

Rattan Kaur Atwal

Mrs. Rattan Kaur Atwal first came to Canada from the village of Langaree Sangha, district Hoshiarpur in 1952 to join her husband Mr. Hardial Singh Atwal.

Hardial Singh was the first Sikh born in Canada on August 28th, 1912 in Vancouver, BC. This was a time of great celebration because there had been no children in the community and everyone's families were back in India. Hardial Singh lived with his father, Balwant Singh, and mother, Kartar Kaur. Balwant Singh Atwal was the first member of the family to arrive in Canada around 1906-07. He hailed from the village of Khurdpur, district Jalandhar. After living in Canada for some years, Balwant Singh sponsored the rest of his family: Kartar Kaur and his two daughters Udham Kaur and Naranjan Kaur, who arrived around 1912. The family was therefore already settled in Vancouver at the time Hardial Singh was born. Balwant Singh supported the family and was the first granthi of the Gurdwara on 2nd avenue.

Balwant Singh was a freedom fighter who was involved in the Ghadar movement. The Ghadar party consisted of revolutionaries who focused on liberating India from the British rule. Balwant Singh worked extremely hard for this cause and sacrificed his life for it as he was ultimately hanged because of a long pending case against him. On an occasion when returning back from India on the Komagata Maru, Balwant Singh was caught trying to enter Canada. He was sent to court and the Canadian authorities tried to hang him, but then decided to send the whole ship, including him, back to India. He was then executed in Lahore on charges of sedition and political agitation against the British government. Rattan Kaur never saw her father-in-law because her marriage took place after this event. She only met Hardial Singh's mother, Kartar Kaur.

It was when Hardial Singh returned to India in 1936, that he and Rattan Kaur were married on June 15, 1936. Hardial Singh then returned to Canada while Rattan Kaur stayed in India. As a Canadian citizen by birth, Hardial Singh had no difficulty in leaving and entering the country any time he wanted. After staying in Canada for about three years, he went back to India to meet Rattan Kaur and soon returned. While Rattan Kaur was in India, the couple had three children: Mahinder Singh (born 1940), Harjinder Singh (born April 7, 1949), and Harninder Singh (born March 11, 1951).

Hardial Singh then sponsored his family in 1952, and by that time he was settled on the island. Rattan Kaur Atwal and her three boys arrived in Vancouver on July 12, 1952. The family travelled from Vancouver to Victoria on a small plane. Her husband came alone to pick her from the airport. Their first reaction upon arrival was that it looked different from what they had ever experienced.

When the family first came to Canada, they stayed at a bunkhouse provided by the mill. There were a lot of single men that lived in bunkhouses since they were made for the workers. Hardial Singh and Rattan Kaur rented a house in Paldi which was owned by the mill. They used to give approximately \$20 for rent and lived in the house for six and half years. Their eldest son was 12 years old when the family came to Canada, and it was in Canada that Rattan Kaur gave birth to three daughters: Rajinder Atwal (Born April 29, 1953),

Davinder (born August 20, 1954), and Kuljeet (Born June 9, 1962). They were all born in the Duncan hospital and everyone went to school in Lake Cowichan. Almost all the children of the millworkers were sent to school there.

When they first arrived in Canada, it felt unusual for the first while, but later they adjusted to the Canadian system. In those days, there were very few Indian people. Rattan Kaur brought Punjabi suits to wear, but was taken by surprise when she saw that none of the ladies in Paldi wore suits. She says that they did not like it when she wore her Punjabi suits either. So when she came to Canada, the local custom was one of the biggest adjustments that Rattan had to make. Because of this, she bought herself dresses and clothes from the local store although she felt very uncomfortable wearing those dresses.

Paldi was a very diverse community, there was a majority of Chinese and Japanese people. A few Indian families also lived in Paldi, and after a while they became used to the environment and mixed with the people living there. The Gurdwara in Paldi helped them a lot as it was a community centre where everyone met, shared their feelings, and kept in touch with one another.

Rattan Kaur recalls the community being very close in Paldi, stating that they faced no discrimination. The Caucasian community living in Paldi were very nice to the families and to the Punjabi community in general. Her children also never faced any discrimination in school or in any other public areas.

The Atwal family lived in Paldi for seven years and then in 1960, they moved to Duncan. Hardial Singh was still working in the Mayo Lumber Mill when they moved and was paid around \$1.50 an hour. Hardial Singh spoke enough English to get around and could write in English as well.

Rattan Kaur later went on to sponsor her two brothers after coming to Canada: Bhajan Singh Sangha and Charan Singh Sangha. They both lived with her for a while until they found work in a mill.

The family used to purchase their Punjabi groceries from a store in Vancouver. Whenever someone went towards Vancouver, they would ask them to get groceries in a bulk order. Usually their regular grocery bills ranged from \$40-\$50 because the Atwals' were a big family.

Hardial Singh retired from the Mayo Lumber Mill in 1986 and passed away in 1996. Today, the Atwal family continues to live in Duncan in the same house they purchased when they first moved there.