in hiring our people, you can consider him our foreman. I was in charge of the dry kiln and Lakha Singh was in charge of the greenchain.

—Mr. Magar Singh Rai



Mr. Magar Singh Rai, January 23, 1991.

The men of the Hillcrest Lumber Company community, near Duncan BC, 1932. The three turbanned men in the front row are Tara S. Kauni (in black turban), and his assistants Lakha Singh and Magar S. Rai.

Sikh millworkers at Hillcrest Lumber Company, Sathlam, BC, 1935. (IWA)

Next to Victoria, BC, Duncan is well known for being the most English community in Canada. Its population, to a considerable extent, is composed of retired British army officers, among them many from India and not a few from the famous Sikh regiments. It is a strange coincidence that in this same Cowichan district there should happen to be residing the largest Sikh communities in Canada. A British subject by birth, still having no franchise rights in this British province of British Columbia, and among the most English population of Canada, the Sikh finds it most difficult to feel the same pride in his adopted country, as he would if he were a citizen, with all the privileges and rights of a British subject, as enjoyed by his fellow Canadian neighbors, both of British and alien ancestry. Nevertheless, being of a martial race, known for its appreciation of the qualities of chivalry, fair play, justice and loyalty, his recognition of that spirit wherever it finds expression from other Britishers, also conscious of their racial tradition, has no bounds. Is it not the extension of this same attitude that leads men to the proper understanding of the so often neglected phrase, in this age of strife,"The Brotherhood of Man," which is the essence and ideal of all religions, be it Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Hindu or Mohammedan. It is in that spirit that we record a short account of the growth of the Hillcrest Sikh Community, which owes so much to Mr. Carlton Stone, in whom, to our experience, are represented the best qualities of the British race. He typifies John Bull, both in looks and character, in the best sense of that symbolic word. . . .

Mr. Stone's deep interest in the welfare of the Hillcrest employees, encouraged the Sikh group to take a special request before him. Through Tara Singh they explained their pressing need for a community hall and a religious centre where they could gather every day for prayer and worship and where they also could carry on some social and educational activities for their members. As a result, a Community Hall and a Sikh Temple, according to the specifications supplied by the Sikh employees, was ordered to be built.

A two-story building 20x36 feet, with an outside verandah all around, was completed in August 1935. The dates for the opening ceremony were set for September 7th and 8th, when a Sikh Bible would be installed there, and the building then could properly be called a Sikh Temple. The traditional rites of the Sikhs demanded that their Scriptures be brought with such dignity and honour as required by custom in India. A call went out to all the Sikhs in the Province, advising them of the special significance of the occasion and their duty to be there in time. On September 7th, from 3 p.m. on, the Sikhs began to pour into Duncan, by the trains, stages and special buses, from points all over the Island. A motor car, with a party headed by Bhai Daswandha Singh, Priest of the Sikh Temple, Vancouver, arrived from the steamer at Nanaimo with the Sikh Bible, and an extra stage brought the full strength of the Nanaimo Band. With military ceremony, the Sikh Bible was placed on a special float which had been designed and fixed up for the occasion. . . . a very impressive procession, with nearly one hundred motor cars following, proceeded through the main streets of the city of Duncan, on its way to Hillcrest.

The procession was augmented by the presence of many Canadian friends and visitors and thus the East and the West and also the Britishers of the two races and religions had met. . . .

Thanks to the generosity and kindness of Mr. Carlton Stone, the Sikh community of Hillcrest thus made a start for a better and happier future.

The two days' proceedings were brought to a close by a lecture in English delivered by Kartar Singh, in the presence of the many citizens of Duncan, including Mr. Hugh Savage, MLA, and his friend, Mr. Noel Robinson, the honorary president of the Dickens Fellowship, Vancouver, BC.

At the end of the current week, on September 6th, 1936, this community is happily engaged in celebrating their first annual gathering which once again is going to bring the Sikhs from all over the province to Hillcrest.

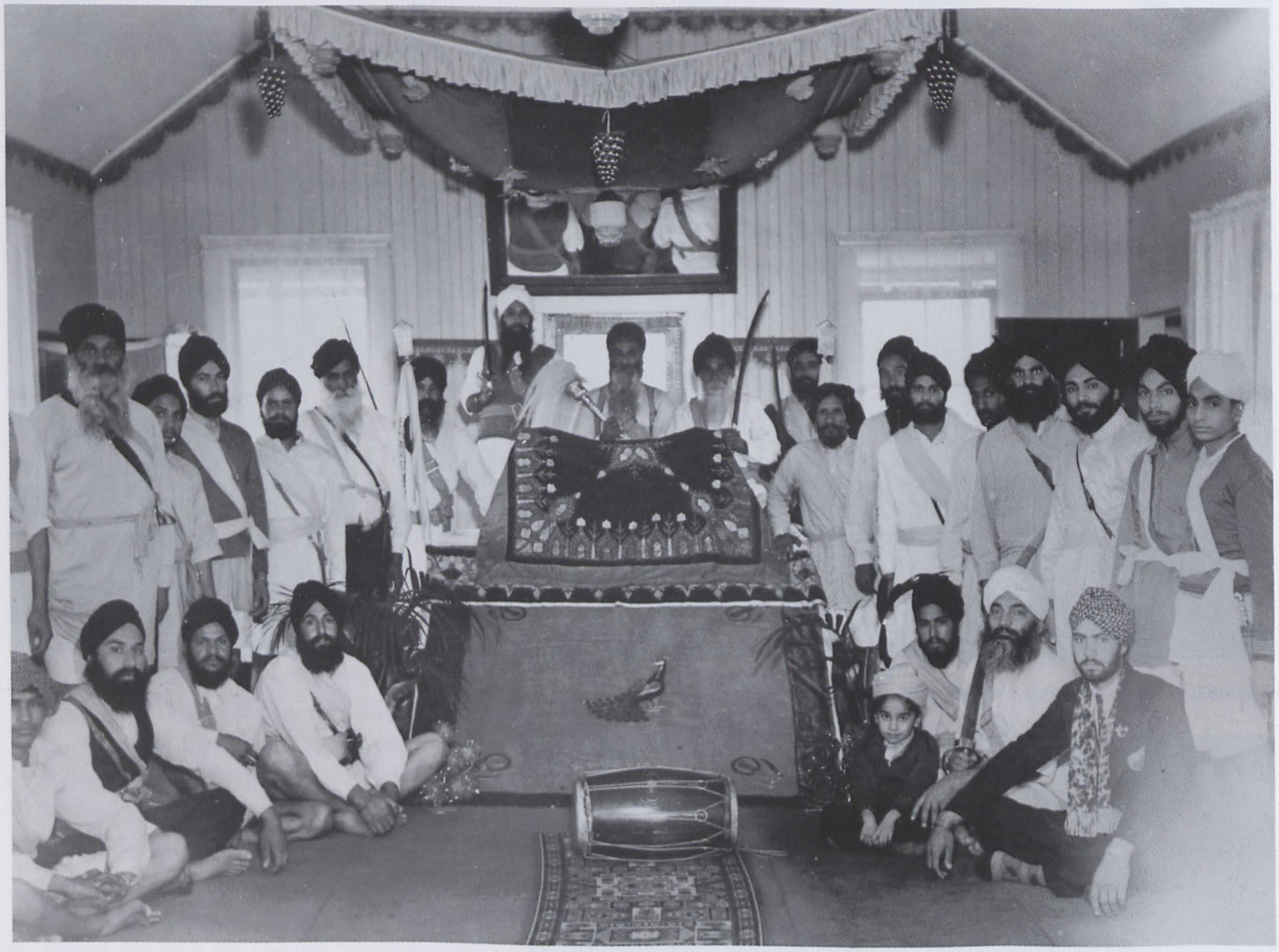
—from India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information, Vol. III, No. 1 (September 1936)



A parade to celebrate the opening of the Hillcrest Sikh Temple, September 7, 1935.



Opening day festivities at the Hillcrest Sikh Temple, 1935.



Inside the Hillcrest Sikh Temple, 1936. The priest is Giani Dosanjha Singh. Among the other men present are Buta Singh, Bachan S. Guram, Lal S. Ghollia, Hari Singh, Kehar S. Mann, Tara Singh, Atma Singh, Magar S. Rai, Dalip S. Rai, Garib S. Rai, Bakshish S. Berar, Sardul S. Gill.

lineup of people waiting at the office of the mill, waiting for any odd job that might open up. We lived in the bunkhouse and ate at the cookhouse. I had about a mile and a half walk to school, the mill school in a mill town. There, I started in grade three and my brother, who is older, hadn't acquired as much English as I had so he started in grade two. It was a blow to him and he was not interested in school. So it wasn't too long after that, he quit school outright and went to work in the mill.

"The wages were 29 to 32 cents an hour, you worked six days a week. Sometimes you would get a Saturday afternoon off, so you'd go



Front and side view of Hillcrest Sikh Temple, 1935. (*IWA*)

downtown and do your business or buy groceries or whatever. The work was hard. Most of our people worked in the mill or on the greenchain or out in the yard. Few worked in the logging camp itself.

"Of our people, there were about sixty single people and four families. There was Dalip Singh's family, the [future] judge's brother and mother, Mrs. Oppal. Then there was the Doman family. Herbie was a little fellow I used to ride him on my bicycle to Duncan. Mr. Doman was the man in charge, not Herbie's father but a relative, an uncle, he was in charge of the contract with the mill. He would get workers.



No. 1 planer day shift, Industrial Timber Mills Ltd., Youbou, BC, July 1941. (*IWA*)

Herb's dad used to operate the trucks which took the wood to Duncan, firewood which they sold to the people.

"I operated a resaw on my summer holidays. There were very few of our people who were allowed to operate a machine. When the gora operator would go off to the washroom or to have his smoke, I would operate the machine and I could do it just as well as he could, but he was very conscious of the fact that he better not relinquish the machine to me for too long, because then he might have to relinquish it to me outright somewhere down the road. You sort of understood that there was a level at which you could function, beyond that it was out of your reach.

"At that time there was a Japanese settlement and a Chinese settlement. These were segregated, each by themselves. East Indians and Europeans were by themselves, as well, in separate locations.

"I think too that the jobs that were offered to these ethnic communities were somewhat different. The labouring groups were the

Chinese and the Punjabis. The Japanese managed to get the better jobs that involved more technical training. The best jobs, the engineers and people who were the bosses at the mill, went to the Europeans."

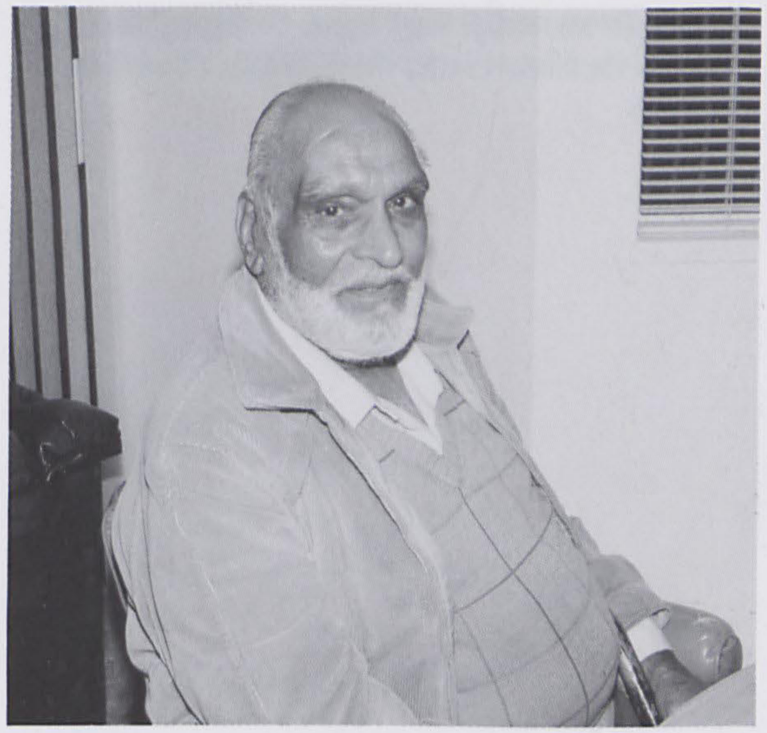
Victoria was the other Vancouver Island Sikh community. It was centred around Market Street with the gurdwara, built in 1912, located at 1210 Topaz Street. Most Sikhs worked in the six or seven lumber mills in town or had their own wood trucks and sold wood door to door. Mrs. Paritam Sangha's husband Ajaib had several wood trucks. At one time, he also owned a grocery store that sold spices and other specialty items to his people. Mrs. Sangha says that in 1934 or 1935, about twenty or twenty-five families were living in Victoria. According to Mr. Tara S. Tiwana this number had grown to thirty or forty families by the mid-1940s.

Agriculture was the other main enterprise, besides lumbering, that the Sikhs engaged in. They had come from a farming background in the Punjab; so they came here knowing how to farm and how to live off the land. Most of them worked on rented land until they could afford to buy their own farms, which were mostly partnerships or co-operative ventures. They worked on vegetable farms in Ladner, Abbotsford, Agassiz, Kamloops, Saanich and Pitt Meadows, among other communities.

Mr. Manga S. Jagpal got his start in farming by working as a gardener for Colonel Victor Spencer in 1930: "After landing, all of us were taken to the gurdwara by the temple people. They contacted our relatives and then my uncle came and took me to the Spencer home at 1750 Trimble Street. He had been their gardener for the last thirteen years and I lived with him in the separate gardener's quarters. It was a little lonely at first, being only fifteen years old, and away from home for the first time.

"We worked for very good people. Sometimes white men would make fun of my turban as they passed by on the road. They would make weird noises and I got into a few fights, until Mr. Spencer had a talk with them. He had been in India in World War One and knew the meaning of the turban to the Sikhs. He told the neighbourhood people to treat us with respect, and they did after that. He was a very powerful man. He even told his own children to be careful when playing with me so as not to touch my turban. His children were about the same age as me and we often played together.

"When I started working there I got paid 45 dollars a month, with no living costs. This was good money, these were Depression times,



Mr. Tara Singh Tiwana, January 5, 1990.



Mr. Manga Singh Jagpal, October 27, 1990.

Left to right: Mr. Manga Singh Jagpal, Mr. Jagar S. Mahal and a friend at the Bharat Lumber Company Ltd., Chase Creek, BC, 1946.



and some millworkers only made a dollar a day then. The work was very easy, we worked according to our own schedule. He had a ten-acre estate and we looked after all the gardening. He also had his own carpenter and greenhouse man.

"I worked there for three years, then Mrs. Spencer got me a job at the Jericho Golf and Country Club, at my request. The wages were better there, 35 cents an hour, nine hours a day. I worked there from 1933 to 1941. We had our own on-site housing here as well. Many of our old-timers worked here, my villagers. Harnam Singh was the boss of thirteen or fourteen people there, it was a huge golf course, our people were the ones that originally built it. In 1936, I got the foreman's job from Harnam Singh, the others were all getting too old and I was younger and could do all the work.

"In 1941, this golf course sold out and moved to the British



Workers and neighbours at the Bharat Lumber Company, Chase Creek, BC, 1946. Mr. Manga S. Jagpal is at right.

Properties. That was too far for me to go, so I tried to get a job with the Parks Board as a gardener. I remember going to their office in Stanley Park and asking for a job. When I told the fellow at the front desk about my experiences working for the Spencer family and the golf course, he was astonished. He said, 'How did you get such good work?' I answered that I got the good jobs because I was capable and could do the work. He said that he'd never hire me there because I was a foreigner. So I started looking for work in a sawmill."

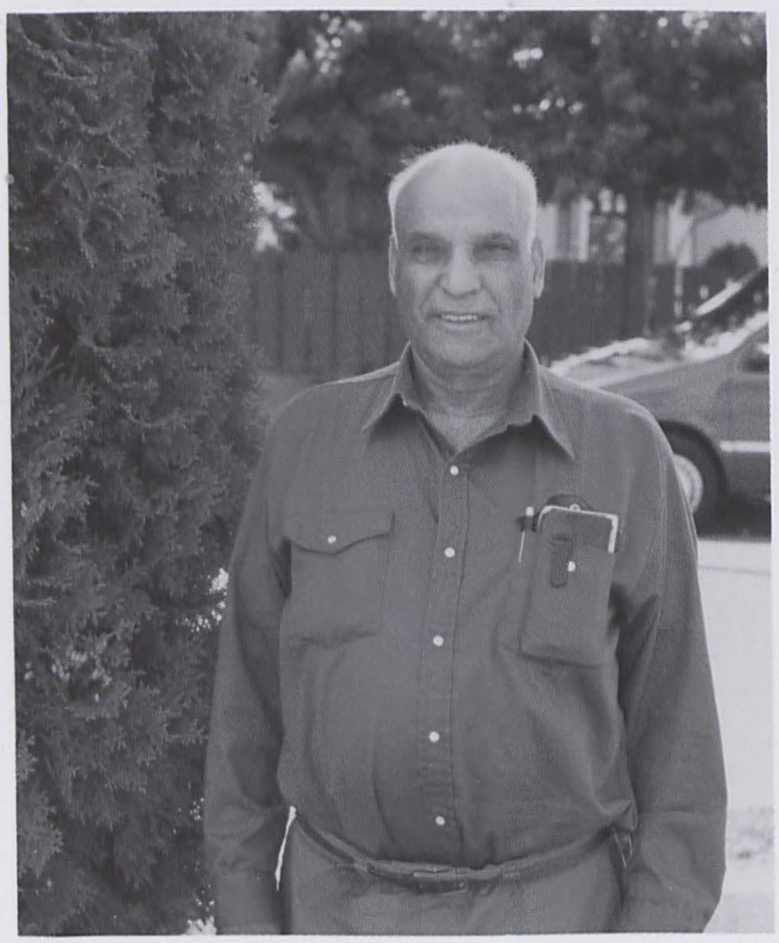
Mr. Manga S. Jagpal later owned farms in Chilliwack, Mission and Pitt Meadows.

There was a sizable Sikh community in Kelowna which engaged in fruit growing and some mixed vegetable farming. The Sikhs had family-owned and -operated orchards beginning in 1924. According to Mrs. Ajit K. Singh, the first Sikhs who owned their own farms here were her father Mehar Singh, Bagu Basran, Banta Singh Sangra and Lachman Singh. These people cleared portions of their land and each owned from 30 to 100 acres.

