



Mayo Singh, an immigrant from the Punjabi village of Paldi in India, founded a logging community in the Cowichan Valley and named it after the home of his extended family.

Signs indicate the end of the public road to Paldi, and it's very much the end of the road for the old town. But a new community is on the drawing board and should soon rise from the ashes of the town that Mayo Singh built.

Ray Smith/Times Colonist

# PALDI

*Cowichan Valley community poised to rise from its own ashes*

By T.W. PATERSON

**T**he old made way for the new in October when an old lumbering town once home to one of the largest Sikh communities in Canada went up in flames. The remains of the 88-year-old Cowichan Valley town of Paldi, which housed as many as 1,500 workers and residents in its heyday, were razed in preparation for its next phase. Over three weekends, regional fire departments "practice burned" a dozen old homes in the once thriving townsites between Duncan and Lake Cowichan to clear the way for 120 mixed-housing units and a re-born commercial centre.

Only the second Sikh temple — built in 1959 — and town-founder Mayo Singh's home survive, at least for a while longer. Originally known as Mayo Siding, Paldi had become a derelict shadow of its heyday incarnation, when the town was famous for its harmonious blending of East Indians, Chinese, Japanese, Europeans and Canadians.

Eighteen-year-old Mayo Singh arrived in California from India in 1904, following the path of his older brother Ganea and cousin Doman, who had earlier emigrated to B.C. After brief employment with the Union Pacific Railway, Mayo — as he was known — crossed the border and eventually got work in a sawmill near Chilliwack. When the business failed, Mayo, Ganea and Doman hired 35 of the former sawmill workers to run a 16-hectare potato farm.

That first attempt at operating a business in a new country ended ignominiously, with the landlord's pigs scavenging potatoes in lieu of outstanding rent.

Undaunted, the three young immigrants tried their hands at lumber milling on the mainland, but a dwindling timber supply led them to turn their eyes to Vancouver Island. They acquired timber rights to a 24-kilometre stretch on both sides of the CPR's E&N shortline to Lake Cowichan.

Sent ahead as scout, Mayo was turned away at two Duncan hotels with the suggestion that he bunk with a "Hindu man living down the tracks." Sundher Singh not only put him up, but guided him to the prospective timber limits by railway scooter. Mayo chose a mill site between the railway line and Sahtlam Creek, and the future Paldi — named for his birthplace in India — was born. The 325 hectares were later acquired clear-title.

Over the next 30 years, Mayo Bros. Lumber Co. survived fires, the Great Depression and the ups and downs of the marketplace. Paldi became home to a growing population of loggers, sawmill

workers and their families. At first, most workers lived in tents and converted railway coaches until bunkhouses could be built. As families arrived, homes and a school sprang up around the mill. Presiding over its steady growth was the slight, five-foot-two Mayo Singh.

Still in his early 30s, but never strong after a bout with typhoid, he and business partner Kapoor Singh — for whom Kapoor Regional Park is named — oversaw operations at Paldi and later at another sawmill site at Sooke Lake. Mayo was empathetic to other new Canadians of all origins, and made a point of hiring them at a time when racial discrimination was rampant and Canadian laws made citizenship difficult for non-whites. Only the internment of Japanese-Canadians during the Second World War put a dent in his practice of employing ethnic minorities. (The town's cultural centres were the Japanese community hall and the Sikh Temple, which officially opened July 1, 1919, to coincide with Dominion Day.)

Paldi became home to the largest congregation of Sikhs yet in Canada, wrote Joan Mayo, Mayo's daughter-in-law, in her 1997 book *Paldi Remembered*. "To the East Indian men living in the bunkhouse, it hardly seemed a foreign country," she wrote. "With the temple, store, post office and newspapers and mail from home, it was a good life. In the evenings and on the weekends, the men played soccer, volleyball and practised lifting weights and other physical sports. ... [It was] a close-knit community that survived in a foreign land on its own merits through love, compassion and sharing with one another."

Three Japanese men who'd worked for Mayo on the mainland were among Paldi's first inhabitants, with most of the growing Japanese community settling to the west of the Sikh Temple. In *Paldi Remembered*, the late Tom Tagam, who grew up in Paldi and died in Vancouver in 2004, recalled playing pranks during Jor Mallas, the Sikh religious festival. Tagam and several playmates would mix up the shoes left outside the temple. "Then we would hide and laugh as we watched the people trying to find their shoes."

Tagam's sister Sumi Kimachi, who now lives in New Westminster and is in her 80s, also recalled a happy childhood in Paldi, describing it as a harmonious, miniature melting pot of Indo-, Japanese- and Chinese-Canadians, with its two temples and two company stores that stocked goods and foodstuffs imported from the old countries.

Across the E&N grade to the south were the Chinese, never in need of their own company store, as they had access to Duncan's Chinatown. While it may seem that Paldi was partitioned by nationality, by all accounts it was a homogeneous blending — nothing like Duncan, where all three ethnic groups were spurned by barbers and escorted to their own balcony in the Odeon Theatre, along with First Nations people.

