

Parks Canada on the Commemoration of the History
of
Ethnocultural Communities in British Columbia Workshop

March 3, 2006, Vancouver, B.C.

Proposal: Respectfully submit the following person (Mr. Mayo Singh) and the site (Paldi Sikh Temple) for consideration by the panel and the committee as Historical Importance for British Columbia and Canadian History.

As this workshop is intended to provide numerous participants an opportunity to bring to light historical importance of person(s), site(s), and event(s) in our Canadian history and to have the panel and committee consider commemorating the said points of interest, it is my intentions to keep this proposal brief and to the point so that others may have time to study all the interesting proposals presented at this workshop.

Person

Mr. Mayo Singh
(1888-1955)

At the turn of the century Canada had seen a tremendous growth in its industrial sector and its economy. Prime Minister Wilfred Laurier and his government had encouraged immigrants, especially from Europe, to come to Canada and make it their home. These immigrants wanted a better life than what they had in their own country. They wanted a better future not only for themselves but also for their children.

The Asians wanted the same thing. One of these Asians was Mr. Mayo Singh, an East Indian from the Punjab, India. Mr. Mayo came to Vancouver via San Francisco in 1907 to join his brother and cousins in Canada. He arrived in the Lower mainland at a time when there was mounting racial tensions in British Columbia. Vancouver Riots of 1905, where the white settlers attacked the Chinese and the Japanese residents, caused the federal government to institute very harsh immigration policies against Asian immigrants. They placed an unreasonable head tax on the Chinese, banned Japanese immigration, and implemented the 'continuous passage clause' on the East Indians who were, ironically, British subjects. The harshness of the continuous passage clause was

illustrated by the Komagata Maru incident in 1914, where over 200 hundred Sikhs were forced to turn their chartered ship around and head back to India.. Thus many of the East Indians, like Mr. Mayo, had to enter Canada through the United States.

Mr. Mayo, along with a group of thirty or so other East Indians worked in the small family owned lumber mills in the Lower mainland. But Canada was hit with a recession just before the war. Many of the mills went out of business and thus there was no work for the men. The group pulled together, led by Mr. Mayo, and formed a co-operative and tried their hand at running a farm. Again, because of the recession, this venture failed. But these people did not despair. They sent Mr. Mayo to Vancouver Island to snare a contract for purchase of timber rights so that they could do what they do best--- run a lumbermill. When Mr. Mayo arrived in Duncan he could not find anyone to rent him a room for the night. Again, racism reared its ugly head. He was told that there was another Hindu man like him living near the tracks outside of town. So Mr. Mayo trekked the tracks to find this 'Hindu man'. Refer to Joan Mayo's, daughter-in-law of Mr. Mayo, book Paldi Remembered to further read about Mr. Mayo's adventures in the Cowichan Valley.

Mr. Mayo was not deterred by racism or hardships that he had to endure to establish a foothold for his people in the Cowichan Valley. Joan Mayo has chronicled Mr. Mayo's rise to become one of the wealthiest lumber baron in British Columbia, if not Canada, very accurately in her book. But in the East Indian community and the community at large, Mr. Mayo was more than just a wealthy man. He was a man proud of his heritage and also appreciated the opportunities that his newly adopted country, Canada, provided him. But most of all he was a caring man and he personified charity.

For the East Indian community, he provided work for scores of newly immigrant men so that they too can have the opportunity to provide for their families. He established a small multicultural community (Paldi) of 1500 people. Here Japanese, Chinese, East Indians, and whites lived in harmony. It was like this community was oblivious to the racism rampant in rest of B.C. Paldi had its own sawmill, post office, school, and grocery store.. From the lumber that was provided by Mr. Mayo, the community built temples for the Japanese as well as the East Indians. Mr. Mayo paid for the cost of building the Paldi Sikh Temple and continued paying for the utilities until the

day he died. He would not think of taking credit for building the temple, even though it was his employees that helped to construct the temple. He always insisted that the temple was for the congregation (Sangat) and belonged to the congregation (Sangat). This temple remains in operation even today after eighty-seven years!

In India, Mr. Mayo has anonymously donated hundreds of thousands of rupees for charitable causes. There is a story that is told many times by the elders. Mr. Mayo, on one of his trips to India, attended a function in a village in his honour. The village elders entertained Mr. Mayo as they would a king hoping that he would help them build a school. When the dinner was over Mr. Mayo got up and thanked his hosts and left for his village. The hosts were left speechless. Was this party for not? Next morning Mr. Mayo's escort came back with a 200 thousand dollar cheque written by Mr. Mayo to be used for building the new school. Mr. Mayo did not like to be in the limelight and did not like public accolades. His charity was from the heart. He has helped to build schools and hospitals in India.