In the 1930s, another ten Sikhs joined the community in Kelowna

Left to right: Manga S. Jagpal, Jagar S. Mahal and a friend, Mr. Hoover, at the Bharat Lumber Company, Chase Creek, BC, 1947.





Mr. Naranjan Singh Sangha, August 2, 1992.

and by 1934 the Sikh population was about 100, not including the children. Ajit Kaur Singh named ten families with children at this time, the rest being single men. Since these were Depression years, many Sikhs would go there to work during harvest time and the population would grow considerably. Some even rented or half-shared farms during these difficult times. When the economy improved, they went back to work in the mills. They never had a temple, so they met in Sikhs' homes or at the Rutland Community Hall.

"When we had our yearly religious celebration," says Mr. Naranjan Sangha, "we had it at Mehar Singh's house or Arjun Singh's house. They were the two people who could read the holy scriptures. We always celebrated Guru Gobind Singh's birthday at one of these two places. One year at one house and the next at the other house. That's where we always got together. Both these men were well educated in English as well as Punjabi. They got their education in India. These two men were both religious and educated; some people have one quality and some have the other, these men had both."



Gopal S. Bains (in turban), father of Dedar S. Bains, with unidentified man and boy, 1942. The picture was taken in the Cedar Cottage area of Vancouver.

Kamloops had about sixty permanent Sikh residents in the mid-1930s. Sher Singh and his sons, Sucha and Hardev, owned 100 acres of land. They grew tomatoes and a few other vegetables. On their land they also operated a small mill where they made railway ties. Chanan Singh and his son Banta owned a 60-acre farm on the Thompson River where they grew mixed vegetables. During the Depression, Pakhar Singh Mann rented 50 acres for mixed vegetable farming.

For the Sikhs in British Columbia the 1920s and 1930s was also a time for family reunification and community building with the arrival of the wives and children, and during this period the first Sikhs were born in Canada. The community had to battle hard economic times, prejudice in the job market and poor working conditions. But the strong family and community network helped them achieve better jobs, pay and accommodations. The Sikhs were highly mobile and

It was hard to find work for 5 cents an hour. Even white people were going hungry in Depression times. I had a good friend who had been the superintendent at the Qualicum Beach sawmill, also a part owner in the mill, and before the Depression he was making $1000 a month. He told me that he had been the superintendent of a CPR mill in Victoria for eight to ten years. He was a very wealthy and influential man and I knew him quite well. So, when I came back from India in 1931 and I needed a job, I went to see him at his home in Victoria. He wasn't in but his wife said he was in town working. She said he'd be on a certain road, so I went there to look for him. All I saw were four or five city workers digging a hole in the ground. It was about three feet deep and they were throwing the dirt out of the hole. I looked around for my friend and wondered where he could be—I was looking for a well-dressed man in a suit. All of a sudden someone shouts from the ditch, "Hey Gill, what are you doing here? I thought you went to India." I told him I just got back and needed a job. He laughed, "It's not like before, if you want a job come on in," motioning for me to come into the hole that they were digging. This was a man who was previously making a $1000 a month and now was digging ditches for the city. Things had gotten that bad during the Depression.

—Mr. Sardara S. Gill

I returned to Canada in 1933 after riding out the Depression in India. I got a job at Alberta Sawmills on 6th Avenue for 10 cents an hour. In a year and a half I worked my way up to 14 cents an hour. Then there was another mill in New Westminster. One of our men was a foreman there and they were paying 25 cents an hour. So me and a friend of mine, Hardit Langrhoa, both quit this job at Alberta Lumber and went to work over there for 25 cents an hour. But when payday came around they were short, they couldn't pay us. I worked for three months and I didn't get anything. Then finally I went back to Alberta Lumber Company. I got a job there for 14 cents an hour. We had to get a lawyer to get our wages from the other mill. There were about ten of us, so we decided that we would sue the company jointly. The lawyer, Mr. Lister, made a few phone calls right away. This lumber had gone onto a ship which was still sitting in the water in the river there. He threatened the owners that he would tie the boat up and stop it from leaving. So we managed to get back some of our money, I think my share was 34 dollars for three months' work. This was only a portion of what was owed to us. Apparently there was a long list of creditors in line before us.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak

In the early days we stuck together through thick and thin. We shared with one another. If someone did not have something then we got together and shared what we had with them. If a newcomer came here we set them up with a place to stay and a job. It was our duty, someone did it for us.

—Mrs. Pritam K. Johl

sensitive to the fluctuations in the job market. They worked hard, lived frugally, saved their money and co-operated with one another.

Sikh men and women who lived through the Depression years attribute their success to their strong sense of community and their social and religious network. It was the key to their survival during the 1930s, when many mills closed and other jobs were hard to get. "Our people did not want relief or handouts," says Mr. Lachman S. Thandi. "Our temple committee openly stated that Sikhs will not ask for relief, as the other people are asking. We will take care of our own people, we don't need your handouts. We looked after our people first class. We never let the food supplies run out at the gurdwara, I know that. There were piles of flour sacks. The wood was always piled high. There was plenty of tea, cans of milk, boxes of butter, salt, spices, peppers. There was one man, Chinta, and whenever he would come to the gurdwara he'd bring two pounds of hot peppers. He'd say, 'I only have these peppers, that's all I can give. I hope you'll remember me for that!' That's how we managed during those tough times, by sticking together."

Mr. Ranjit S. Hall says that wherever you went, "all you had to do was look up a Singh and they would help."

"The old-timers were always there for one another," Mr. Manga S. Jagpal adds. "If someone got a bad letter from India, everyone laid their paycheques on the table. If they were in trouble and needed money or someone in their family got hurt or damage to crops happened back home, we all helped. We'd say pay us back when you can, just send the money now. Two Sikh families suffered tragedies in the 1930s. Both parents died in these families and the community looked after the children. The old-timers took these kids as their own. There was one girl and two boys. The boys were looked after by the men in one bunkhouse and the girl went to a childless woman who took the girl as her own."

As always, the temple played an important role during these years. It was the base of operations, the headquarters for whatever action took place. All communications with India, within the province and with Ottawa went through the temple committee, the Khalsa Diwan Society. Housing, employment, health and welfare could all be taken care of at the gurdwara. Thanks to the efforts of the temple committees and the work ethic of the community, the Sikhs' economic fortunes began to change for the better.



Inside the Hillcrest Sikh Temple, 1936.

4 Getting an Education

FOR THE SIKHS, one of the advantages of coming to Canada was the opportunity for their children to get an education. Many Sikh parents, realizing the importance of learning English, sent their children to school for this reason alone. The Sikhs' school experiences were mixed. It was a traumatic experience for the ones who knew little English, since they had to start in grade one regardless of their age. Mr. Gurdave S. Billan was fourteen years old when he was put in a grade one class at Henry Hudson school in Vancouver. Not surprisingly, he did not stay in school long, but quit to sell wood with his uncle. This was the case with many of the children who came from India.

About two dozen children were born and brought up on 2nd Avenue during the 1930s and 1940s. They had more positive school experiences, since they went to school knowing the language and the culture. These children came from five main families: Mrs. Bhani Johal's children (Gurdass), the Massa family (Sarai), Mola family (Johl), the Dusanjs and Mr. Pakhar Mann's children. They enjoyed

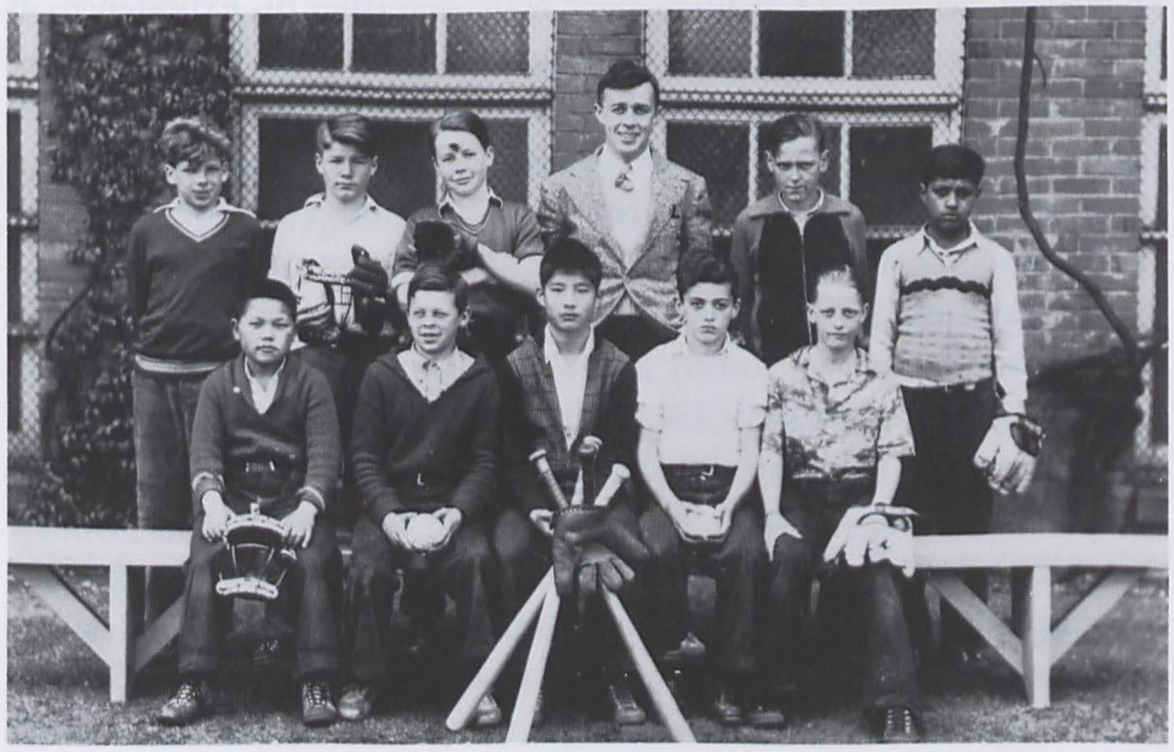
We got here about July in 1921 so I didn't have to go to school until September. I was the only Indian child in the school, at Model School just by False Creek on 7th or 8th Avenue. Then when my dad moved to another mill further down, I went to Simon Fraser School for a week or so. Then, because I lived on a certain side of the block, I had to go to Mount Pleasant School even though Simon Fraser was closer.

In school I couldn't speak much English, but my math was better than even my teacher's. At that time I remember I could multiply up to 18 times 18, I've forgotten that now. In Canada 12 times 12 was the limit. So right off the bat if she asked me any math, I was right there.

I skipped class a couple of times, so I got my grade eight in six years. I wanted to go to school further but my dad wanted me to work for financial reasons. He didn't want his friends to know that. During the summer holidays I'd go to work in Ladner. In fact I was making more money than my father for a couple of months. I was working on a hay-baler on a farm in Ladner which was owned by one of our own people, Bishan Singh from Raipurdabba. He had a baling machine and he had six or seven people working for him. And even pulling spuds there, I was getting 50 cents an hour and my dad was getting only 32½ cents an hour working at Timberland Mill.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak

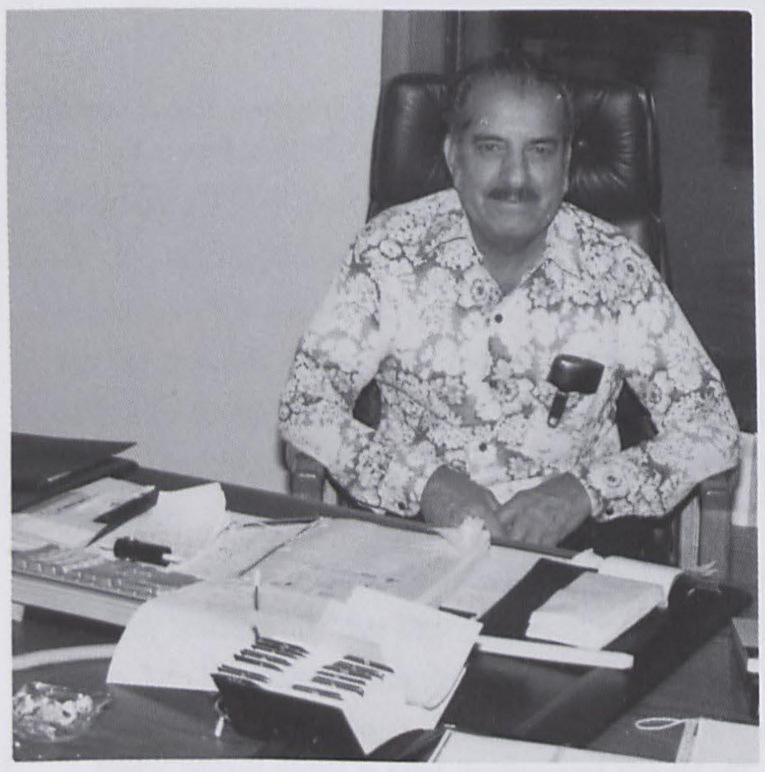
Grade One class at Henry Hudson elementary school, near the Sikh Temple in Vancouver, 1944. The three boys in the front row are (left to right) Sadhu Aulak, Jack Mann, Babu Das.



The Juvenile Boys Softball Team at Henry Hudson School, 1941. Sohan Singh Sarai is at the far right.



Lord Beaconsfield School, Vancouver, 1935. Sadhu S. Uppal is second from the right on the top row.



Mr. Jagindar Singh Sangara, November 10, 1990.

their days at school, joining teams, clubs, choir and taking part in many school activities.

Sikh children also attended schools in other parts of Vancouver. Mr. Jagindar S. Sangara, a Canadian-born Sikh, describes his experiences at Moberly School in south Vancouver in 1930: "I was always speaking English. This one time, Dad came to school to talk to me and I said to him not to come to school to see me because the other kids might think I'm an East Indian. I was the only East Indian kid at Moberly in those days." Mr. Piara S. Bains had a similar experience in Dollarton, in North Vancouver: "I went to school in Deep Cove from 1927 to 1929. At that time there were mostly Japanese living there and I was the only East Indian kid at that time. I learned Japanese as well as English."

Jagat and his older brother Sadhu Uppal, who came to Canada in 1926, lived at Kerr Street and Marine Drive and started school at Sir James Douglas School. Then their father, Dalip Singh, bought two lots on the corner of 23rd Avenue and Nanaimo Street and built a house there in 1931, so the Uppal boys went to Lord Beaconsfield School. Their education meant a lot to them so they continued on to high



Lord Beaconsfield School, Vancouver, 1935. In the front row, Jagat S. Uppal is fourth from left, and Tom S. Sangha is seventh from left.

school at Vancouver Technical Secondary School. Unfortunately, in 1939 they had to quit because their father was killed in a truck accident. The boys had to take over their father's wood truck to support their family.

Most young Sikhs would gain a functional knowledge of English at school and, as soon as an opportunity for work presented itself, they would quit school to begin working. Work had an immediate return in the form of wages. Education, on the other hand, was dependent on the future. The Sikhs' future in British Columbia was never secure; they knew what they had with a job, they didn't know what they would have with an education.

What further diminished the value of education was that the Sikhs lacked the provincial, municipal and federal franchise. As a consequence, many jobs and professions were not open to them. "They were simultaneously excluded from a host of other things that were dependent on being a provincial voter," writes Norman Buchignani. "They could not vote for or become school trustees or trustees of improvement districts; neither could they be elected to provincial



The Hundal family in front of their home in Point Grey, Vancouver, 1913. Left to right: Iqbal, Hakim Singh Hundal, Jermeja, Mrs. Bishan Kaur Hundal, Teja, Mr. Jiwan Singh Hundal, Atma.

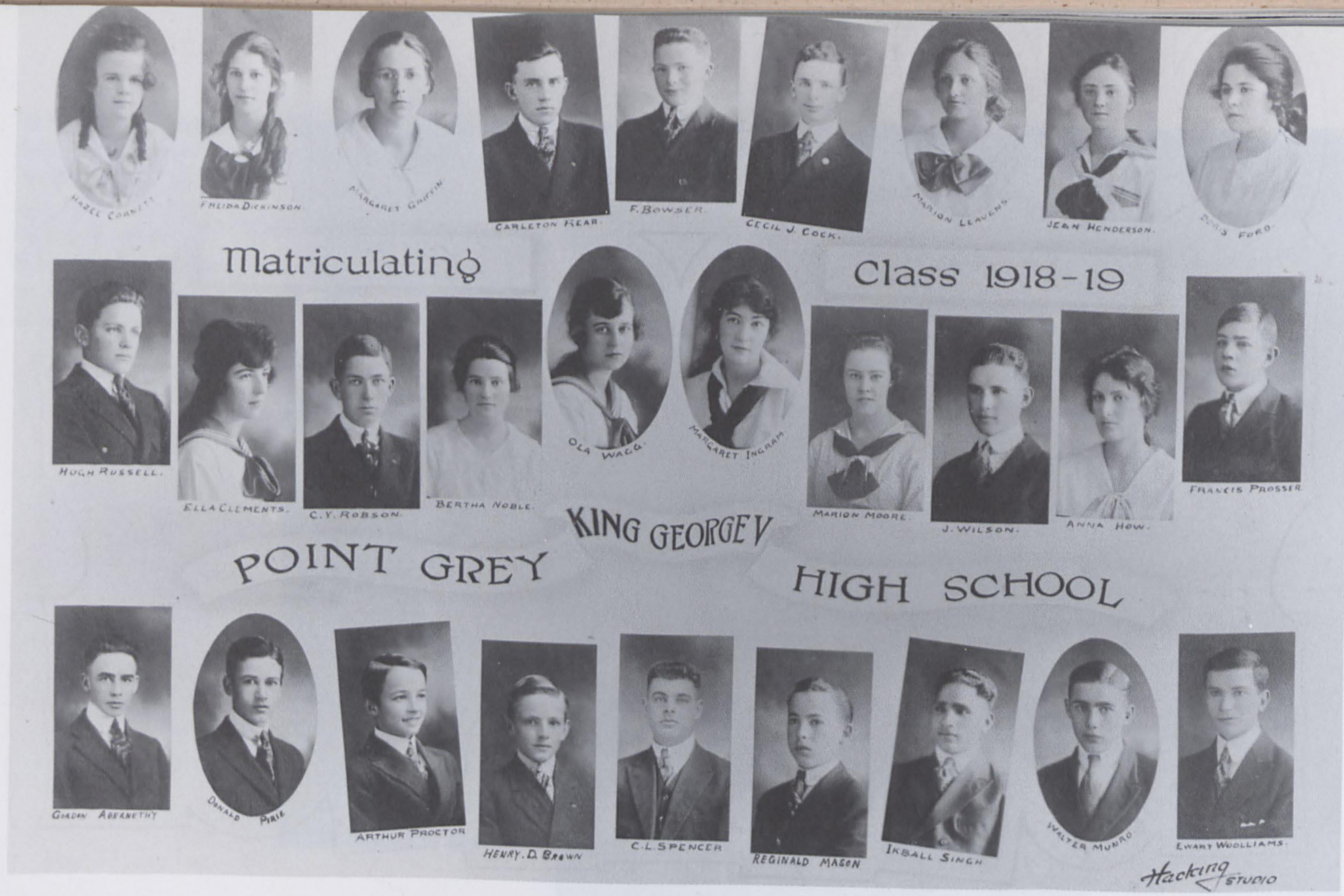
public office nor serve on juries. Although exclusion from the voters' list did not legally restrict them from public service, this became a universal practice. Public works contracts specified that they not be employed. The same restriction applied to the sale of Crown timber, and the professions of law and pharmacy were informally closed to them."

