

100 Years of the Paldi Gurdwara

The life of a Sikh revolves around his Temple (Gurdwara). In their homeland, even in the smallest village, everyone enters the Temple for prayers and blessings each day before setting off to work, school or simply the daily chores. Therefore it was only natural that once the mill and bunkhouses were erected the next building should be the Temple.

The Paldi Temple was officially opened on July 1, 1919 in conjunction with Canada's Dominion Day, now Canada Day. The annual July 1st Jor Malla, or festival, hosted by mill founder Mayo Singh became one of the most important religious gatherings of the early Sikh Immigrants.

Newcomers made their way to Paldi because of its status as a mill town with several bunkhouses, an East Indian cookhouse and a sawmill operated by an East Indian who somehow always found a job for a newcomer.

The community took on the atmosphere of a village in Punjab, with the Sikh Temple in the centre. It became a home away from home in a foreign country: this was particularly comforting for the women who spoke no English.

Even though the New Westminster, Abbotsford and Victoria temples were subsidiaries of the main Vancouver temple, the Paldi temple remained a separate society. In the 1950s, it was officially registered under the Societies Act as the Paldi Khalsa Diwan Society, with members from Lake Cowichan, Youbou, Hillcrest and Duncan on the working committee.

Sikh travelers anywhere in the world know there will always be a room and a meal for them, provided there is a Sikh Temple nearby and the Gurdwaras of British Columbia were often the first place of refuge to a newcomer just off the boat.

Mayo Siding: A Logging Town

The government of British Columbia was looking for a way to extend the Esquimalt and Nanaimo Railway (E&N) north to Courtenay. The federal government would pay its share provided they build a railway everyone could use. The E&N invited tenders to harvest the timber 15 miles on each side of the tracks provided the buyer shipped by rail. This in turn created income for the railway company.

In 1917, Mayo Singh and his partners established the Mayo Bros. Timber Co. of behalf of thirty-five shareholders after obtaining timber rights to land along the railway. By purchasing small parcels at a time, Mayo's holdings increased and the small community known then as Mayo Siding sprang up near the newly-built mill.

The site was named after Mayo's birth place of Paldi in the Punjab State, India. Mayo fought to gain the right to vote, for civil rights, and to make significant changes for the people in the community.

At its peak, Paldi was home to 1,500 people, rivaling the population of Duncan at that time.

A Multicultural Community

Those who lived, worked and grew up in Paldi remember the ease with which friendships were forged between people of different nationalities. In the logging community of Paldi, South Asians, Japanese, Chinese, First Nations and Europeans existed together in a unique cultural harmony.

“It would be the same if you were living in Duncan or Lake Cowichan, all the kids got together to play, the only difference here was there was a mixture of all the nationalities; automatically, everybody was just a big mixing bowl, everybody got along and played together.”—Rajindi Mayo, 2005

The many faces of Paldi can be seen in photographs of students who attended classes at the Paldi School.

LOGGING BY RAIL

Logging by rail was still in its infancy when it fell to Mayo Singh to design an engine suitable for logging on a mountain side. As the original steam locomotives gave off a lot of sparks, the design had to be one to arrest these fire hazards. Old "3 Spot" is now on display in the BC Forest Discovery Centre in Duncan, lovingly restored by local steam train enthusiasts.

The 50-ton Pacific coast type shay locomotive built specifically for use in the logging operations of Mayo Lumber Co has a smoke stack with a spark arrester on top of the funnel to deflect any sparks that develop from the wood used to fire her boiler. There is also a rack on top of the tender to store the fuel. Built by Lima Locomotive Works Inc, in Lima, Ohio, it is listed in the Encyclopedia of Sharp as sold April 22, 1924, to Mayo Lumber Co, Paldi, BC.

Another shay designed and built for Mayo Lumber Co., was originally constructed as a wood burner and the only 90 ton engine built as such. This shay, No. 4, was converted to oil on Hill 60, when they were so far back in the forest they couldn't carry enough wood to fuel the return trip. The Encyclopedia of Sharp lists her as sold on July 26, 1928 to Mayo Lumber Co, Paldi, BC.

The Jor Malla

The annual Paldi Jor Malla, held the weekend closest to the first of July, was and still is the year's largest function. A Jor Malla is a gathering of people. 'Jor' means gathering and 'Malla' means festival. It is a happy occasion combining a religious service with sports, games and traditional foods.

The religious service requires the non-stop reading of the Grant/i Sahib, or holy book, from beginning to end. The reading is done in shifts. The opening ceremony with prayers and hymns begins Friday morning at 9:30 am. It is perfectly timed so as to complete the reading along with the closing prayers on Sunday morning, when most people are free to attend.

The East Indian men from Paldi and other temples in B.C. competed in high jump, long jump, and flip jump. But the most exciting event to watch was the weight lifting. Sometimes it was a heavy piece of iron with a prize to the one who could raise it and lower it the most times. Other times it would be a large boulder. Phuman S. Johal is remembered to have lifted a man on his hand with his arm straight out. Another time Nanjo Singh created excitement when he played tug of war with a car. It was not unusual for the Paldi volley ball and soccer teams to be made up of East Indian, Japanese, Chinese and whites. Everyone joined in the celebrations.

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Families of Paldi

By 1928, some wives and families had arrived and the temple as well as the community was enlarged to accommodate the newcomers. Mayo and his older brother Ganea Singh had both returned to India to marry as did several others.

With the arrival of the women the community took on the atmosphere of an Indian village, their lives revolving around their temple and although at first the men did most of the cooking for the religious functions, the women made the roti, the unleavened bread. Later a separate cookhouse for the women was built adjacent to the men's cookhouse.

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The Townsite of Paldi, BC

The map was drawn in 1933.