

Asa Singh Deo¹

Asa Singh Deo was born on January 18, 1890 in the village of Kharaudi, District Hoshiarpur. When he departed Punjab to come to North America, he was travelling with ten to fifteen villagers from the Mahalpur area including, Tara Singh Siddoo who accompanied him in pursuit of a better life in Canada. Asa Singh and his colleagues departed from the Mahalpur police station after gathering their clearance papers, and walked to the city of Hoshiarpur to obtain their approval for travel overseas from the court there. From Hoshiarpur, the group walked for a day and a half to the railway station in Jalandhar. There they obtained their British Indian passports and boarded a train headed for Kolkata.

In Kolkata, Asa Singh boarded a small ship for their fifteen to sixteen day journey to Hong Kong. This trip was long and rough; they slept on cotton bedding which was spread out on the deck. Unfortunately, the deck was usually wet from water that would get on the ship so it was very uncomfortable. Once in Hong Kong, Asa Singh stayed at the gurdwara for a week before boarding the Canadian Pacific steamship, *Empress of Japan*, for Vancouver. At the time, there were around 103 other Punjabis also headed on the same journey. The journey of about twenty-five days ended when the ship reached Vancouver at the Canadian Pacific wharf in October 1906.

When he departed from India, Asa Singh had completed grade ten which was a rarity and so upon arrival, he was one of the only English speaking settlers. Since the English language was foreign to many who had immigrated, Asa Singh became responsible for locating jobs in British Columbia for the others Punjabi immigrants. During those days, jobs were very limited so Asa Singh, being the only Indian worker at a local saw mill, would acquire work at the mill for others during difficult times. He lived in a house with the other settlers who had travelled with him.

During this period, there was an onset of a mild recession that impacted many jobs in Canada. The jobs were scarce, especially for new settlers who were bouncing from job to job. After hearing of more work on the railway in America, Asa Singh decided to board a ferry from Vancouver to Victoria and then a Pacific Coast Steamship boat to San Francisco. There, Asa Singh, Tara Singh and other colleagues headed to the employment office and were given work in the Sierra Nevada Mountains to work on the Southern Pacific Railway.

Eventually, Asa Singh became in charge since he spoke the English language and after working for a couple of years, in 1912, he returned to India with Tara Singh to visit his family for a few years. During this time he got married to Dhanni Kaur and had a son, Pritam Singh, who was born on December 8, 1917. Once Asa Singh returned from India, he came back to Canada but decided to travel to California and later to Texas. Following his arrival in America, he bought a large farm with another partner. Asa Singh used his skills that he learned and began farming in America. In 1925 and 1926, Asa Singh started working in the Ghadar party for the independence of British India. At times, it was at the Stockton Gurdwara in California where he would meet with other revolutionaries and send money home to India in support of the movement.

¹ Please note, much of the research in finding the missing facts about Asa Singh Deo can be credited to Dr. Hugh Johnston, *Jewels of the Qila*,

Pritam Singh clearly remembers the day when the Mahalpur police received a report about the Ghadar party and started to interrogate him regarding his father. The police would question him about letters from Asa Singh and what those particular letters entailed. In one of the letters, Asa Singh requested that either Pritam Singh or Asa Singh's elder brother, Hoshnak Singh, come to America to help him on the farm however it was not possible for either of them to go.

In 1934 Asa Singh passed away suddenly at the very young age of 44 years old. He had lived in the United States for most of his life working on his farm. During this time, he had helped many people. In fact, since his farm was situated near the Mexican border, he would always help Punjabi people that were crossing into America via Mexico. He would provide them with a place to stay on his farm. Since he was one of the few people who spoke English, many people in the Punjabi community would call him "Asa Singh Attorney."

Asa Singh came to Canada and the United States in search for a better life for himself and his family. Unfortunately, his family did not immigrate during those years. The first time someone from the Deo family would come to Canada would be in 1970 when Asa's grandson, Sohan Singh Deo would with his wife and daughter. From there his son, Pritam Singh and the rest of his family immigrated. Currently the Deo family is well-established in Vancouver. In present day, Sohan Singh Deo is a prominent figure in the Punjabi community and continues to keep Asa Singh's story alive. It was with determination and confidence that Asa Singh went from being a mill worker to a large scale farmer and setting the roots upon which the entire Deo family can build upon.