Most businesses would not hire Sikhs because of their marginal status; they believed them to be foreigners and not real Canadians. The Sikhs all knew the names of highly educated Sikhs who, because of discriminatory hiring practices, went out of province—or, worse, ended up working in the sawmills. Mr. Darshan Sangha cites a prime example: "Hazara Singh Garcha, who arrived in about 1927, had his Master of Science degree in agriculture in eastern Canada, and he pulled lumber like we did in the mill. At that time no Hindustani could get a job even if he was a doctor, lawyer or engineer. So it didn't matter if you were educated or not, if you were Hindustani you would be working on the greenchain."



A studio photograph of Jiwan Singh Hundal (standing) and Hakim Singh Hundal, c. 1918.

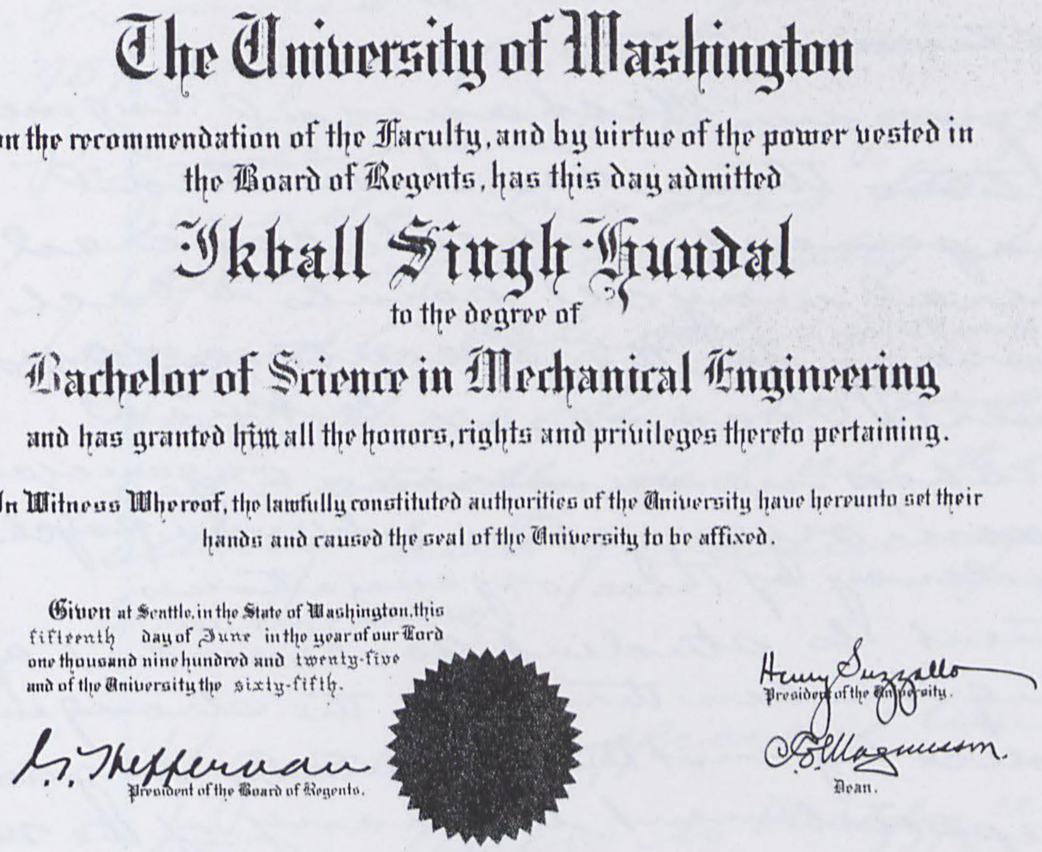
Despite these obstacles, some Sikhs still went to great lengths to further their education. The Hundal boys who arrived in Canada in 1913 were excellent students. They lived in Point Grey and went to Queen Mary Elementary and Prince of Wales High School, then on to the University of BC. Iqbal (Ikball) earned a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Washington in 1925 and went on to be an aeronautical engineer in the United States. He also worked in the automobile industry in Oshawa, Ontario. Jermeja attended UBC and then Oregon State College, and he worked for the



The graduation class of 1919, Point Grey High School, Vancouver. Iqbal Hundal is in the bottom row, third from right.



The four Hundal brothers in 1917. Left to right: Jermeja, Iqbal, Atma (holding a rifle), Teja.



The University of Washington

on the recommendation of the Faculty, and by virtue of the power vested in the Board of Regents, has this day admitted

Ikball Singh Hundal

to the degree of

Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering

and has granted him all the honors, rights and privileges thereto pertaining.

In Witness Whereof, the lawfully constituted authorities of the University have hereunto set their hands and caused the seal of the University to be affixed.

Given at Seattle, in the State of Washington, this fifteenth day of June in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and twenty-five and of the University the sixty-fifth.

President of the Board of Regents.

President of the University.

Dean.

Mr. Iqbal S. Hundal's degree from the University of Washington, June 15, 1925.

Indian Consulate's office in Los Angeles. Throughout their lives, the Hundal boys made every effort to fit in with the dominant culture. They were always well-dressed and in style, and they socialized with all groups and joined clubs and teams. But they still encountered discrimination in the job market, and so they both found employment outside the province.

Ranjit Mattu combined athletics and academics to reach his goals. He began his education at Mount Pleasant Elementary School, where he was the only Sikh student. Blessed with superior athletic abilities, he enjoyed his years at school. He was accepted by his teachers and schoolmates and was very popular because of his involvement in sports. In high school and at university he was an all-star rugby and football player. He graduated from UBC in 1941 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in business and economics.

He then worked with his father, Natha Singh Mattu, in an established business. Natha Singh had come to Canada in 1906, worked in lumbering and eventually began a wood truck business that supplied hog fuel to industries such as New Westminster Paper Mills, Vancouver Breweries and large laundries. After several years working with his father, Ranjit began his own lumber mill in the interior of the

Mr. Iqbal Singh Hundal's handwritten letter listing his qualifications for a job he was seeking in eastern Canada, c. 1926.

Qualifications

(1) B. Sc. degree in Mechanical Engineering

(2) Graduation thesis on "Industrial management" which covered in a general way all the points which are necessary for the executive of an Industrial concern to know.

(3) Membership in numerous organizations to learn organization & human psychology. Presidency of three organizations.

(4) Appointment to student government after having broken through the strong inherent prejudice against the Orientals in general. Also appointment to many of the most important executive committees.

(5) Acquisition of honor scroll for meritorious service to University of Wash.

(6) Hundreds of good connections with former students in China, Japan and Philipines whom I had the honor to represent in many student activities.

(7) Some knowledge of French.

(8) Bookkeeping experience, having kept books for India Canada Traders Ltd. for 1½ year

(9) Knowledge of Aerodynamics and Aeroplans

(10). Promoted a woodyard and sold it at 75% profit after three months of operation

(11) President and Manager of India Canada Traders ~~Ltd~~. for 1/2 year (operating successfully at present)

(12) Supposedly, only sales manager for North Shore Elec. Co. Ltd for one year but actually did all the buying, selling, and financing for about 6 months.

P.S. If given sufficient time, I could obtain letters to verify all the above mentioned facts.

province, just west of Princeton. In time he established larger milling operations in Vancouver and Richmond.

Ranjit was always involved in sports at many levels in his community. He coached junior football, won a Canadian Championship in 1947 and was a director of the BC Lions professional football team. When asked how his degree helped in his life, he replied: "I don't think my degree helped all that much. I think your exposure to people is very very important. You become more aware of what's around you, you become aware of who to go to, and it gives you the tools to look after you a bit and intelligently analyze a problem. If you didn't have an education you wouldn't be able to apply yourself to it, unless you were a really special person then you could do it. But I would say in my particular case, my athletics have opened all my doors. It was the athletics."

Ranjit Hall went to great lengths to get an education. He milked ten cows each morning before walking seven miles to his high school in Pitt Meadows. He would get to school late each day, usually after

Mr. Iqbal S. Hundal in the United States, where he served with the Air Unit of the Reserve Officers Training Corps, 1925.



11:00 a.m. After half a day of school, he would then walk the seven miles back home. These were only some of the difficulties that he encountered. "Every summer I would work at Hillcrest to pay for my education," he remembers. "It was hard physical work. Sometimes, I think that I should never have gone to university because it was blood, sweat and tears. In my last year, I worked nine hours night shift at Barnet, Kapoor's mill. Walked from there to Burnaby, where the street-car began, took the streetcar to get to UBC, changed my clothes and tried to get to my first lecture at 8:30 a.m. each day. I wonder why I didn't get the Governor General's Medal. I finally graduated in 1946."

After 1947, when more jobs opened up to Sikhs, Ranjit Hall got a

job with the federal government. He worked for the Citizenship and Immigration Department and the Secretary of State—Multiculturalism. He was instrumental in setting up the Human Rights Program and NACIO (National Assocation of Canadians of Indian Origin). His last duties with the government involved addressing the settlement problems of refugees. He is now retired and living in Ottawa.

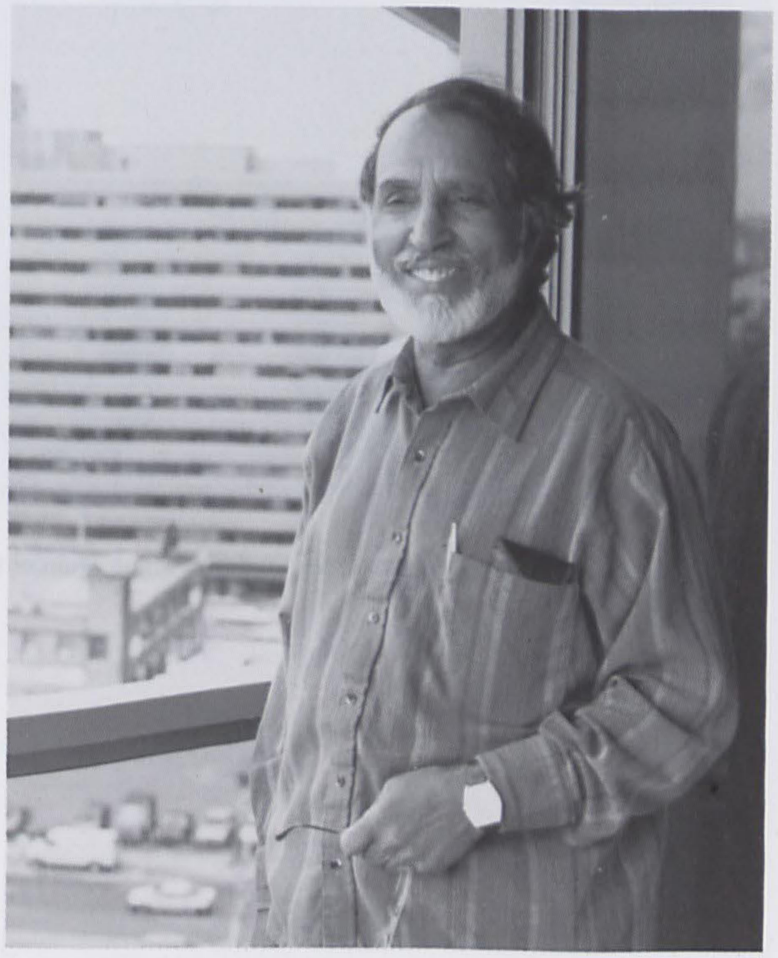
Mr. Dedar S. Sihota's teachers in Duncan were instrumental in persuading him to go on with his education, while his own people were not so encouraging: "Very few people went on and got an education. By the time they were fourteen or fifteen they just left school to find a job in the mill. I remember when I was about fourteen, the question came up. I had just finished elementary school and wanted to go to high school in Duncan. The advice from numerous people was, 'You are wasting your time. Why go on? You can earn more money in a mill than you'll ever get with your education.'

"They would talk about other people who had got their degrees and couldn't get a job. There's one who had a degree in agriculture, Hazara Singh Garcha was his name. There were no professionals from the Sikh community being employed or hired by anybody in Vancouver or BC at that time. So he was unable to secure a position and consequently people were advising me not go on. I'd probably end up getting a degree and still having to work in a mill.

I'm an idealist, I wanted an education for education's sake. I knew that I wouldn't get a better job. When I was working at Hillcrest, the young guys would laugh and say, "If you go to school, you'll be the most highly qualified lumber worker in the country so why are you going to school? The white people aren't going to give you a job in the offices." I'd say, you guys just drink your booze, and have your parties, sing your songs and whatever else you like to do, just let me live my life. I prefer to spend my money over here. I may never become a worker in this place or get this type of position, but if an opportunity ever came up, it wouldn't be you, it might be me. They made fun of me all the time.

Those were the younger guys. The older guys, including my father, were always telling me, "Get the most education you can, it's the only thing that will stay with you." That was good advice, that was real good advice. I was beholden to those old guys because I was able to stay on course and away from all the things that other young guys were getting into then.

—Mr. Ranjit Hall



Mr. Ranjit Singh Hall, July 11, 1991.



Rugby champion team members Jermeja and Teja Singh Hundal (spelled "Hundall" here) are pictured at the lower left and lower right corners.

"I sort of liked school and I decided I'd better keep going, in spite of the opposition from our own community and lack of encouragement from some people. There were others at the same time who said, 'Education is the only way to go, get as much education as you possibly can get, come what may, it will be a benefit to you'."

Dedar Sihota's elementary school teacher, Mr. Yard at Hillcrest, was

not only a good teacher who encouraged him to become involved in many school activities, but he showed him much personal respect. "I liked him very much," Sihota explains. "He gave me all the opportunities to progress at my own speed. He'd give me extra books to look at and read. He kept me involved in other school activities. He got other kids to help me. I was fairly good in sports, so he'd put me in charge of looking after the games. So through that kind of encouragement I remained in the educational field.

"He even invited me to his house for dinner. This must have been in June, when I was finishing elementary school. This to me was kind of unheard of, a Canadian inviting an East Indian Sikh to his house and offer a meal. To my knowledge it wasn't being done. So that was quite an experience to go to this strange environment, where the table is set and all the knives, forks and cutlery are there. It was a very nicely appointed house. I'd never seen anything like that in the bunkhouses and cookhouses of our own community."

Before entering high school, Dedar Sihota got his hair cut and took off his turban and changed his ways. He thought that this would be a good time to make these types of changes since he was going into a new situation. He tried to be more "easy-going and free" to better fit in with the other students, trying to mix and socialize more.

He did well in high school. His strong subjects were math and science but he found French difficult, even though he already knew Punjabi, Urdu and English. His success in high school brought him recognition from his teachers and peers. He felt that he was one of them. "In the Duncan high school, I went up to grade eleven. At the end of the eleventh year, they were picking somebody to be president of the Council for grade twelve, and my name was suggested. I nearly got it. Apparently there was some opposition from some of the parents in the community, that an East Indian should become the president of the Student Council in Duncan. My science teacher told me later that if that hadn't entered into it, that I would have been elected.

"Another thing happened at that time, the war was on and I was in Army Cadets. It was part of the school program. You had to belong to them as part of the PE program. I was a sergeant there, and taking the platoon out to do their regular march I'd be the officer and I'd be giving the commands and they'd be obeying them. To me it didn't matter and to the students it didn't matter but it mattered to the community, that I was in charge. There were some complaints to the school about that."



Lord Selkirk School, Vancouver, 1939. Miss Jaginder Kaur Bains is the girl with her hair covered, at left in the first row.

After finishing high school in Victoria, Dedar Sihota took a year off to work at the Hillcrest mill in order to finance his education at UBC. The Sikh community's negative attitude toward education was still strong in the 1940s, but more people were going on to get a university education. He mentions Jerry Hundal, Ranjit Hall, Pritam Sangha, Kapoor's two daughters and Ranjit Mattu among others. Sihota found no discrimination at university. His professors treated him fairly and he was well accepted. In 1949, he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree, majoring in economics and psychology.

Sihota tried unsuccessfully to get a job in business, for at this time it was still difficult for East Indians to break into the professions and white collar jobs. As had been predicted, he ended up working in a mill, only now operating a machine, the resaw.

Later, on the advice of a friend, he went to normal school and got his teaching degree, and became the first Sikh teacher in Vancouver at Renfrew School. His career in education eventually encompassed elementary and high school teaching, counselling and vice principal, principal and administrative duties at the district level. In his own words, getting an education had been worthwhile, with "never a dull moment."

Kapoor Singh, a mill owner, and his wife Besant Kaur had their children's lives planned even before they were born. Education was a



The rugby team at Vancouver Technical High School, 1939. Mr. Jagat Singh Uppal is seated in the front row, third from right.

vital part of the life plan for their daughters Jagdis and Sarjit. Dr. Sarjit Kaur Siddoo explains: "Both Mother and Father had decided that if they had any children—and that wasn't likely since Mother was almost forty when we were born—they decided that their children would be doctors. They would get their education here, then go back to India and serve in their village. As well they would get involved in the freedom movement [for an independent India]. That's how we were brought up."

