

HUMBLE TEMPLE



PHOTOS BY RICK COLLINS/SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN

Numerous pairs of shoes await their owners' return at the newly renovated Gur Sikh Temple in Abbotsford.

ABBOTSFORD |

Oldest Sikh house of worship in North America opens to the public in April, thanks to committed volunteers



BY KIM BOLAN
VANCOUVER SUN

It has taken more than \$1 million and four years, but the oldest Sikh temple in North America has been lovingly restored and is set to reopen next month.

A team of hard-working volunteers has done everything from haul away trucks full of gravel to strip layers and layers of paint off the beadboard walls of the Gur Sikh Temple built in Abbotsford in 1911.

The simple 2½-storey building was designated a national heritage site in the summer of 2002 at a ceremony attended by then-prime minister Jean Chretien.

Former heritage minister Sheila Copps helped the community get a grant of more than \$500,000 to cover half the restoration work.

Now the executive of the Khalsa Diwan Society of Abbotsford hopes Prime Minis-



Sucha Singh Thandi's aunt and uncle donated the original plot of land on South Fraser Way for the temple to be built in 1911.



North America's first Sikh temple has been lovingly restored over four years and is due to be officially reopened on April 1.

ter Stephen Harper will join a host of dignitaries, including Copps, for a special ceremony April 1.

Norm Sangha, who heads the reconstruction committee, said this week that the white building perched on a hill is significant not just for Sikhs, but for all Canadians.

"This is the first time they have designated a heritage site that was not part of European or

French culture," Sangha said. "It is really important for Canada to include all minorities and their sites as well."

When Chretien declared the building a heritage site, he remarked that it is "a humble building."

"This temple is a gift given to us by pioneers. It's our duty to preserve it. It is our duty to learn its lessons," Chretien said.

The Abbotsford temple was

the second one built by the pioneer Sikhs of B.C. The first, on Vancouver's West Second Avenue, was sold and torn down in the 1970s — a move many old-timers now regret.

"Now this will be open to the public as a national historic site," Sangha said. "We are Canadians and we want to share with the rest of Canada what our heritage is."

Members of the society's executive committee, including president Gurdarshan Singh Sandhu, were eager to show a reporter around the quaint building.

One pointed to the crafted fir spindle posts supporting the porch outside — noting that each took three days to make. Parts that could not be restored had to be reproduced. Heritage reproduction light fixtures hang from the ceiling. There is a view of mountains to the east and strip malls and fast food restaurants to the west.

Nine layers of paint were stripped off the interior walls, exposing the original colour from 96 years ago, when Sucha Singh Thandi's aunt and uncle donated the site to their community.

Thandi, now 73, pointed to