In Canada, his charity reaches far and wide. In Beacon Hill Park the flag pole was donated by him. Rooms built in many of the hospitals in Chemainus, Nanaimo, Duncan, Victoria, and Vancouver, bear his name. Often, many of the unexpected generous gifts that hospitals received each year were from 'an anonymous donor'----- Mr. Mayo. University of Victoria has benefited from Mr. Mayo's generosity. The list of charities that benefited from Mr. Mayo in B.C. are too numerous to list here. Again, Joan Mayo has an exhaustive list in her book.

The tangibles are easy to identify for Mr. Mayo. But what I believe to be his greatest legacy is the pride and confidence that he inspired and instilled in future generations of East Indians. The pride and confidence, that if we work hard we too can be successful in this country. The pride and confidence to be able to share our wealth with the less fortunate. The pride and confidence to be able to look beyond racism and embrace all cultures. The pride and confidence to be able to call ourselves Indo-Canadians, which is a symbol of our dual nationality. It is a no wonder that the name Mr. Mayo is on the lips of many, both in India and Canada, even fifty years after his death!

Site

Paldi Sikh Temple

The site that I would like my distinguished panel to consider for commemoration is the Paldi Sikh Temple. This temple is located in Paldi, a once thriving village built by Mr. Mayo Singh, approximately seven miles west of Duncan B.C. This temple is the oldest functioning Sikh Temple (Gurdwara) in British Columbia and I believe possibly Canada. It was built in 1918 to provide a place of worship for the East Indian community in Paldi and Vancouver Island. This Gurdwara symbolizes many things to many people.

The Paldi Sikh Temple symbolizes the multicultural harmony that was prevalent in Paldi from 1918 to the 1980's. The Chinese, Japanese, East Indians and the 'white' Canadians all had a hand in building the Sikh Temple. This illustrated the village values of hard work, co-operation, and tolerance for all cultures and religions. The temple is not just a "Sikh" thing but has the imprints of those that lived there

The Paldi Temple symbolizes the strength and resolve of the East Indian community to overcome any obstacles and hardships to adapt to this country and establish firm roots for future generations. Through the religious ceremonies and services in this Temple the East Indians from all over B.C. drew spiritual strength to carry on and not waver from the values are so dear to them. Values of facing hardships with dignity and resolve, of being tolerant of other cultures and religions, and of helping the less fortunate. The Temple offered refuge to any immigrant that did not have a place to stay or was going hungry. The Temple itself has survived wars, depression, prosperity, and decline in population. This Temple symbolizes the strength that people look for when they are facing adversity.

To me, as to others my age, the Paldi Sikh Temple symbolizes the togetherness and the feeling of one big happy family. Since 1961 I have been involved in hundreds of religious and social gatherings at this Temple. People from all over B.C. often gathered at the weekend functions in the Paldi Temple. It was a time to meet friends and family that one may not have seen for years. It is a time to share delicious meals (Langar) with friends and family. One thing that comes out clearly at these Temple functions is the genuine love and respect for each other---no matter what nationality one may be. Many

people have mentioned that the feeling of inner peace and open heartness can only be experienced in Paldi and at this Temple. The Temple draws the best out of people even today!

The One thing that the Sikh Temple in Paldi provided for future young Canadian Sikhs was the sense of community service. Numerous Sikhs like Herb Doman (Doman Industries), Wally Uppal (Attorney General), Moe Sahota (former MLA), Ujjal Dosanj (MP) etc. learned to work hard for their successes and also to give back to the community. It did not matter whether you are a lumber baron or a ditch digger everyone is treated equally at the Temple in Paldi. All are also willing to put on an apron in the Langar Hall and serve food to the congregation. Again the sense of we in this together and we are family.

Today, time and progress is catching up to Paldi. All of the old houses have been demolished and the only building left standing is the Paldi Sikh Temple. The owners Mark and Ranjit Saroya, grandchildren of Mr. Mayo Singh, have plans to develop Paldi by building and selling new homes. They are aware of the rich history of the Sikh Temple and it is their wishes that the Temple be preserved and commemorated as historical site so that future generations could look to this site with pride. They too, as the Society running the Temple, wish that the Sikh Temple continue to function and provide services for today's generation as it has for the past generations. By designating the Paldi Sikh Temple as a Heritage site, it would ensure that the wishes of all parties be fulfilled.

The Sikh Temple commemoration not only will serve as a reminder of Mr. Mayo and his deeds, but also be a symbol of the multicultural tolerance that was possible amidst the racial unrest in rest of British Columbia. Maybe Paldi showed rest of Canada a blueprint as to how to be racially and religiously tolerant. The designation of the Paldi Sikh Temple as a Heritage site will make the Indo-Canadian community proud of the accomplishments of their forefathers as well as appreciative of the Canadian government for recognizing the contributions that the Indo-Canadians have made to Canadian history and society.

Respectfully submitted by: Nirmal Parmar

Further Readings:

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