The girls began their schooling at Mayo where their father and his partner Mayo Singh had their mill. In 1935 they moved to 2416 York Street, Vancouver, to a home that their father had built for their mother when she first came to Canada in 1923. It was near the 2nd Avenue gurdwara and the children attended Henry Hudson School. "It was a new world for us," Dr. Siddoo recalls. "I was in grade four and my sister was in grade five. It was a big school, the most I had in my class before [in Mayo] was seven students, here we had between thirty and forty students. We were always at the upper end of the class, never the lower end. We had lots of friends. There were some East Indian kids there, not that many. Bunt Gurdass and I were in the same class. I think he was pretty naughty. He's the only one, there were lots of Japanese



Dr. Sarjit Kaur Siddoo, August 11, 1993.

kids, I don't remember any Chinese. That only went up to grade six, so junior high and senior high school was at Kitsilano High School."

Both girls went on to UBC for their pre-med courses and then to the University of Toronto for medical school. They became doctors and went to India and set up hospitals in their family's village as their parents had planned. From the time their daughters were born, the Kapoors supported and encouraged them to do well. "In those days," Sarjit says, "our people had a saying: 'To be educated is like drowning.' It gets you nowhere. What good is education when you'll end up pulling lumber in a mill? But my father and mother never looked at it that way. And Father always said, 'It doesn't matter if you are boys or girls, you have equal rights, and don't ever feel that you can't do this or that.' He was very much in favour of people having equal rights; not one dominating the other but having equal rights. He was way ahead of his time. He really was a visionary."

The Kapoor girls, the Hundal boys, Ranjit Mattu, Ranjit Hall and Dedar Sihota had a dream and realized it by pursuing their education at great personal sacrifice. For all of them, motivation was a key factor in their education, whether it was self-motivation or encouragement from teachers, elders or parents. The histories of these particular young Sikhs teach a valuable lesson: that individuals are capable of overcoming great obstacles by perseverance and dedication to their goals.

5 Social Life

THE SIKHS' social circle was very restricted, since work took up much of their time and energy. Any free time that remained was spent in the company of their family or fellow Sikhs at their homes or at the gurdwara. They seldom ventured far from these three venues: work, home and temple.

After work, during the week, the Sikhs would socialize amongst themselves in their homes or bunkhouses. They seldom went out since they were too tired and had little time or money to spend on entertainment. On most occasions they would talk about conditions here or in the villages in India, or talk about politics, drink tea and find other ways to amuse themselves. Ranjit Hall recalls his life at Fraser Mills in 1924, when he was seven years old: "We played ghuli-dhanda [a Punjabi game], and we played all these other kinds of games there with the grownups. They included me, I was the only kid around, the rest were all adults. I have a fond memory of Fraser Mills. Even at that

Many of the problems our people faced were a direct result of our not being able to speak English. We could not tell anyone how we felt. We managed by depending on other Sikhs who could speak for us. The old-timers told me that they would walk ten miles to get someone to write letters to India or to get their letters read for them. When we sent letters to India we'd enclose a pre-addressed envelope so that our relatives could send us their reply in that envelope without any expense or bother to them. Sometimes letters were sent without postage but they somehow got through.

— Mr. Kartar S. Ghag

They had a tough time not knowing the language. When my dad needed to get an envelope and paper to mail a letter, he went to the post office. He took out his handkerchief, neatly folded it this way and that way, spit on his finger and then put his finger down onto the handkerchief and said, "India". The postmaster knew that he wanted to post a letter to India and gave him what he needed.

— Mr. Hari S. Manhas

There is an old story of when our people first came to Canada. A group of our turbanned Sikhs needed eggs and milk and so they went to a farm in the Fraser Valley. They didn't know how to explain what they wanted so they acted like chickens and pretended to be laying eggs. It must have been a funny sight to see grown men clucking and flapping their wings. The farmer's wife got the message though and laughed so hard that she gave them what they wanted free of charge.

—Mr. Manga S. Jagpal

Men dressed in suits, probably going to temple on a Sunday, c. 1908. Sunday was a special day for Sikh men, as most of them worked six days a week and Sunday was their day to socialize and catch up on happenings here and in India.





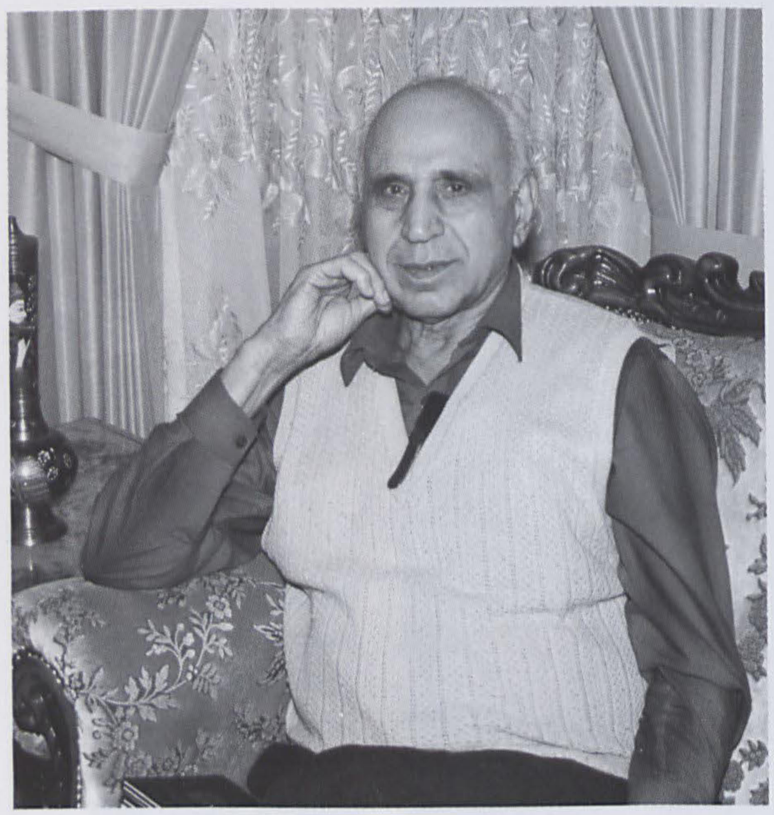
Inside view of the Vancouver Sikh Temple on 2nd Avenue, 1946. Hari Singh is the temple guard, Labh Singh is sitting at the altar, and Pakhar Singh is at right. (*CVA* Ch P85, N112)



Men preparing food at the Queensborough Sikh Temple, New Westminster BC, c. 1940. Left to right: Jarnail S. Sull, Sabu Singh, Magar S. Rai, Meha S. Bains, unknown, Gurdev Kaur Sidhu and Sardara S. Gill.



Queensborough Sikh Temple, New Westminster BC, c. 1940. *View of the langar, the eating hall where the men served the food after the women did the cooking in the kitchen area.*



Mr. Amar Singh Mattu, February 7, 1991.

age I could read Gurmukhi [written Punjabi] quite well. These fellows, older men, would sit around in the yard and take their enamel mugs of tea and sit in the sun, in the evening. They would sit there and just sort of rest for they'd done a hard day's work. Sometimes on the weekend they'd be resting after washing their clothes and so on. They somehow got to know that I could read Gurmukhi. Somebody gave me a Banda Bahadur, a classical Indian tale of a brave person. I used to sit there and read this to them. They would say 'Ah ha, ah ha.' I don't know if they were saying that for my reading or if they were just enjoying their cups of tea. It was enjoyable for me and for them."

There was a strong bond among the Sikhs in these times. Many older Sikhs lament the loss of that closeness with the growth of the community. Mr. Amar S. Mattu describes the camaraderie of the early days: "We were so close then. One way or another we always tried to get together. We'd go visiting to one another's houses. We'd walk right across town to where Manga used to work at Spencer's house. We'd go



Inside view of the 2nd Avenue Sikh Temple, Vancouver, in the 1940s. Women sat on the left side and men on the right side of the worship hall. (Yucho Chow Studio)

visit him there. We were all guys, one or two years apart in age. We got together whenever we could."

On weekends most socializing occurred at the gurdwara, the heart of the community life. Its prime function was as a religious and social centre but it did much more than that. It fed the Sikhs literally, spiritually and figuratively. The temple committee and their religious leaders were in touch with every aspect of an individual's life here and in India. They handled all births, deaths, marriages, engagements, celebrations, partnerships and petty squabbles. Their role involved counselling, mediating, advising, translating, housing, employment, health, communications, and the fight for justice and equality. Any action that was planned and any fight that was fought had its beginning at the temple. All Hindustani people were welcome there. "There were no differences then," Lachman Thandi explains, "not like now, whether someone was Hindu, Sikh or Moslem. We never felt any difference in those days. There were some Hindus and some Moslems living nearby, not many, they all came to the gurdwara. They worshipped and ate with us, gave donations to whatever cause there was



A group of young Sikhs in a parade in Vancouver, 1936. (CVA 300-24)

at the time. If we met them in town we'd offer to buy each other milk or tea. We never felt any other way. We all went to the temple together; but they were unable to join the temple committee, only Sikhs could be members. They did not seem to mind, though, since lots of us didn't want that position. What was important was that we were together on the issues, like immigration and major issues here and in India, and we were."

By 1925, the Khalsa Diwan Society had autonomous branches in Vancouver, Abbotsford, New Westminster, Golden, Duncan, Coombs and Ocean Falls—virtually everywhere Sikhs lived in any number. This was a province-wide organization, led by locally elected committee members whose duties were to manage each temple and to maintain constant communication among the temples.

To guarantee the economic survival of each of the different temples, special religious celebrations were shared. All of the province's Sikhs would gather in Victoria for Baisakhi celebrations, in Vancouver for Guru Gobind's Birthday, in Abbotsford for Guru Nanak's Birthday and



Mr. Gurdass Singh Johal with his wife Bhani Kaur Johal and their children, (left to right) Bunt, Bonto, Paulo, and Bachan (in Mr. Johal's arms), in front of their 1927 Buick. The photograph was taken in 1934.

so on. They would stay at one another's houses or at the temple overnight. "Everyone from all over the province would come to these functions," Mrs. Pritam K. Johl remembers. "They would even stop work on the farms to attend the Akand Path. It was so important to see one another and keep in touch. We stayed at people's houses, sleeping wherever, no one cared then as long as we were together. No one stayed in hotels."

There were many stories of loading up the wood truck with people and driving to Abbotsford or New Westminster for these special religious services. This was common practice, since few people had cars but there were plenty of wood trucks in the community. This sharing of religious days kept the province's Sikhs in touch with one another and enhanced the welfare of each community.

Going to the temple was especially important for the women, since they seldom left the confines of their own homes. They mainly looked



Mrs. Pritam Kaur Johl, April 10, 1991.



Two women with their children, *Vancouver, 1936*. Sikh women kept their heads covered when in public, and they wore western clothes or a style that blended western and eastern influences, as shown here. (*CVA* 300-23)



Left to right: Naranjan Kaur Singh, Ajit Kaur Singh, Amar Kaur Sangra and Labh Kaur Sangra, outside the Aquatic Club in Kelowna, BC, 1946.

after their husbands, children and other relatives, spending their time on domestic and household duties. Mrs. Dhan Kaur Johal describes her social life on 2nd Avenue: "When the ladies had done all their housework we'd spend our time sitting on one another's front stairs talking. Sometimes we'd go for walks to the beach. No one bothered us when we went on our walks. Our family had a car, so sometimes I would take the ladies to the beach in the car, all the time making sure to be home in time to make the men their roti. We knew what time the



Abbotsford Sikh Temple, 1934. Many of these Sikhs are from Vancouver, Victoria and Queensborough (New Westminster). They made the special trip to the Abbotsford gurdwara to celebrate Guru Nanak's birthday on November 26.

mills stopped work. Sometimes I would drive to Cedar Cove Sawmill to deliver the men's roti.

"There was so much caring and love then in our community. We were so close, like brothers and sisters. When the ladies went to the gurdwara, they'd come to our house after the services. We'd tell the priest to tell the men where to find us. When the men finished their business they'd meet their wives at our house. Many times our friends would stay over, sometimes for months and months. If someone came from India, they would stay with us until they found a job. Jobs



The Khalsa Diwan Society welcomes Reverend C. F. Andrews, a friend and colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, to Vancouver at the CNR Station, April 1929.

weren't always easy to find, especially in the Depression times. We all stuck together and took care of one another.

"Women got together at the temple on Sundays or at weddings. Weddings did not occur very often, not like now. They were special occasions. We looked forward to them, we sang, danced and had fun."

Most of the women never had the opportunity to learn English and those who did learned much later from their children. Whatever time they spent away from their homes was at the temple in the company



Sikh singer/musicians with traditional Indian musical instruments, the sarangi and dhadh (small drum), c. 1905. (UBC)

of their own people. There they would pray, socialize, cook, clean, babysit, arrange marriages and gossip. "I'd walk to the gurdwara," says Mrs. Rattan Kaur Thauli, who lived close to the Abbotsford temple. "It was only five minutes away. I would do sewa [service], sweep, clean, there were a lot of fruit trees to care for, rake leaves, cut and pile wood for the kitchen."

The temple leaders also made sure that the Sikh community maintained high standards of housekeeping. They did not want the city or neighbours to criticize them for being dirty or uncivilized so there were periodic inspections of the Sikhs' homes and lodgings. Mrs. Johal explains: "There was a man named Dusanj who was the president of the gurdwara committee. He would go to the Sikh homes and check

to see that they were kept clean, the kitchen, all the rooms. He even went to the cookhouses and bunkhouses. He'd say, 'Why is this so dirty? Clean this, pick this up and throw this out!' When we bought another house, Nand Singh, Karnail's dad, asked Dusanj to come and inspect the house. He said, 'Not yet; in two months, when you've lived in it for a while. Now it's the white lady's cleaning'."

The Sikhs were very proud of their gurdwara and they showed their pride by having special functions and inviting guests. On these occasions everyone would attend. In 1929, the Khalsa Diwan Society invited two very important people to Vancouver and Victoria. Reverend Charles F. Andrews, a friend and colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, and the famous poet Rabindranath Tagore were invited to see firsthand the unfair treatment of the East Indians by the Canadian government.

Sometimes musicians, athletes, politicians or visitors from India would come to the temple. Locally educated Sikhs like Sadhu Singh

Ishar Singh Bains, the aviator, came to Canada in 1910. His first job was clearing land, then he worked on a railway gang building the rail line to Port Alberni. In 1913, he helped the editor of India and Canada by setting type and helping to get the Punjabi paper out into the Canadian Sikh community. A year later, along with some fellow Sikh partners, he started the Silver Creek Lumber Company in Mission City, BC. His enterprising spirit led him to Alberta in 1919 where he and his partner, a white Canadian, started a general store. Then he moved on to Winnipeg in 1920, where he worked as a mechanic in a garage. Working with machines led to his inventing the "pen point extractor" for which he applied to Ottawa for a patent, and later sold the invention.

In 1922 Ishar returned to the Pacific coast and started a logging camp with some Sikh partners. He enjoyed working on the machines and did all the repairs and maintenance. Doing mechanics piqued his interest in aviation so he moved to the mainland and joined the Air Force Club, whose offices were in the Dominion Building in Vancouver. His interest in aviation then led him to Los Angeles, where in 1927 he joined the Warren School of Aeronautics. There he finished his Ground, Meteorology, Navigation and Theory of Flight courses. In 1929 he finished the Flying course in the California School of Aeronautics. He thrilled the local community by making parachute jumps in Victoria and North Vancouver. He was known in the Sikh community as "Odaroo" (one who can fly).

A HINDU AVIATION CLUB IN B.C.

We are glad to know that plans are afoot and encouragement is being given by his compatriots in Canada to Mr. Ishar Singh, the first Canadian Sikh aviator, to organize an Aviation Club . . . There are many young men who have been inspired by the example of Ishar Singh and are keen to learn aviation. It is interesting to note the growing interest that is being taken in aviation by the youth, in India. Mr. Chawla, the first Indian who at the end of last month made a flight from India to England is only seventeen years of age and he and his companion, Mr. Engineer, another Indian, have been receiving congratulations both in England and India for their feat which was made on their own initiative. Why not a Canada to India flight by one of our boys here?

The committee in charge of the celebration of the 24th of May by the district of North Vancouver, at Mahon Park, announces that Mr. Ishar Singh will make a parachute jump on that day and expenses in connection with this jump will be borne by the Hindu community of British Columbia, as their share in the celebration.

—from India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information, April 1930



Sir Rabindranath Tagore's visit to Vancouver on April 15, 1929. Tagore, a well-known poet, was invited by the Sikh community. Back row, left to right: Rev. C. F. Andrews, Munsha Singh, Kartar Singh (Hundal), Sham Singh. Front row, left to right: Puran Singh, Harnam Singh, Tagore, Jagat Singh, Wattan Singh.

Dhami and Darshan Singh Sangha would discuss the union movement or local politics. "I would go the gurdwara on Sundays," says Darshan, "where I would meet everyone because everyone in those days went to the gurdwara. After the prayers were over we would stay and have debates. The elders would ask the students what was going on in the world. When my turn would come to tell them something I would be



Jeremeja Hundal speaking to the congregation at the Vancouver Sikh Temple, c. 1930.



Members of the Hindustanee Young Men's Association, Vancouver, 1929. Seated, left to right: Teja S. Hundal, K. N. Paude, Ajaib S. Sangha. Jermeja Hundal is wearing glasses. (Yucho Chow Studio)

> When we first came here most white people thought that Sikhs were uneducated, looked different, didn't dress properly and lived cheaply. In those days they avoided us because we didn't know English and our living habits were at odds with their ways. If some white people did make an effort to get to know us, that was fine, we said hello and that was that. I don't think that they were afraid of us. I guess there was a mutual misunderstanding, though. The white people thought that the Sikhs wanted to be by themselves and therefore avoided contact with us, and we thought the white people wanted to be by themselves so we stayed away from them and kept to ourselves. That's just the way it was.
>
> —Mr. Lachman S. Thandi

terrified. I didn't know what I should or shouldn't say. But gradually I got used to speaking in front of the elders. We would talk about Indian independence, our fight for rights and socialism."

Mrs. Jagdish K. Singh, whose husband Harnam Singh was the priest of the 2nd Avenue temple, recalls these days: "People would talk about the problems in the villages, the lack of freedom because of the British Raj, the lack of education for the children, the poor social and political conditions. They were so helpless in those days. We felt sorry for them so we'd take a collection and send money back to the villages. Some of the men who would lecture were my husband, Mit Singh, Geevan Singh Braich from Mission, Sundar Singh from Abbotsford and other men of respect."

