

Shared Roots

How Mills and Migrants Created Community

Educator Suvreet Johal

By 1908 there were more than 5,000 South Asian settlers in BC. These rapidly growing numbers sparked fear and outrage among many European settlers and officials, and led to an immigration ban on the South Asian community that the same year. The racist ban stated that immigrants from India had to travel to Canada in one long continuous journey and could not stop along the way for any reason. This included stopping to get supplies or medical aid or because of poor sailing conditions. Additionally, the federal government imposed a \$200 tax upon all South Asian immigrants on arrival to Canada. This was an attempt to dissuade individuals and families from entering and settling in Canada.

Mayo Singh arrived in Canada in 1906. In 1917 he opened a mill and founded the community of Paldi on Vancouver Island. Singh became known for hiring newcomers to Canada during a time where discrimination and racism was rampant.

Joan Mayo, daughter-in-law of Mayo Singh, reflects on the vibrant community of Paldi in her book, *Paldi Remembered*. She recalls that Paldi was family centred, and there were always social events and gatherings happening. Children would gather for games such as hide and seek, tag, marbles and card or board games, and the women too would gather and spend the evenings enjoying each other's company. There were always functions happening within the communities that everyone was welcomed to. This was the time before televisions, and people spent their free time out in the community with each other. Twice a week, for 15 cents, the community was able to enjoy a movie played with a rented projector and reel in the community hall.



Cowichan Valley Museum & Archives

Paldi Students

From small beginnings come great things. School children in Paldi in 1938.

Credit: Courtesy of CVMA, 2014.6.2.245; Joan Mayo fonds, SACDA, 2020_06_07_105

While the residents of this once colourful town have all moved out, festivals and annual events are still held and the Gurdwara (Sikh temple) remains where it has always stood. In 2019, the Gurdwara turned 100 years old, making it one of the oldest temples in Canada. Celebrations that year featured food, fireworks and a flag raising to commemorate the journey of Paldi and its residents.