

INDAR SINGH GILL *
A Pioneer and an Entrepreneur.

Indar Singh Gill came to Canada in 1930 at the age of 17, leaving behind a wife and an 8 month old daughter in the care of his parents. The economic hardships faced in India due to poor cultivation and lack of irrigation made many seek a better life in Singapore, Malaya, or East Africa. It was Indar's Taiyaji Niranjan Singh Gill, already settled in Canada, who gave Indar the ticket to a better future. Niranjan sent five sponsorship permits from Canada to the village of Dhudike and it was decided then that Indar would travel to Canada with his 13 year old younger brother Joginder and his cousins Darbara Singh Shergill and Saudagar Singh Gill.

Horse carts were used to travel from the village of Dhudike to Ludhiana, where a train to Calcutta would cost them 14 rupees each. Once in Calcutta, the steam ship of the Jardine Company of Hong Kong would be waiting to take them to Hong Kong for a cost of 44 rupees each, during the course of 18 days. Travelling from Hong Kong to Victoria was to be done by the way of another steam ship, The Empress of Japan owned by the Canadian Pacific Company, for a fare of \$90 US. This part of the route was to take approximately 2.5 months.

Indar left India on Diwali day after working all night irrigating the family farm by hand, packing his possessions into a metal trunk purchased from Moga for 3 rupees, which the family still has to this date. This trunk carried his money, passport, clothes, two blankets, 10 pounds of Indian butter and flour. On December 12th 1930, at 6:00 p.m. Indar Singh Gill arrived in Vancouver, BC. As he excitedly took in the view of his new home, Indar couldn't help but notice the 'W' shaped red rotating lights above the Woodward's store and the tallest building being the Marine Building.

Due to the depression, all sawmills had shut down, thus eliminating all employment possibilities. Indar had the desire to work so sought out any jobs which were available. He found the opportunity to work for Sher Singh Ahluwalia in Kamloops, picking tomatoes and harvesting potatoes for three months. He made a total of \$54 CAD that summer. Upon his return to Vancouver Island, Indar began working for Great Central Lake Sawmill for 18 cents an hour, working six hours a day four days in a week. In July 1932, Indar started working for Babul Singh Kapoor at Kapoor Lumber Company at Sooke Lake, near Victoria. Babul paid Indar 15 cents an hour for 6 days of work a week and a provided a place to stay in the bunkhouse located on site. Supplies were bought every 6 months from Victoria, by walking 20-25 miles since not many cars were owned. In 1935, once all expenses were paid to his Taya ji, Indar sent his first gift back to India of 60 rupees to his grandfather to buy a horse.

From the start of World War II in 1939 until its end in 1945, there were no ships surviving the German and Japanese submarines so travelling back to India was impossible. The restrictions placed on Indian immigrants were relaxed in 1947, with 150 people being allowed to emigrate per year from India. Indar was kept from seeing his wife for 17 years, until his visit back to India in 1947 but in the meantime, there was correspondence via letters. In 1949, Indar along with his wife, Kartar Kaur Gill, and son Nachhatter Singh Gill, travelled via steam ship through Honolulu, Hawaii to San Francisco, purchasing western clothes for Kartar along the way. Then aboard the Great Northern Train, they entered Canada in White Rock on November 25th 1949, to then reside in Mission, B.C. Indar's two daughters, Malkit Kaur Brar and Baljit Kaur Khangura were both born in Mission.

In 1951, Indar started his own business under the name of Indar Fuel Company, where he delivered wood and sawdust to people to burn in their homes for heat. He had a number of trucks which he used to pick up raw material from Albert McMahon's mill in the east side of Mission at Suicide Creek. In 1958, the appearance of natural gas brought the end of his company so in 1959 he purchased an old sawmill in Mission on the Fraser River. This mill was destroyed near the end of 1959 due to fire, so in 1960 construction of the new modern Fraser Valley Sawmill started. This mill employed 30-40 workers who helped produce 60,000 board feet of lumber per shift, to be exported to the United States, Japan, and the Great Britain. The sawmill was never rebuilt after the fire on October 9th 1964. Then in 1979, Indar built a shake and shingle mill in Fort Langley called Langley Forest Industries Ltd., which still operates to the

present day. In the 1980's, he became involved in raspberry production and land development, after serving as President of the old Sikh temple in Abbotsford in 1951 again in 1979.

The Abbotsford Gur Sikh Temple was one of many, under the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. Each gurudwara had an allotted religious function which would be celebrated each year, such as Guru Nanak Dev Ji's birthday at the Abbotsford gurudwara in November, Vasaikhi in Victoria, and Guru Gobind Singh Ji's birthday in Vancouver. Indar's son Nash S. Gill recalls visiting the Abbotsford old gurudwara and describes the surroundings as, "the road in front of it, South Fraser Way, was just two lanes and it had a gravel shoulder. They did have stairs going down to the South Fraser Way... I also remember the flag pole that they had and it was a wooden flagpole, and I believe the flag pole was some 70 ft high, it had a red light on top of it." The gurudwara was surrounded by fruit trees, with pear trees on the west side and the parking lot located on the east side of where the gurudwara is now present. Nash also recalls "chopping up firewood and then carrying it into the basement of the gurudwara and piling it up to be used for heating and for stoves that were used for cooking the langar." While sitting in the darbar sahib (main praying hall upstairs), the men would sit on the right side and the ladies on the left with a sheet to cover their bare legs due to their attire of dresses. The priest of the gurudwara resided on site and conducted all the ceremonies required, such as waking and doing prakash of the Guru Granth Sahib. This priest also worked for Indar Singh Gill as a truck driver delivering the wooden sawdust. The gurudwara was run by volunteers at that time who would do sewa like, the maintenance, cooking and serving. There were no committees present to handle the affairs until Abbotsford became incorporated as a branch of Khalsa Diwan Society with the opening of the new gurudwara.

The Gill family had many celebrations of their own at the Abbotsford gurudwara, starting with the wedding of Nash to Rajinder. After meeting Rajinder in India on a visit in 1969, Nash sponsored her to come to Canada in 1972, and then on June 18, 1972, they were married. The gurudwara was packed with people sitting and standing wherever room was available. Besides being the first place visited by Nash's sons after birth, the Abbotsford gurudwara was also the site of Nash's son's engagement, making it the first ceremony held after renovations were complete in April 2007.

Canada was a place where prejudice and discrimination was present in the early 1900s and well into the 1950s. Nash believes the Abbotsford Sikh Gurudwara being designated as a National Historic Site is "a feather in the cap of the Indo-Canadian community." The Abbotsford Sikh Temple is the only existing original temple in Canada, mainly due to the "good roof on it". During Indar's presidency of the gurudwara in the late 70s, putting a new shingle roof on the gurudwara turned out to be maybe the leading factor in its preservation. Indar had the new shingle roof placed at a cost effective price and installed by one person. Nash describes the procedure: "One person went up and it's a very steep roof so they tied a rope to him and then kind aofanchored him by taking it around the other side so he wouldn't fall off and he had the roof put on".

Indar Singh Gill had the determination and courage to go from a sawmill worker to owner during his stay in Canada. He was a man whose first priority was his family. Nash says, "He wanted to raise his kids, he wanted his kids to have good education, and he wanted them to have an easier life than he did, he wanted them to live nicely, and he would forego a lot of his own luxuries for the sake of his family".

*This interview was given by Nash Gill on behalf of his father late Indar Singh Gill.