The Sikhs contributed their time and money generously to their gurdwara. By their own accounts, the Vancouver Khalsa Diwan Society had contributed $295,463 to various social and political causes before 1921:

1. to sufferers from massacres	$ 4,330
2. to families of political prisoners	$ 2,100
3. to sufferers from political causes	$ 30,700
4. to Congress Tilak Swaraj fund	$ 3,333
5. to religious and educational causes	$148,000
6. to *Komagata Maru* case	$ 50,000
7. to immigration cases	$ 30,000
8. to deputations to Cdn. and Br. govts	$ 12,000
9. to Hindustani Press in Canada	$ 15,000
Total	$295,463

Sikhs seldom ventured out of their own ethnic community for a number of reasons: racial prejudice, lack of facility with English, their own insecurity and lack of social opportunity. Some Vancouver men would go to the theatres downtown or to restaurants for a meal but they would go with one another, not mixing with white people. A favourite spot was Gibson's Dairy on Hastings Street, where they would eat ice cream and drink fresh milk, cream and buttermilk. This was a special treat for them, as these rich dairy products reminded them of their farms in the Punjab.

Lachman Singh Thandi describes the men's social life downtown: "At the BC Electric Station on the corner of Carrall and Hastings Street, the shoeshine man would not shine our shoes. When we would go sit in the chair, he'd either light up a cigarette or open his thermos and

take a coffee break. So we avoided him. We used to go to the Capitol and Orpheum theatres with no problems. There were a few rundown theatres on Hastings that would not let our turbanned Sikhs in, so we'd go to the Royal nearby. It used to cost 10 cents, there used to be a live dance at the end of each show. There was another theatre by the police station that charged only 5 cents a show, lots of us would go there to pass time.

"Lots of beer parlours wouldn't serve us beer. They thought that turbanned Sikhs were troublemakers. Whites were troublemakers too. If some white guy started trouble, the Sikhs would fight back and get a bad reputation for that. It was very rare that a Sikh came home beat up, only if he was very drunk. Sikhs would not take a beating. There was one guy named Thakher Singh Dhesi. He had been drinking and got into a fight outside the Royal Theatre with some sailors. They'd also been drinking. He just kept picking them up and throwing them onto the sidewalk, all five of them. He beat them good. Another time at the dairy where a lot of our Sikhs would go, Thakher Singh and another Sikh made a bet to see who could drink the most cream. You may not believe it but he drank forty glasses with two eggs in each glass! The other guy stopped at twenty or twenty-five glasses. Then he gave the girl 10 dollars to cover their bill."

There were other establishments that would not serve Sikhs. "There was Scott's Cafe on Granville Street," says Karnail Johl, "and the Beacon Theatre and the Strand Theatre. There was a sign there saying that you are not allowed in if you had a beard and turban. There were some big hotels, like the Vancouver Hotel, that would not allow Sikhs in either."

Mr. Naranjan S. Mahal, a turbanned Sikh, tells of going to the Ivanhoe Hotel on Main Street in Vancouver with two other Sikhs who



Mr. Naranjan S. Mahal, July 4, 1991.

In our community there were those men who liked to drink and dress fashionably and chase after girls. We called them "Jacks." The definition of "Jack" is a person who works and then whatever money he makes, he wastes, usually on pleasures like alcohol. He drinks and shares with others, then he will go into the city looking for a girl. He never writes home and never sends any money home because he is too busy spending the money on himself. He likes to earn money for the sole reason of spending it on himself. He may fight from time to time but he does not wish to fight.

Then there is the "Garari," one who likes to look nice and wear expensive clothes. "Garari" is different from "Jack" in the sense that garari comes from the Punjabi word great. A garari person does not waste his money. He works, saves, spends and shares with his fellows, never forgetting his family obligations. That is truly a great person. We had both these types in our community.

—Mr. Darshan S. Sangha

Bains family portrait, c. 1927. Standing, left to right: Dedar Singh Bains, Sadhu S. Bains. Seated, left to right: Gopal S. Bains, Piara S. Bains, Tara S. Bains.





Mr. Piara Singh Bains, September 29, 1990.

both had their hair cut. They got served but the waiter refused to serve Mahal. Mr. Magar S. Rai remembers that in Duncan, "when we used to go to the beer parlour we had to sit in a separate room in the corner, this was for anyone with a turban and beard. This was in 1934 to 1936, then I shaved in 1938 and I could sit with the white people. Same thing in the cinema, they used to make us sit upstairs."

Mr. Piara S. Bains, who knew English very well and socialized with white people, would challenge proprietors about their unfair treatment of their Sikh customers: "I took my uncle Dedar Singh to the Rex Theatre on Hastings. We used to call it Beacon, that's where the tram used to come in. This was in 1943. There was a good movie he wanted to see and they would not let him in because of the turban. I said that if the turban was going to hinder someone's view, we would buy the large seat. It was higher up and no one was behind us. I paid extra money for it. He had no excuse then so he let us in. Then, I saw ladies sitting with great big hats on in front of us. So I called over the



The Rex Theatre, Vancouver BC, 1919. Management did not allow turbans here, claiming they hindered patrons' view, until Mr. Piara Bains challenged the rule. (CVA 99-240)

manager and told him to sit down in our seats and see how these ladies' hats were hindering our views. So then that opened the gates right there."

The Sikhs made small gains like this one but it always took an individual Sikh to take a stand, otherwise social discrimination would go on unchallenged.

To widen the social circle, a sports league was established among the Sikh millworkers on Vancouver Island. This mill league was set up more for recreation and social purposes than for competition. "This was the first volleyball league for young Sikhs," explains Ranjit Hall, the league organizer. "We played amongst ourselves. Then we had the



The volleyball team for Hillcrest Lumber Company on Vancouver Island, 1932. The team was part of the Mill League.

> In our free time we played grass hockey, on Sunday and Saturday. Five or six of us came from India being able to play the game, and we formed a team. In 1934, 1935 and 1936 we were the best in Vancouver. We consistently beat all the other four teams in the league during these years. Three of our players got chosen on the all-star team, which was made of the best players from all five teams. One of them was me, also Jagir Singh and Magar Singh Gill. We were three of the eleven members on that team to go to Victoria. We won there as well, no one had done that before. We got a lot of respect from the white people. It was mentioned in the newspaper, my name used to come up quite often.
>
> —Mr. Sardara S. Gill

idea that we would set up a cup. So we went to Tara Singh Kauni [the foreman at Hillcrest] and said would he set up a cup. We bought a cup and had it inscribed. We [Hillcrest] played with Youbou, Alberni, Victoria and so on with different sawmill teams made up of our people. They used to all come to Hillcrest for a tournament. We used to put up notices in the cookhouses and everyone would come. It was a big deal."

Sports were also a means for a group of Vancouver Sikhs to socialize with and gain the respect of the dominant culture. Some sports-minded men began the India Grass Hockey Club in 1933 and joined the Mainland Grass Hockey League. The men would work in the lumber mills or drive wood trucks during the day, and practise grass hockey in the evenings and compete on the weekends. They played against four established teams: The Vancouver Club, The Cricketers' Club, the Varsity Club, and the University of BC Club. In 1934 they were the league champions, winning the Mainland League Cup and the O. B. Allan Cup.

One of the most influential of all the Sikh leaders and someone who



The India Hockey Club in front of the Vancouver Sikh Temple, 1934. The team won the Mainland League Cup and the O. B. Allan Cup.

encouraged socializing with the other Canadian people was Kartar Singh. A believer in the "Canadianization" of East Indians, he came to Canada in 1912 and lived in Toronto, apart from any other East Indian people, until 1929 when he was called to Vancouver by the Khalsa Diwan Society. They wanted his help in the fight for their rights, for he had a very good knowledge of the English language as well as the dominant culture of Canada.

Kartar Singh edited a newspaper called *India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information*. It was written in English and Punjabi and had two purposes: "For its immediate usefulness, this publication will endeavour to place before the Canadian public the truth and nothing

but the truth, about the people of North India, now resident in Canada. After giving examples and facts, its appeal will be to invite Canada to scientifically examine now—when sufficient practical results are available—the fitness or unfitness, the merits and demerits, of the Sikh settlers in Canada. The other aspect of the work of this journal will be to inform, through its Punjabee section, the people of North India here and at home, about the life, institutions, problems, requirements, standards and ideals of Canada."

This journal was published periodically from June 1929 to September 1936. It was very well written and informed both the Sikh and non-Sikh community of significant events here and in India. Since many Sikhs did not socialize beyond their own family or neighbourhood, this journal added another dimension to their social lives. It helped give them some legitimacy. Seeing their affairs appear in print made the Sikhs feel more a part of Canadian society.



BC Sikhs mourning the loss of one of their grass hockey team heroes, at the funeral of Mr. Sewak Singh Gill, February 1936. He died from injuries he received in an accident at Dominion Sawmills.

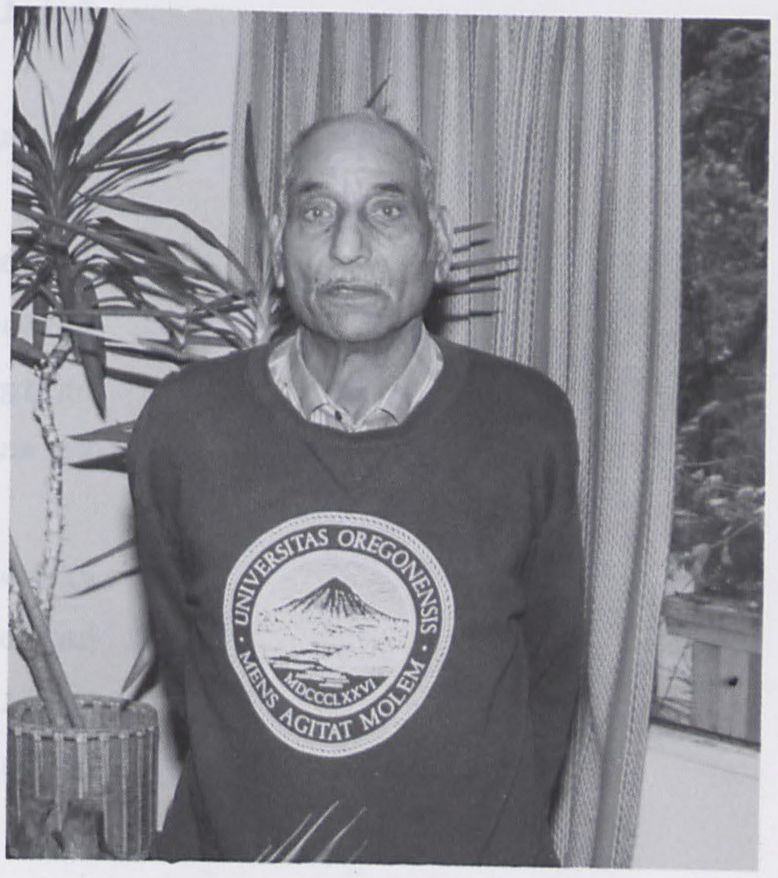
6 The Fight for Rights

IN 1942 under The National War Services Regulations, all single men and childless widowers of the ages twenty to forty (inclusive), who were British subjects and who had been in Canada for at least one year, were being called for compulsory military service. Many Sikhs were included in this group and got notices to report for basic training. But the temple intervened on their behalf: the Khalsa Diwan Society engaged the legal services of Bird & Bird, a Vancouver law firm, and the Sikhs refused to go to war until they were granted full franchise rights.

Mr. Phangan S. Gill came very close, though: "I got my basic training in Vernon. Then I went to Halifax for advanced training. Three days before going overseas, I hurt my finger training on the anti-aircraft gun. They sent me to the hospital and while I was there my unit left for Europe. I was thirty days in the hospital, I think. Then I came back to a new unit, mostly Ukrainians. My finger would still not work properly so they lowered my category and sent me back here. I wasn't fit to go overseas.

"I was stationed at Exhibition Park where they had the Japanese locked up. They didn't treat them too good, they lost everything. They wasn't no troublemakers, no, no, not one case. We had a lot of Japanese neighbours on 2nd Avenue. For two blocks there was only one white house, the rest were Japanese and East Indians. They didn't lock up Germans or Italians. I guess they made a mistake."

"I was the first person to be drafted in the Hindustani community," Mr. Darshan S. Sangha remembers. "Gareebu was the second. Discussions arose at the gurdwara and our people began to say why are we being drafted when we have no rights and therefore no duty to defend this country? I asked some people what I should do and they said I should obey. Kapoor Singh said that I should go while the gurdwara people will work on my behalf. So I went to training camp in Vernon. There were some officers there who had served in India. I was



Mr. Phangan S. Gill, October 27, 1990.

A letter from the law offices of Bird & Bird, Vancouver, BC, dated October 8, 1942. The letter protests compulsory military service for all East Indians in BC.

BIRD & BIRD
VANCOUVER, B. C.

October 8th, 1942.

The following letter to be forwarded to the

following newspapers:
The Editor,
Vancouver Daily Province.
Vancouver Sun.
Victoria Daily Times.
Victoria Colonist.
Federationist, Vancouver.
Labour Statesman.
Congress News, Holden Bldg.
Columbian, New Westminster.
Trail News, Trail.
Canadian Press, Vancouver
News-Herald.
President, American Federation of Labour, Ottawa.
President, Canadian Congress of Labour, Ottawa.

COPY

Dear Sir:

We are instructed by the Khalsa Diwan Society, which body represents all "East Indians" resident in British Columbia, to forward you the enclosed Petition.

"East Indians" of British Columbia are disqualified from voting at any election. This is the only Province in Canada where "East Indians" are deprived of the franchise. Nevertheless, they are liable to be called for military service. Thus they suffer the same obligations as other British subjects, without being able to enjoy the like privileges.

It is with the object of remedying this situation that the Petition, a copy of which is enclosed, has been forwarded to the proper Dominion Government and Provincial Authorities. Concurrently with the forwarding of the Petition, our clients are sending to the Minister

BIRD & BIRD
VANCOUVER, B. C.

of National Defence a communication protesting against the imposition upon them of compulsory military service.

Should the Petition be allowed and our clients be granted the franchise they will no longer have any objection to military service, but on the contrary, they will most gladly do their part to further the war effort.

Our clients seek your assistance in making public the situation referred to above. They hope that the granting to them of the franchise will have a soothing effect upon the political unrest in India. Consequently, any favourable publicity you may choose to give to this matter will be appreciated.

COPY

Yours very truly,

RIB:NS

the only Hindustani, the rest were white. Every morning we would get up and run, eat and learn to shoot a rifle. I learned to swear in English at the camp because the sergeant would come in early each morning and yell, 'Hey! You bastards! You sons of bitches! Are you still lying there? Get up!' Every morning we would wake up to insults. As soon as he would begin yelling, everyone would get up, some running to wash their faces, others to the washroom and some just trying to get their clothes on. I learned everything there. I was soon released from the army and I went back to work in the mill. I began to think this is the white people's war, not ours, how could I fight for the white people?"

Several other men got the call to go, but because of the furor raised



Sikhs visiting their friends, who are being detained at federal government immigration offices, located along the southern shore of Burrard Inlet, Vancouver, c. 1930.

by the temple committee, they did not have to join the armed forces. Although the government relented on this issue and did not pursue the matter of compulsory military service for the Sikhs, franchise rights were not granted until some years later.

The government's unjust treatment of the Japanese was deeply felt by the Sikhs. Many of the older Sikhs remember very well how unfairly they were treated by the authorities. "They got kicked out by the government," says Mrs. Jagdish K. Singh, who lived on 2nd Avenue. "They had to leave their homes, they couldn't take anything with them, only what they were wearing. They had to leave everything else, their furniture, belongings, clothes, possessions all behind. They just told them to get out and they did. These were our neighbours and they went empty-handed. It made me feel pretty bad seeing all this.

They told us at the temple that if we didn't stay good, this could happen to us as well. They stood up in the gurdwara and told us these things. We were scared."

The fear was widespread throughout the Sikh community, not only because of the fate of their neighbours, but because of the Canadian government's past treatment of the Sikhs and the uncertainty of their present status. The common feeling was that today it is the Japanese and tomorrow it may be us.

Ironically and sadly, the uprooting of Japanese Canadians improved the Sikhs' fortunes during the 1940s. Many of the Japanese sold their properties to their Sikh neighbours at discount prices. Mr. Karnail Johl describes the events on 2nd Avenue, near the temple: "I can really remember the Japanese getting kicked out because I was older then. We used to have a lot of Japanese kids for friends. Some of the Japanese used to work for my dad, they used to pick wood out of the bunkers, on the chains. They worked for him for quite a while. They used to work in the same sawmills. So when they were going to be moved out because of the war, they came up to my dad. I was there sitting in the living room, listening to them. They wanted to sell him their houses. Whoever had some property, they said, 'How about taking our property off our hands? We have some papers here and we'll sign it over to you.' My dad told them, 'I just can't take it over, I just don't have that much money.' It was wartime then and things were tough, so the good friends' houses he did buy. I remember he gave them $200. Some of them just begged him. They said, 'Give me $100

I went to school with some of the Japanese kids and of course had an opportunity to visit them occasionally in their homes. They were very fine people and it came as a surprise to me when the war broke out in 1941, after Pearl Harbor, all of a sudden they were told very quickly to leave. Those kids had become friends. I couldn't see any reason why they should be uprooted in that way and sent away.

It seemed to me that this was another way to get at the Asiatics. I had heard our people say don't count on permanency in Canada. They were always fearful that they'd be deported. Even during the war they were fearful that they'd be deported. I was of the impression that no, they can't do that. Young idealism, I guess, but when I saw what happened to the Japanese I became a bit more philosophical about it. If it could happen to them it could happen to anybody.

—Mr. Dedar S. Sihota

Top photo shows Henry Hudson School, Vancouver, 1941–42 school year. Bottom photo shows Henry Hudson School in the 1943–44 school year. In the back row, Jeet Bholi is at far left; Paul Mann is fourth from left. In the front row (seated on bench), Phugi Sarai is second from left; Bachan Gurdass is sixth from left. All the students of Japanese descent, pictured in the class photograph of 1941–42, had been interned by the time this photo was taken.





for my house!' So he bought 1633 West 2nd and 1635 West 2nd off the Japanese. The reason I remember the address is because we had them for a long time after that. Then he bought four houses on the corner of 4th Avenue and Fir Street, right on the corner. The total of all four houses was $400, that was around 1940. Then my uncle bought an apartment from the Japanese, a ten-suite apartment on 1600 block West 5th Avenue, for $1100. Our people bought about thirty-five houses down there. The Japanese were just begging them, saying, 'Please take our building, they're going to move us out tomorrow, today is our last day'."