After Kapoor went his own way, Mayo and Ganea started families with wives they'd returned to India to marry. An expanding Mayo Bros. Lumber Co., which incorporated in 1914 and boasted a peak payroll of 600 employees, became a pioneer in Island railway logging. (A 1924 Shay locomotive, the "3 Spot," was restored and is now used on the Kettle Valley Railway.) Mayo's most notable

piece of rolling stock, however, was a 1930 Rolls Royce Phantom III. He mounted the car on railway wheels and used it to inspect his holdings on a private railway thought to have been the longest in B.C.

The prospering sawmill owner was well-known for his benevolence. Joan Mayo notes in her book that a hospital in India and auditorium in a college near her father-in-law's birthplace are both named for him, as is a scholarship at the University of Victoria.

Another pet project was Mill Bay's Queen Alexandra Solarium for crippled children, which Mayo supplied with fresh fruits, vegetables, linens and sundries — "everything the ... Solarium asks for," a wholesale grocer was once quoted as saying. In the 1940s, he provided 1,000 pounds each of turkeys and potatoes for New Year's staff parties at Victoria's St. Joseph's and Royal Jubilee hospitals. He also supported the B.C. Protestant Orphanage. Twice over the years, the Mayo Lumber Co. donated a flagpole for Beacon Hill Park.

"Mayo was regarded as a virtual Santa Claus by more than a dozen institutions in Victoria and on the Lower Mainland," Joan Mayo writes in *Paldi Remembered*.

In 1934, it was announced that Mayo, to mark his 25 years in Canada, had made a cash donation to St. Joseph's Hospital, where his eight children were born. (Of those eight, he lost a son to spinal meningitis and a daughter in an accidental fire.)

"None can say exactly what prompts Mayo's generosity," Agnes Carne Tate noted after interviewing him for the *Daily Colonist* 60 years ago, "other than that they feel it is his 'naturally kind nature'." His love for children, however, is the keynote of his philanthropy in the minds of many who administer his charity.

Mayo was ably supported by his wife, Bishan Kaur, known for her welcoming line: "Come to Paldi — my husband will give your husband a job!" The first to own a washing machine, she shared it freely, and her home served as a gathering place for East Indian women.

She died young, however — at the age of 46 in 1952. Her husband died three years later at 64. Both were cremated according to Sikh custom, their ashes interred beneath a bronze tablet in the family cemetery.

Logging operations on Hill 60, which had extended almost to Lake Cowichan, had ceased in 1943, and after a disastrous fire consumed 27 million feet of bucked timber, the Paldi mill shut down. For a time, the old town enjoyed a baby boom, even though most of the men were commuting to company operations at Summit Lake and Nanaimo. Then residents began to move away to be closer to schools and opportunities, and Paldi became a near-ghost town, its homes rented and allowed to deteriorate.

As of last October, historic, multi-cultural Paldi had all but disappeared. There are few residents now besides two families of Mayos, although this will soon change dramatically. Hundreds of new homes and a business centre are set to rise from the ashes in a 22.5-hectare development spearheaded by Mayo's grandson, Mark Saroya, who inherited the townsite property bequeathed to his mother. With developer Dave Johel's adjacent Cherokee project, located between Paldi townsite and Lake Cowichan, the total number of new homes in the area could soar to 600.



An abandoned house stands in the background as Joan Mayo takes a farewell walk through the town of Paldi. Joan's father-in-law was Mayo Singh. (Many Indian families a century ago did not use a family name. It wasn't unusual for immigrant families, finding themselves in a society that demanded a last name, to take the name of a senior family member as the family name.)

T.W. Paterson/Special to the Times Colonist

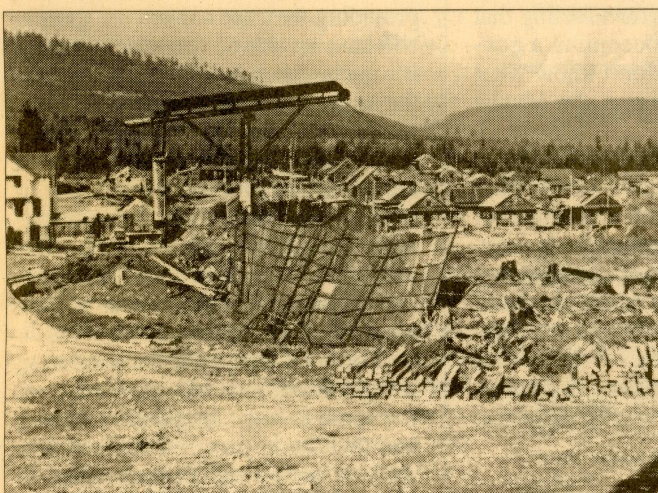


The abandoned house is soon reduced to smoking ashes when the local fire department uses controlled burns to test its team and equipment.

T.W. Paterson/Special to the Times Colonist

In some respects, October's fires were a replay of those that claimed the machine shop and school in 1997. With husband Rajindi and their five children, Joan Mayo had watched as flames swept the latter from existence. "To outsiders, it was just an old building, but to anyone who has lived in Paldi, it stood as a reminder of those happier, simpler days when families of different nationalities lived, worked and played together in harmony."

Duncan resident T.W. Paterson writes about Vancouver Island history.



Paldi was falling into ruins by the early 1980s.

A. Atkins/Times Colonist archives