There is a visual testament to Karnail Johl's story of losing his Japanese neighbours and classmates in the class photographs of Henry Hudson School. The photos after 1942 show no Japanese children present in any class, but just a year before there were plenty of smiling Japanese students.

In 1944 an unofficial census was undertaken by the Khalsa Diwan Society, to show the extent to which the Sikhs were becoming an integral part of the Canadian economy. The census was done by selected community members who counted the Sikhs throughout BC in all municipalities and mill communities, and the results were sent to Ottawa. Mr. Ranjit S. Hall recalls his involvement: "At Hillcrest I did a number of things to help our community. I was appointed to go around and do a count of our people in and around there. I knew the language and I went to the families, somehow most of our people trusted me. And where a person wanted somebody to interpret or in matters where the family was concerned, they would rather come to me than to somebody else. And so that kind of trust built up."

The survey was conducted in October–November 1944, and showed that the total population of Sikhs in Canada in the 1940s was 1,756, of whom 1,715—98 percent—resided in British Columbia.

Place	*Population*	*Under 21*	*Over 21*
Kelowna	44	17	27
Port Hammond	16	8	8
Port Moody	19	5	14
Sardis	8	6	2
Mission	19	10	9
Abbotsford	26	11	15
Chilliwack	9	6	3
Agassiz	17	10	7
Kamloops	39	29	19
Cariboo	7	5	2
Nanaimo	1	0	1

Place	*Population*	*Under 21*	*Over 21*
Victoria	338	144	194
Hillcrest	54	12	42
Grand Forks	7	3	4
Coaldale	1	0	1
North Vancouver	43	3	40
Barnet	39	16	23
Vancouver	462	125	337
Youbou	42	0	42
Great Central	22	0	22
Duncan	30	10	20
A.P.L. Alberni	16	3	13
Bloedel	15	3	12
Ladysmith	4	0	4
Sahtlam	9	5	4
Honeymoon Bay	47	20	27
Fraser Mills	44	20	24
Mohawk	14	0	14
Lulu Island (New Westminster)	44	21	23
Lulu Island (Queensborough)	59	33	26
Timberland	10	0	10
Cloverdale	11	6	5
Langley Prairie	5	0	5
Ladner	27	4	23
Sproat Lake	26	4	22
Paldi	115	53	62
Shawnigan Lake	9	6	3
Chemainus	7	3	4
Haney	8	5	3
Sinclair Mills	2	0	2
Calgary, Alberta (While Court, Alta.) (Calaboo)	16	9	7
Montreal, Quebec	3	0	3
Toronto, Ontario	12	2	10
	1,756	614	1,142

Note: In the one published source of this data, minor errors in computation have been acknowledged by the author/editor.

The 1940s were indeed a boom time for the Sikhs living in BC. Jobs were plentiful because of the wartime economy and the shortage of labour at the mills and elsewhere. Because the Sikhs did not have to go to war and had a solid reputation as good reliable labourers, their services were in demand. Everyone had a good job. Sikhs' businesses flourished as they took over lucrative labour contracts, their trucking businesses prospered, and their traditional investments in real estate grew.

"SOCIETIES ACT"

ANNUAL REPORT OF KHALSA DIWAN SOCIETY AS OF JANUARY 31ST, 1940.

Assets.		Liabilities.
Land.....	800.00	
Buildings.....	6000.00	--- nil ---
Furniture.....	2000.00	
Cash in Bank.....	5135.96	
	$13935.96	

REVENUE AND EXPENDITURE:

Income..... $5033.47 Expenses..... $4750.37

LIST OF DIRECTORS:

Names.	Addresses.	Occupations.
Sowarn Singh (Secy)	1866 - W. 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.	Mill Worker.
Bhola Singh (Pres)	1763 - W. 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.	Wood Dealer.
Natara Singh (Treas.)	1866 - W. 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.	Mill Worker.
Banta Singh.	1866 - W. 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.	Mill Worker.
Ghania Singh.	42 - W. 2nd Avenue, Vancouver, B.C.	Wood Dealer.

DATED this 25th day of June, A.D. 1941.

CERTIFIED CORRECT.

"Banta Singh" Director.

"Ghania Singh" Director.

During the war years the temple collected $37,382.73:

Carried over from 1940	$ 5,189.22
Total Receipts in 1941	4,908.37
Total Receipts in 1942	7,974.55
Total Receipts from 1943–45	16,110.59
Loan from Naginder S. Gill	3,200.00
Total	$37,382.73

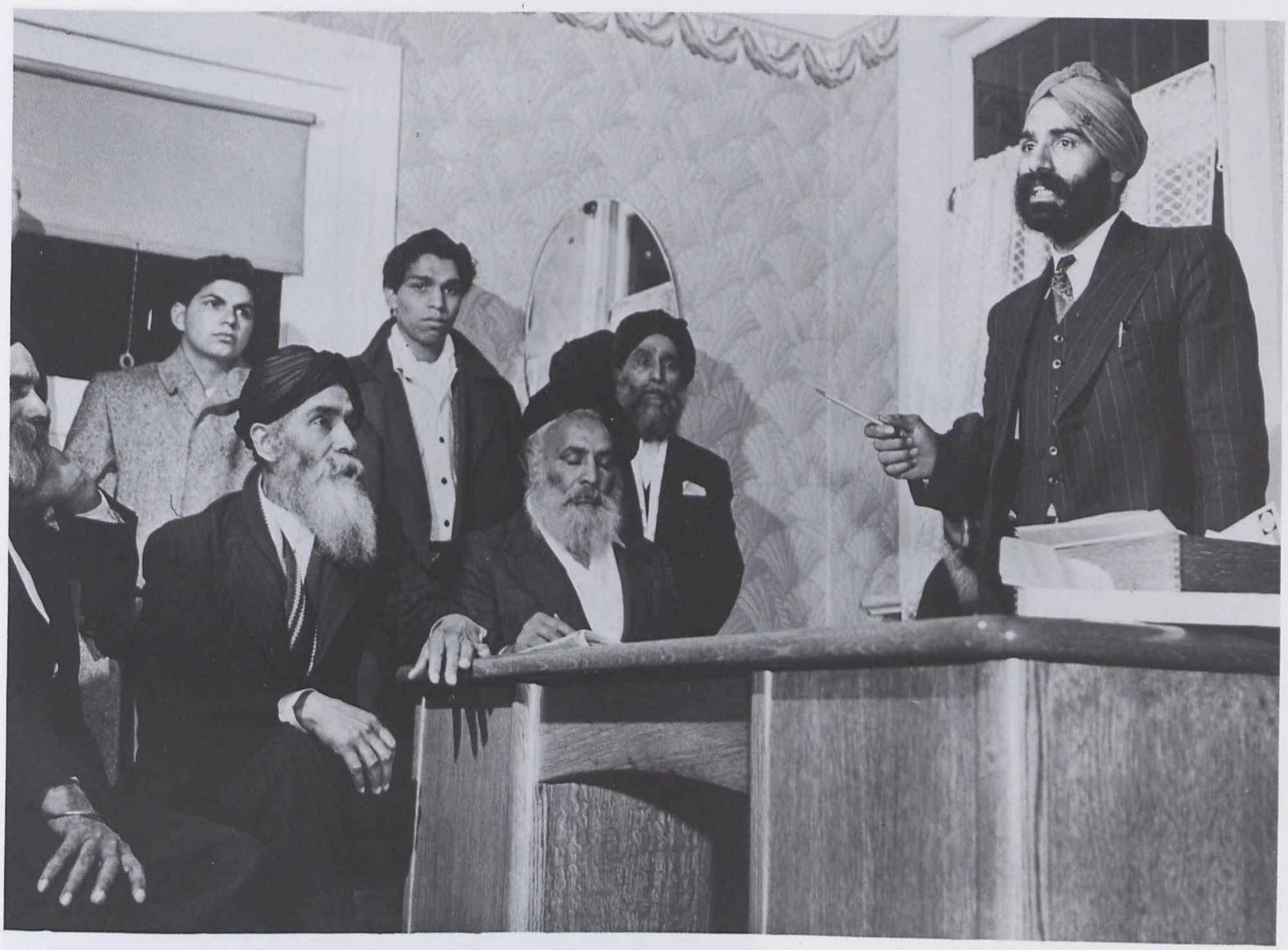
The community prospered economically through hard work, extensive social networking and better employment opportunities, and the Sikhs had become established by investing in their businesses, farms, homes and properties. Their numbers were growing slowly and becoming more balanced in terms of age and gender. However, this new-found prosperity did little to change their standing as Canadians. They still could not call Canada their home until they gained the franchise.

Throughout the Sikhs' years in Canada but especially after World War Two, much of the community's time and energy was focussed on gaining the franchise. They had waited long enough. Much of what the Sikhs wanted and needed now was tied to their right to vote. So this one issue dominated all others and became the Sikh community's major goal. Whenever and wherever Sikhs would gather, they would put aside their petty differences and concentrate their efforts on it. "We held numerous meetings and campaigns demanding that we be given our rights," Mr. Jagat Uppal explains. "The people at the forefront were the committee of the Sikh temple, Naginder Singh Gill was the secretary, Dr. Pandia and others. There was a youth group, of which I was a part, the East Indian Youth Association. In that capacity we held mass meetings at the various theatres in town. We worked for our rights by trying to tell the people that there was an injustice being done to us. We had a parade with banners stating that we wanted our rights to vote."

The leaders of this campaign were Naginder Singh Gill, Kapoor Singh, Mayo Singh, Kartar Singh and Dr. D. P. Pandia. They sent correspondence to Ottawa, and sent delegations there to meet with government officials and explain their special situation. Dr. Pandia, a Hindu lawyer who came to Canada in 1939, led a delegation that included Mr. Batan Singh Dhoot from Victoria, Mr. Ishar Singh Bains and Mr. Naina Singh Kondola. Batan Singh Dhoot financed this campaign, giving $25,000 initially and several thousands thereafter. In 1939, the delegation persuaded the federal government to grant amnesty to

The men had to go back to India to get a bride. There weren't enough ladies here. The first marriages here didn't happen until 1941. The first was in Kamloops, when Pakhar Mann's daughter Amaro married Karnail Kandola. Then after that Hardaso Johal married Charlie Dusanj in Victoria. And the third marriage was Harbunt Johl and Harzara Thaker. All these weddings were in 1941, three months apart. They weren't in the temple, they were all at home. The first wedding in the temple was Asi Johal's at the New Westminster gurdwara in August of 1941.

—Mrs. Pritam K. Johl



Nagindar Singh Gill, secretary of the Khalsa Diwan Society, conducts a meeting in the office at the Vancouver Sikh Temple on West 2nd Avenue, 1946. Seated, left to right: Gurdit Singh, Naranjan Singh, Mehan Singh. Standing, left to right: Jagat Singh Uppal, Sadhu Singh Uppal, Arjan Singh. (CVA Ch p87, N153)

about 218 illegally arrived Sikh immigrants then living in the province. These immigrants had been brought into Canada as sons when they were actually nephews of the pioneers. In India, there is no difference between sons and nephews in the extended family, so Sikhs did not consider this breaking the laws, especially when they felt that these laws were specifically designed to prevent immigration from India. Pandia's group challenged the government of Canada and won. They were heroes and gained a great following in the Sikh community.

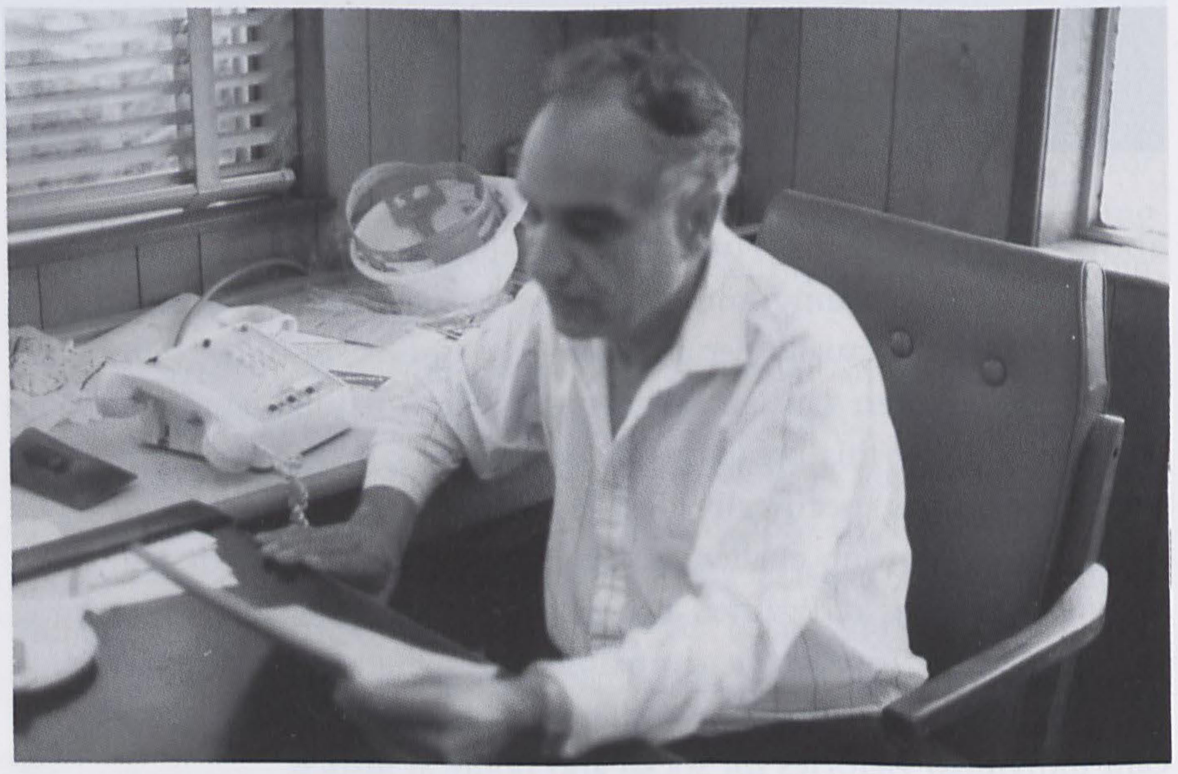
While many important campaigns for social and political justice were organized by the whole Sikh community, there were also significant individual victories for social and political justice.

It was in 1947 when Mr. Mayo, Mr. Kapoor, Giani Naranjan S. Grewal and D. P. Pandia attended a conference at Harrison Hot Springs. All the municipalities were there, having their yearly conference. Pandia decided they had to go there, he wanted to speak at their convention. They said "No, no, no, this is just for aldermen and mayors, nobody else can speak."

Pandia never gave up. They had a big room in the hotel. He asked Mr. Mayo and Mr. Kapoor if they knew a city mayor. They said that they knew the mayor of Victoria, they used to deal with him in business. And there was a Mayor Wragg in Duncan, they knew him too. So Pandia invited them to their room and anybody else who wanted to come, they were all welcome. They had a case of Scotch. Mr. Kapoor never drank but Pandia told him, "Your job is to offer anyone who comes in a drink." So he got all these people coming in and they socialized with them.

The next day the head of the convention asked Pandia to speak. Pandia pointed at Mr. Mayo and Mr. Kapoor sitting there, and said, "These two men had hundreds of employees working for them. Their workers were allowed to vote and these two mill owners could not vote because they were East Indians." Right away they put it to a vote and they decided that East Indians should be allowed to vote in municipal elections. That triggered the change, because the law was that if you could vote in the municipal election, that allowed you to vote provincially and in federal elections. And so we got voting rights at every step. From then on we finally got equal rights.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak



Mr. Jagat S. Uppal, January 4, 1990.





Sikh community leaders, 1946. Left to right: Mr. Kartar Singh Hundal, Mr. Kapoor Singh, Dr. D. P. Pandia, Mr. Mayo Singh.

Mr. Kartar Singh Hundal is standing at left, Mr. Gurbachan Singh is at centre, Mr. Teja S. Hundal is seated at right. (Ken McAllister photo).



Dr. D. P. Pandia with Kelowna's Sikh community, outside the Rutland Community Hall, 1939.

In 1946, Mrs. Ajit Kaur Singh took on an entire city and won. Her father, Mehar Singh, had come to Canada in 1907. He had worked as the foreman of the Sikh workers on the Canadian Pacific Railway and later as a bookkeeper at Mayo's mill. In 1929, his wife Naranjan and daughter Ajit arrived from India and settled with him on their twenty-acre orchard in Kelowna.

They worked hard and prospered, and the family grew to six children. In 1942, Mehar Singh died. Ajit and her mother raised the family and kept the farm going through these difficult times. In 1946, they decided to sell the farm and buy a house in the city where life would be easier and the children could go to better schools. They purchased a nice home in Kelowna for $6,000, and were stopped from moving in because some residents did not want "hindoos" in their neighbourhood.

THE KELOWNA COURIER

.UME 43 | Kelowna, British Columbia, Thursday, August 22nd, 1946 | NUMBER 5

OINT 16 TEACHERS FALL TERM

' of Teachers With Per-
nt Certificates Reported
spector

JAP BRIDGED"

achers Offered $100
y Above Basic Estab-
l in Cameron Report

tment of sixteen new
was approved by the trus-
Kelowna School District
their regular meeting Wed-
night, August 14th. Though
s been and still exists a
of teachers with permanent
es, School Inspector A. S.
reported to the board that,
latest appointments, the
s pretty nearly bridged."
end of July, the situation
ts worst, with several va-
o be filled, he said. In spite
y advertisements in Van-
nd Calgary papers, the re-
as been slow. Teachers
nporary certificates have
been accepted.
the teachers appointed re-
ere offered $100 yearly over
ve the basic established by
meron report. This move
tly due to the fact that the
teachers are in a position
ere the higher salaries pre-

disliking this practice and
g it as a "ticklish situation."
d felt it had no other choice.
ve found that even with the
00, there has been difficulty
g the vacant positions.
xtra $100 will be given also
achers on the present staff.
weeks ago, during negotia-
etween the board and the
an Valley Teachers' Asso-
over a new salary scale for
, the Kelowna School Board
$200 a year above the Cam-
sic. This the association de-
because it was below the
e sought by the B.C. Federa-
Teachers. Both the board
teachers then agreed to ar-
n. The arbitration is due to

RIDE 'EM COWBOY!



The cream of Western Canada's cowboys will be on hand to compete in Kelowna's third annual Stampede which will be held on September 2 and 3, and scenes such as the one above will be enacted here. Many of the dare-devil riders who took part in the famous Calgary Exhibition and Stampede will take part in all events—Photo courtesy Calgary Herald

Fruit And Vegetable

Taxpayers Object To Hindu Buying City House But Girl Openly Defies All Protests

OLD COUNTRY EXPORT DEAL ALMOST READY

Prospects Point to Shipping 2,000,000 Boxes of Apples to United Kingdom

U.S. MARKET

Okanagan's Share of U.S. Export Deal Not Set by Government

Negotiations are still underway regarding the United Kingdom export deal, but prospects point favorably toward the movement of 2,000,000 boxes of apples to the Old Country, officials of B.C. Tree Fruits stated Wednesday. Subject to one or two minor details, the contract will undoubtedly be signed within the near future.

Regarding the Okanagan's share of the U.S. export deal, the quota has not yet been set by Ottawa, but it is expected that B.C. will get the largest share from among the apple producing provinces. A total of 3,250,000 boxes of Canadian apples will be permitted to enter the States, and officials hope that B.C. will get about half of that amount.

Car shipments are far ahead of last year, it was stated. Up to Tuesday, August 20, a total of 2,251 cars have left the Valley, compared with 1,676 during the same period last year, and 1,796 in 1945.

During the past week, daily car shipments have almost tripled those of the week before, indicating that from now on shipments will increase daily. A total of 46 cars were shipped August 12; 73, August 13;

Ratepayers Concerned Over Future—See Property Values Fall if Other Orientals Come Into Neighborhood—Hindu Girl Declares Family Has Right to Live in City—Five Day "Cooling Off" Period Agreed to Between Parties—Hindu Girl Indignant Over Property Sale Being Held Up—Taxpayer Threatens to Move Out if Purchase Is Allowed to Go Through

Hindu Settlement

LOCAL residents, backed by several prominent organizations in the city, are protesting over the contemplated purchase of a house on Wolseley Avenue by a Hindu family on the grounds that if the Orientals settled in the neighborhood, it would be the starting signal for more Far Eastern natives to move in to the residential district, with the result that the area would slowly grow into a Hindu settlement, thereby lowering property values and causing general unpleasantness in the neighborhood. It is understood that a 25-year-old Hindu woman has already placed a deposit on a $6,000 house, and despite the protests from many people in the neighborhood as well as members of several local organizations, she is adamant to go ahead and complete the deal. The young woman, who has supported her mother and four brothers and sisters on a farm for many years, will be getting married next year, and while many of the protesting citizens pointed out that they have nothing against the family personally, they are alarmed over the future, as the district may deteriorate into a Hindu settlement.

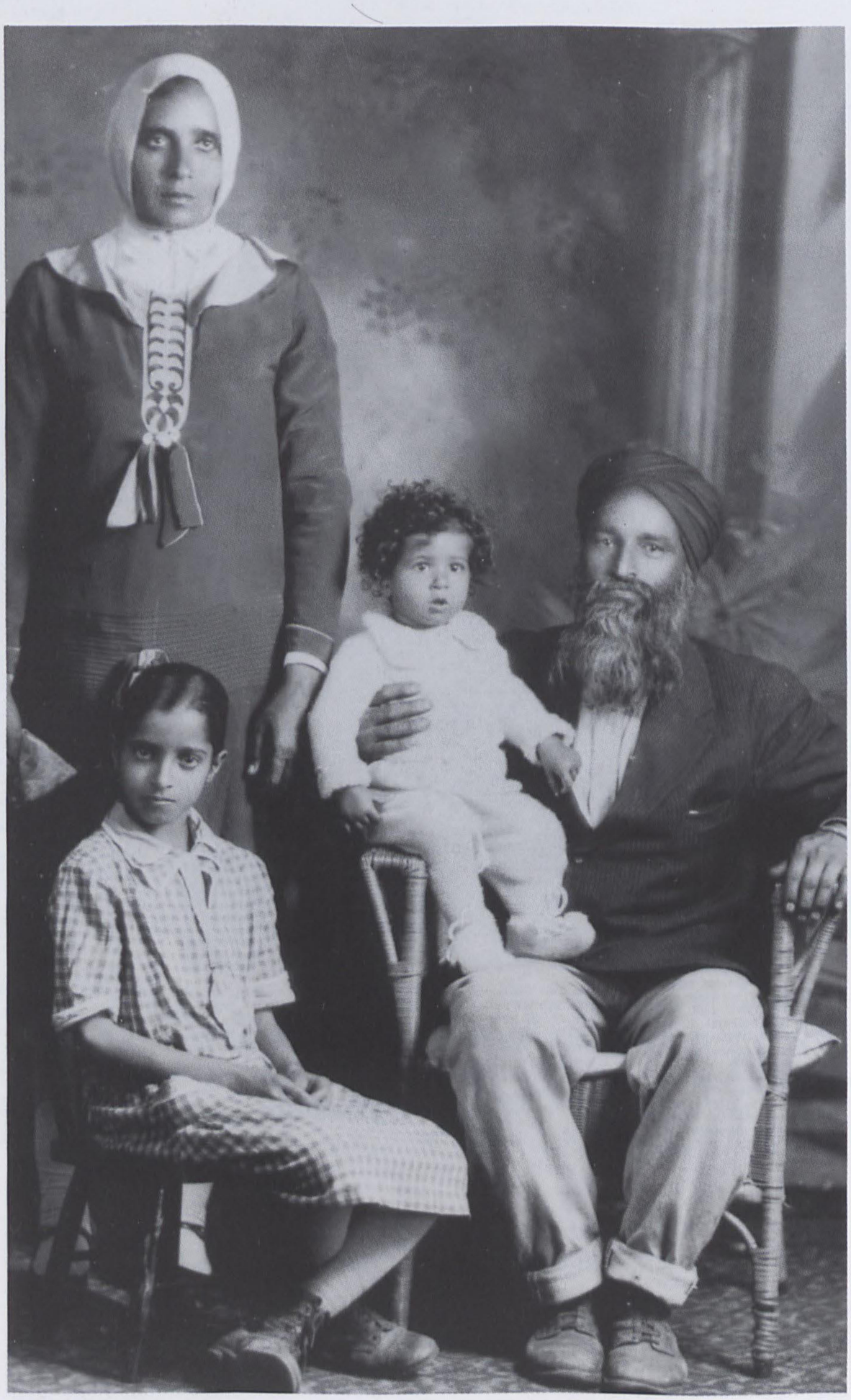
The matter was laid on the door-step of the City Council on Monday night at which time local taxpayers and representatives of civic organizations spoke against the contemplated purchase. After efforts had been made Tuesday morning to persuade the young lady to cancel the deal, another meeting was called Tuesday afternoon, but little progress was made. However, a five-day "cooling off" period was agreed to between the two parties, and in the meantime assistance will be given the Hindu woman to find living accommodation elsewhere.

Media coverage of racial discrimination against the Singh family in Kelowna, 1946.

The matter went to city council. Ajit and a supportive neighbour—Captain Bull, a retired British army officer and a former member of the BC Legislature—spoke in front of the councillors. It was a simple case of racial discrimination, there could be no denial of that. The incident generated considerable public controversy, and the 2nd Avenue temple committee kept an eye on the situation. Eventually Ajit's courage and persistence paid off. After weeks of heated debate and fear of political fallout, she and her family were allowed to move



Above: Mr. Mehar Singh, 1923. He came to Canada in 1907.



Right: Mrs. Naranjan Kaur Singh (standing) with her daughter Ajit, her baby son Jeet, and her father, Mehar Singh. Kelowna, 1931.



The Singh family on their farm in Kelowna, 1937. Left to right: Ajit Kaur Singh, Kartar, Harbhajan. Beant Kaur, Jeet, and their dog Lenny.



Mrs. Ajit Kaur Singh, with grandsons Michael and Jhan, October 31, 1987.

into their home. They became model citizens and many of their previously angry neighbours became their admirers.

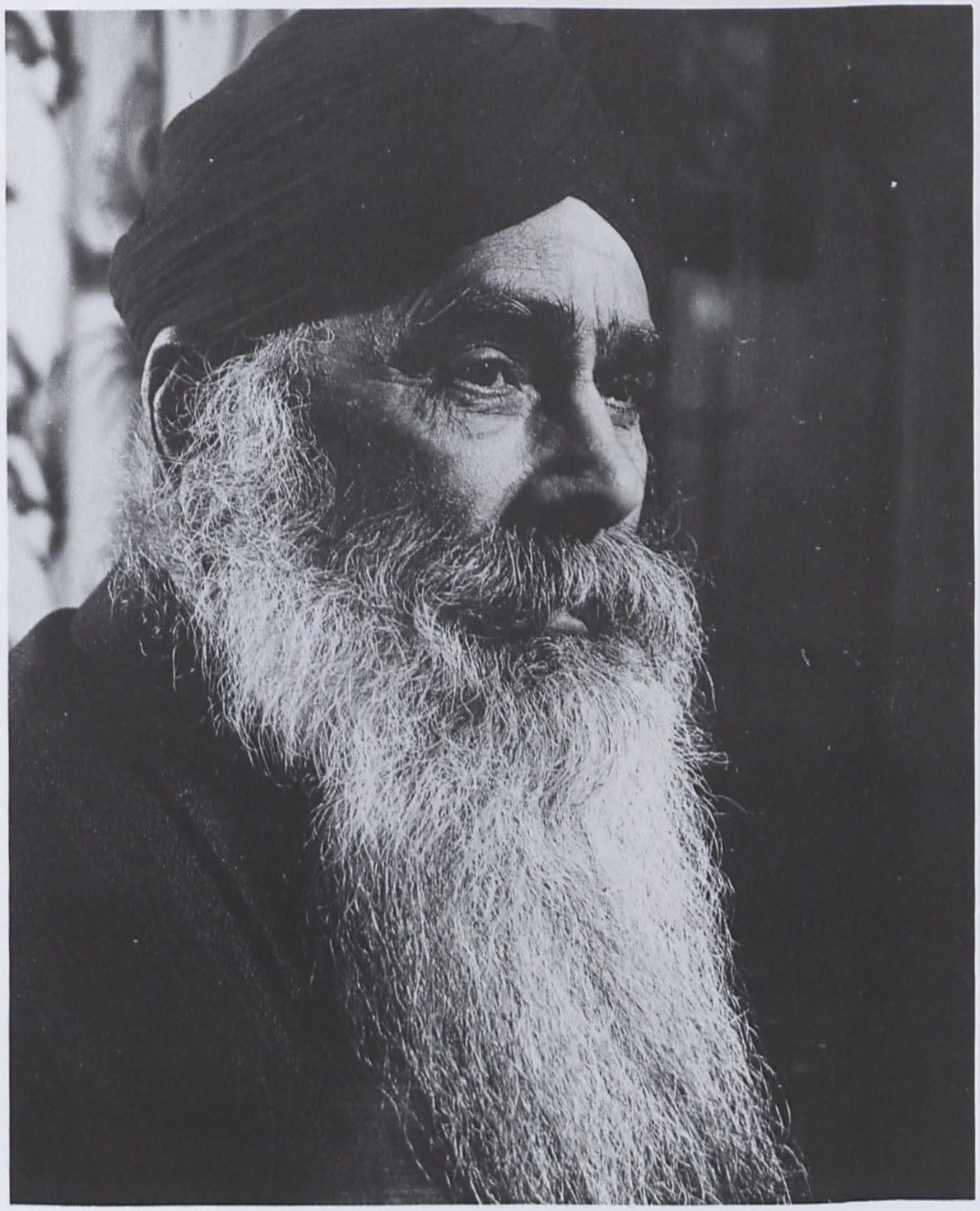
Today there are laws to help protect all people from suffering such indignities. But it took someone to stand up for their rights before things changed. In the Sikh community there is always someone who stands up to lead the fight. It is part of being a Sikh.

In some respects, racism and incidents of discrimination brought the Sikhs closer together as a group and strengthened their resolve. But they never became insular; in fact, they had strong allies amongst white people who helped them fight the battle against injustice and discrimination.

When Mr. Natha Singh Mattu decided to buy a home in the prestigious Shaughnessy area in 1941, he was warned by his real estate agent that the neighbours would block the sale. This upscale district was not yet ready for an East Indian neighbour and the white people felt that their security and property values would be threatened if a Sikh moved into their midst. Natha Singh Mattu very wisely got one of his trusted white friends to buy the house on his behalf, and then the friend registered it back in Mattu's name a few weeks later. The irony of the situation was that the neighbours who complained the loudest were the parents of some students who attended UBC with Mr. Mattu's son Ranjit. The young people got along fine.

Kapoor Singh used the same strategy—getting a trustworthy white friend to buy on his behalf, to avoid discrimination in business and real estate—in 1938–39 when he opened a sawmill in Barnet, on the Lower Mainland. The mill was established not as Kapoor Sawmills but as Modern Sawmills, owned by Mr. J. T. Armstrong, a good friend of Kapoor Singh who was a real estate agent and involved in politics. Armstrong later registered the mill in Kapoor Singh's name as Kapoor Sawmills.

Since most Sikhs worked in the lumber industry, another major focus for the Sikh community was the union movement. The Sikhs had been receiving lower wages in the mills than the white men and had been excluded from the better and higher-paying jobs for far too long. There was a need for fairness and job security on the labour front. Mr. Darshan Singh Sangha was a major force in the Sikh community as an organizer for the International Woodworkers of America: "The first time I went into the mills to organize, I went to Mayo's mill, to Youbou and Honeymoon Bay. At first when I went into these mills it would seem that the only people that I could talk to were the ones



Mr. Natha Singh Mattu, c. 1946. (*CVA* Port P874, N1085)

that were slightly progressive. It was in 1944 that I began to inform people in groups what the union was and what it would do and what its achievements are and why it is important to join the IWA. This is what I did in 1944 and 1945. Before that, in 1942 and 1943, I would go from one mill to the next mill talking to people individually. I would talk to those people that were militant and asked them to help me in this cause so that we could have small groups in these mills. My specific task for the first three years was to persuade the Hindustani people to join the union. Once I was offered a very nice job if I would agree to cease working with the union, in Mayo's mill, a job in the office.



Mr. Darshan Singh Sangha, also known as Darshan Canadian, 1945. (H. V. Knight Studio)

"Word spread to the surrounding mills in that area. The workers' trust and belief increased. We took advantage of the momentum that was building up in the bunkhouses. Then in 1946, when the IWA tried to assemble workers together to form a union, there was tremendous support from the workers. Even the most backward workers were coming up to the IWA. At that time the union gave the owners some demands: that wages be increased by 25 percent, a forty-hour work week, time and a half for overtime and vacation time. There was to be union security, and union dues were to be deducted at the mill. These conditions being demanded by the union did not exist in any mill at this time. For this reason it took a very long time. By then the union was 28,000 strong. That summer (1946), there was a very big strike in BC, and it was 100 percent successful. I think the strike lasted thirty days."

With the end of the war in 1945 there was generally a greater concern for human rights and fair play. The CCF (Cooperative Commonwealth Federation, later renamed the New Democratic Party) and the IWA both sided with the East Indians in their fight for the franchise. Dr. Pandia headed the group that presented a brief to the federal Election Act Committee in 1946. This brief was accepted and

The government came in with a law in the mid-1930s which stated that the minimum wage would be 35 cents an hour. But they could pay 25 percent of their employees 25 cents an hour. This was another form of discrimination, because in every mill about a quarter of their workers were Asiatics. This was one way that they could pay the whites 35 cents an hour and pay the Asiatics 25 cents an hour. But Alberta Lumber Company was in a quandary because they employed about half Asiatics. And where were they going to draw the line among the Asiatics?

Whoever was the boss at that time got this bright idea. He'd pay the whites 35 cents an hour. When it came to Asiatics, he'd pay half of them 25 cents an hour. For the other half he made out cheques at 35 cents an hour but he'd come to the bunkhouse and get us to endorse our cheques, take them back and give us an envelope of money which was figured at 25 cents an hour. I couldn't stand that you know, that was going a little too far. So I quit and got a job here at Hillcrest where they paid 35 cents an hour.

—Mr. Karm S. Manak

the committee recommended the necessary changes in the Act to give the franchise to the East Indians. It was enacted into law on April 2, 1947, and on September 15, 1947 East Indians were granted the municipal franchise.

There was irony in this victory, as Samuel Raj explains. "The day India became politically free, East Indians ceased to become second-class citizens in Canada. The tragedy of the East Indian experience in

Proud Canadians at the Vancouver Sikh Temple, c. 1947.

Canada is that the rights and privileges for which they struggled for so long, came to them only when the basis for their claims became obsolete: British rights and privileges were theirs only when they ceased to be British subjects and citizens."

The Sikhs had finally become Canadians. Mr. Manga S. Jagpal says that on the day they got their rights the Sikhs got dressed up in their best suits and went downtown. There they proudly lined up to eat at the fancy restaurants that had previously refused them service. By law, they had to serve them now, and they did. The Sikhs could now call Canada their home.



Mr. Manga S. Jagpal (left) going for a drive in his Cadillac with Kartar Singh, Jeet Singh, Kundan Singh, Harbhajan Singh and Jagar S. Mahal, c. 1946.

7 The Challenge Continues

THE SIKHS I interviewed began to feel that they were truly Canadians when they were granted full franchise rights, after more than forty years in this country. Some of them had been born here, or had come as children and knew no other country, but it was not until 1947 that their efforts for justice and fairness were rewarded with Canadian citizenship. Now all that remained was for other Canadian people to recognize the Sikhs as their equals.

With Canadian citizenship and the independence of India came new responsibilities. Canada was assigned its first High Commissioner for India, Mr. Hardit Singh Malik. Malik received a special welcome from the Sikh community when he arrived in Vancouver in 1948, on his way to Ottawa. He and his entourage were given the red carpet treatment. As was Prime Minister Nehru when he visited Vancouver with his daughter Indira Gandhi in 1949. "It was a huge honour for our people here," says Mr. Jagat S. Uppal, "to have a dignitary, a statesman, recognized all over the world, here in Vancouver." The Sikhs proudly recall that the whole community took part in the celebrations.

The two almost simultaneous historic events gave Canadian Sikhs some legitimacy and new-found status in Canada, but there was still a way to go before they would have full and equal rights. Malik and Nehru were powerful allies who could help the Sikhs achieve these goals. Canadian immigration laws were still unfair to East Indians: even though the Sikhs were now Canadian citizens, the laws regarding immigration from India were not the same rules that applied to immigrants from Europe. East Indians were only allowed to sponsor their wives and children under twenty-one years of age. If they wished to bring in their parents, brothers, sisters, in-laws or other relatives, they had to apply through a quota system. The maximum was 150 persons per year, but in reality the law allowed for only 50 persons per year for East Indians domiciled in Canada. Canadians from Europe were allowed to bring in their relatives without any quota restrictions.



Happy Canadians at a celebration for India's independence, New Westminster Temple, Queensborough, 1947.

Another discriminatory rule was that an immigrant from India had to wait five years before gaining Canadian citizenship and applying for immigration for a spouse and minor children, while Europeans could apply immediately after becoming landed immigrants.

The Khalsa Diwan Society elected a special thirteen-person committee, the Khalsa Diwan Welfare Committee, to lead the fight for immigration rights. This committee handled all correspondence between

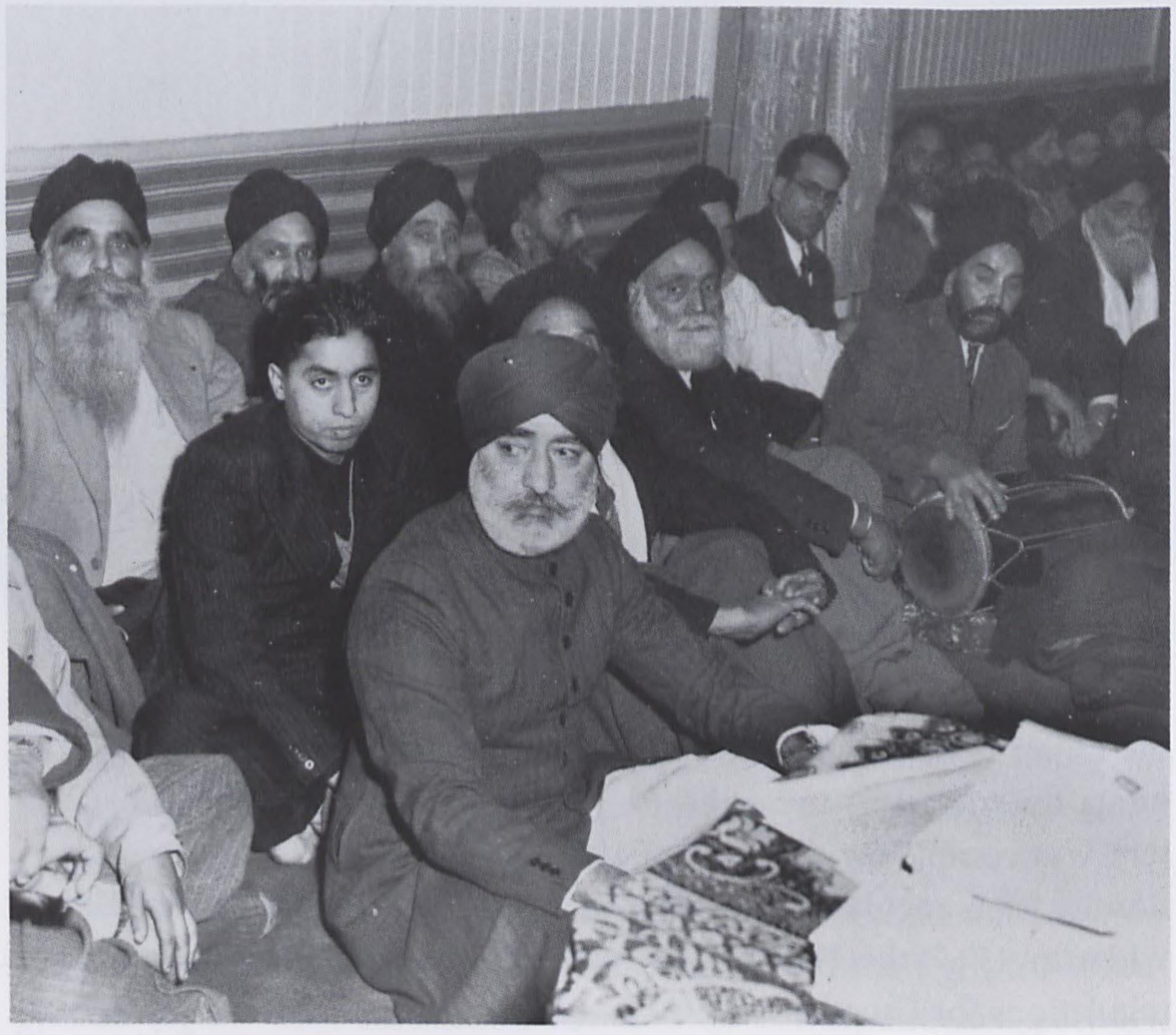


Mr. Hardit Singh Malik, High Commissioner to India (at centre), meeting with Vancouver Sikh leaders, 1948.

the Sikh community and the federal government. The group later became the East Indian Canadian Citizens Welfare Association, which appealed not only to Ottawa but to the government of India to change the unfair policies against immigrants from India. Finally in 1957, the quota for India was increased to 300 people per year. The quota system was completely dropped in 1962, when new non-discriminatory immigration regulations came into effect. The victory was complete when in 1967 the Liberal government introduced new immigration regulations for Canada.

Mr. Hardit Singh Malik's visit to Vancouver, 1948.





Mr. Malik at the Vancouver Sikh Temple during his visit in 1948.



Mr. Malik and his entourage.

The older Sikhs I talked to have lived through decades of institutionalized discrimination, and they supported the community's long fight for the franchise and fairer immigration laws. But they were uncomfortable discussing racism and discrimination. They preferred not to talk about these things because they felt there was nothing to be gained by bringing up the unpleasant aspects of the past. The unfairness and injustice had not been directed just at them: "Look what happened to the poor Japanese, who lost everything," many of them pointed out. And they mentioned the Europeans known as DPs (displaced persons), who had been left with no home and no country by war and political upheaval. These people were treated poorly by Canadians as well, and they were white people. "We all knew where we stood, we knew our place," Mr. Lachman Thandi sums it up. "We felt inferior to the white people and that was more or less accepted.

This letter was sent to Indian Prime Minister Nehru by Mr. Kuldeep Singh Bains, on behalf of the East Indian Canadian Citizens Welfare Association. They wished to gain Mr. Nehru's support in changing Canadian immigration laws that were unfair to East Indians. The letter is dated June 30, 1956.

June 30th 56

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru

Prime Minister of India
London England.

Canadian Citizens of East Indian origin are deprived of the privilege, which is extended to othe. Canadian of bringing their relatives into Canada, notwithstanding our willingness to under take that such relatives will not become charge on the country.

Under the new immigration regulations, far more rights are granted to the legal residents of Canada from Middle East countries such as Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, and Turkey than to the Canadian Citizens of East Indian origin, This discrimination is still more rancorous and unjust because our country of origin is an active and important member of the commonwealth.

Therefore we appeal to you to urge the Right Hon the Prime Minister of Canada to remove this unjust discrimination against canadian Citizens of East Indian origin, and to accord to us the right to bring to Canada our relatives, upon the same terms and conditions and to the same extent as enjoyed by Canadians from other commonwealth countrues.

Kuldeep Singh Bains secretary

East IndianCanadian Citizens
Welfare Association.

We did not really go places where we were not accepted or challenge anyone needlessly. If one of us faced an injustice or discrimination at the immigration office or the police station or some other place, we'd all say, 'That's all right Singh, forget about it'."

The Sikhs have earned the right to call Canada their home. They worked hard, saved, paid taxes, bought property, invested wisely, sent delegations, engaged legal services, prayed and waited for things to change. If they encountered an obstacle they never gave up, but tried a



Prime Minister Nehru of India and his daughter, Indira Gandhi, visiting Vancouver, 1949.

different road going in the same direction. When I asked the elders why the Sikhs were successful in overcoming all the difficulties they faced, there was only one answer: because they are hard workers. Sadhu Singh Dhami, who came to Canada in 1922, writes in his historical novel *Maluka*: "An idle man, holy or unholy, was not wanted in the New World. Activity, intense and vigorous, was imperative. And success, ever new and greater, was the crowning prize of all activity."

For the Sikhs, the work ethic and economic activities are located within a religious and socio-cultural context. The work an individual

does is part of "being a good Sikh." Sikhs are not afraid of hard physical work, and they will take whatever job they can get until they can find a better one. By doing hard honest labour, the Sikhs became stronger physically, financially and spiritually. "The old-timers say that there are two things that helped us get established," says Mr. Kuldeep Bains, "the strength of our arms and the strength of our money. Firstly, with our physical power we can work in the hardest jobs, physically we can endure much more than other people. Others will say 'the hell with it' and pack it in. We don't do that. Secondly, if they could not fight their battle because of lack of knowledge or education, they could collect money like nobody's business. With this money they could hire some people who could do the job. That's how we got established here, with muscles and money."

If the older Sikhs could give advice to a new immigrant from India, most of them would say that newcomers should try to fit in with other Canadian people, in fashion, hairstyles and attitudes. They should adapt to Canadian ways like other Canadians and leave the problems of India behind them. At the same time, Mrs. Jagdish Kaur Singh cautions, "Never forget India, you can't. I'll never forget my India."

Their other advice would be to work hard and save money, be honest and help members of the community, as they did in the early days. They stress the value of learning English, and most of them advise getting a good education since the professions have opened up somewhat since the early days. Socializing outside of their own group is very important for new immigrants, since that will help them to gain greater acceptance. Go to night school, they say. Join teams and community centres, go to the YMCA. Overall, immigrants should try to adopt a flexible lifestyle, avoid living in isolation and mix with other Canadian people.

This advice to newcomers today is very similar to the advice to newcomers given in 1929 by Kartar Singh, in the first issue of *India and Canada: A Journal of Interpretation and Information*. The timelessness of the message is uncanny: "It is a great joy to me to find that here in this distant land you still keep up your own religious faith and do not neglect your Sikh religion. That is the right thing to do if you want to remain in a distant country with moral character and good social and family traditions such as those which still remain in India itself.

"I am so glad to find that the Khalsa Diwan Society is the centre of your own life in British Columbia. That is quite right and proper and



Indian Independence Day celebrations at the Vancouver Sikh Temple, c. 1950. Mr. Jermeja Singh Hundal is reading the proclamation as the flag is being raised.

good. For without that binding link you are bound to fall to pieces. But if you keep this binding force of your own pure religious faith intact, then you will preserve your character also and your family life will be good and pure. You must cling together and help one another. Do not let any member of your community come to grief and ruin through your neglect.

"Secondly, you must remember that you are guests in a new country and you have to observe the first law of hospitality, which is to accommodate yourselves as far as possible and pay every consideration to the manners and customs of this new country where your children

Mr. Manga Singh Jagpal and Mr. Mohan Singh Jagpal enjoying a Saturday night in downtown Vancouver, 1948.



are being born and where you yourselves have elected to live. This is a necessity in every country where people emigrate if good will and friendly feeling are to be observed. This does not mean that you are to alter all your own good customs and manners of living, but rather that you are to seek at every point to find a common meeting place where your own life and the Canadian life coincide. To put what I wish to say

in two words, you should do your best to prove yourselves 'Good Canadians'.

"If you do this and become proud of the ideals for which Canada stands you may be certain that in no distant period you will gain your citizenship. Therefore, as one who has a deep affection for you, I urge you to follow your Gurus who lived a pure life according to the spirit. Guru Nanak sought to identify himself with everything that was good in Islam. He tried to unite the ideals of the two religions. So it is necessary for you to learn to unite the two ideals of Canada and India, and I am sure you will do it."

The main reason I wrote this book was to provide a new historical perspective, this one from the people who lived the history. It is time we heard their voices and filled in some of the gaps in the Sikhs' social history. "The reasons for these gaps in the historical record are many," writes Derek Reimer in *Voices: A Guide to Oral History*, "but a common theme is that some groups in society had neither the means nor the occasion to represent themselves by written records and hence our knowledge of them came through impersonal statistics or the observations of a detached and unsympathetic elite."

Through their spoken words, the people who lived history can be returned to a central place in that history. The central place is their rightful one, since it is their experience that helped shape Canadian history, and that now provides the rest of us with a more balanced and realistic historical record. Today, all of the more than 200,000 Sikhs living in Canada can trace their roots to the courageous pioneers who first came to British Columbia at the beginning of this century. These pioneers weathered the storm and remained loyal to their adopted country, because they had chosen Canada to be their home.

Yet we cannot assume that the injustices of the past are gone, or that they will never recur. As Canadians, we need to ask ourselves whether attitudes toward Sikhs and other Asians have changed substantially since they first came to Canada in significant numbers. Are our immigration policies fair? What do we assume about Canadians of non-European descent when we see them at work or on the street or moving into our neighbourhoods? Is our education system teaching us respect for cultural differences? What is the role of the media in presenting fair reports? Is multiculturalism working?

Most important, do we value our elders, their experience and wisdom? Do we give them the respect and attention they deserve? Do we accept their advice and guidance? Are their stories worth listening to,



Four Sikh pioneers who helped pave the way for future generations, pictured here in 1925. Left to right: Natha Singh Mattu, Dalip Singh Uppal, Harnam Singh Dalawala, Saran Singh Meham.

and do we believe they have value in our own lives? How can we show our appreciation for what the elders have done for us? How can they make a contribution to their community?

By recording our elders' words we can begin to answer all of these complex questions. I believe each one of us should be gathering our elders' memories before they are lost forever, and collecting their letters, documents and photographs as well. Tapes and personal papers can be stored in safe, accessible archives and made available to the public. There is no substitute for the living history that only our elders can offer us. Their stories are vital to our existence as human beings, and they help form and strengthen our Canadian identity.

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Interviews conducted by the author:

Interviewee	*Birthdate*	*Arrival in Canada*
Mr. Hardial S. Atwal	Born in Vancouver	Aug. 28, 1912
Mr. Kuldeep S. Bains	Sept. 11, 1920	Sept. 9, 1938
Mr. Piara S. Bains	Oct. 22, 1922	May 18, 1927
Mr. Gurdave S. Billan	Sept. 10, 1918	Sept. 2, 1932
Mr. Phangan S. Gill	Apr. 6, 1912	Mar. 1, 1930
Mr. Sardara S. Gill	Aug. 26, 1907	May 18, 1925
Mr. Ranjit S. Hall	Mar. 25, 1917	1924
Mr. Manga S. Jagpal	Sept. 15, 1913	June 1, 1930
Mrs. Bhani K. Johal	Jan. 26, 1906	Sept. 9, 1927
Mr. Karnail S. Johl	Born in Vancouver	May 20, 1930
Mrs. Pritam K. Johl	Jan. 3, 1918	May 4, 1936
Mr. Gurbachan S. Johl	June 10, 1906	May 18, 1921
Mr. Nand S. Langrhoa	1906	1920
Mr. Jagar S. Mahal	Dec. 25, 1906	Dec. 25, 1924
Mr. Naranjan S. Mahal	Oct. 8, 1916	Mar. 6, 1931
Mr. Karm S. Manak	Sept. 25, 1912	1921
Mr. Mawa S. Mangat	Nov. 13, 1910	Nov. 17, 1925
Mr. Amar S. Mattu	Oct. 13, 1916	July 3, 1931
Mrs. Gurdial K. Oppal	Nov. 15, 1913	Dec. 14, 1934
Mr. Magar S. Rai	Sept. 25, 1909	May 18, 1929
Mr. Jagindar S. Sangara	Born in Vancouver	June 28, 1924
Mr. Naranjan S. Sangha	Aug. 20, 1920	Oct. 5, 1929
Mrs. Paritam K. Sangha	June 26, 1904	June 13, 1932
Dr. Sarjit K. Siddoo	Born in Mayo	Sept. 10, 1926
Mr. Dedar S. Sihota	Feb. 9, 1924	Dec. 2, 1936
Mrs. Ajit K. Singh	Nov. 1, 1922	Oct. 5, 1929
Mr. Harnam Singh	Dec. 4, 1906	1932
Mrs. Jagdish K. Singh	July 12, 1912	Nov. 19, 1929
Mr. Tara S. Tiwana	Sept. 5, 1912	June 1, 1930
Mr. Jagat S. Uppal	Feb. 27, 1925	June 26, 1926

Taped interviews in the Indo-Canadian Oral History Project Collection, Simon Fraser University:

Interviewee	*Birthdate*	*Arrival in Canada*
Mr. Kartar S. Ghag	1907	1924
Mrs. Dhan Kaur Johal	1902	1923
Mr. Gurbachan S. Johl	June 10, 1906	May 18, 1921
Mr. Ranjit S. Mattu	1920	Jan. 25, 1925
Mr. Darshan S. Sangha	1917	1937
Mr. Lachman S. Thandi	1912	1930
Mrs. Rattan Kaur Thauli	1890	1924

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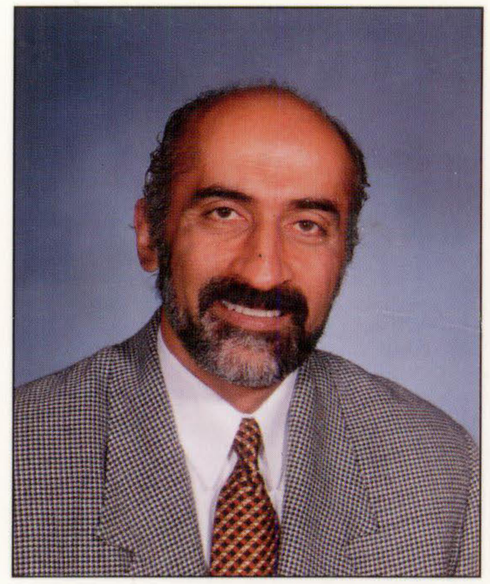
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