

Immigrants given vote

An evening spent with local real estate agent Karm Singh provided some interesting memories. Life was not easy for the East Indian people who immigrated to Canada in the early 1900s. Feelings of hostility and jealousy were running high and coupled with the terrible years of the depression, the early settlers from India faced an uphill battle. The issues of citizenship and equality in the work place became burning desires.

The loneliness of being separated from their families back home, together with their treatment here, combined to produce a community of hard working and loyal Canadians.

Karm Singh's father had immigrated in 1906 with the first group of men, who came to Canada from their impoverished country, seeking a better life. In 1921-1923 after a visit back to his homeland he returned to Canada bringing his nine-year-old son Karm with him. In the early days, Karm recalls, they travelled in small groups, helping each other during the trip and settling close together. Karm's father found work in a sawmill in South Westminster where his son received his schooling.

There were about 60 men working in that mill, nearly all were immigrants, many from Europe including Poland, Germany and Yugoslavia. Still the Asiatic worker, Japanese, Chinese and East Indians, were treated and paid on a different scale to the white men. Karm joined his father in the mill at the age of 15.

The depression had hit hardest on the unskilled workers and coupled with an influx of immigrants from Europe, life became a human tragedy. Karm recalls the foreman, an immigrant from Germany himself, a compassionate man who hired as many as he could, allowing the rest to sleep in the warm boiler room on the sawdust. By 1929, there was no work available so Karm and his father returned to India where their meagre savings would last longer.

He came back to Canada alone in 1933, by now in need of a job. He again found work in a mill at 10 cents per hour. The B.C. government brought in the minimum wage law of 35 cents an hour but employers were allowed to pay 25 per cent of their workers only 25 cents per hour. Two years later he came to Hillcrest Lumber Company in the Sahtlam district.

In 1938 he was able to purchase his own logging truck using all his savings and no-interest loans from friends. We helped each other more in those days, he recalls. Logging camps were working two shifts a day and he worked from dawn to dusk to pay off his truck in one year.

It was at this time he returned to India where he married his wife Rajinder Kour, bringing her to Canada in 1940. His 19-year-old bride spoke no English but they purchased a home on Gibbins Road where their friendly neighbor Mrs. Auchinachie taught her basic English using the grade one reader Dick and Jane.

From 1945-64 he operated a portable sawmill he purchased from Tom Garner, employing up to 15 men at a time. They did their own logging with a team of horses moving the portable mill right up to the timber.

For a time he worked for the city of Victoria, supplying badly needed fire wood to the needy, who would phone city hall when they were desperate for fuel and Karm would be told how much to cut and where to deliver it. Later he took the portable mill to the interior where he cut only custom orders. A car accident in 1964 forced an end to hard labor and it was then he turned to real estate.

Always concerned with the rights of immigrants from India,



Indo Canadian

By Joan Mayo

he was party to many discussions and plans here in the Cowichan Valley where a very active group was struggling to obtain voting rights for East Indians. In order to vote federally, they first had to be given the vote in municipal and provincial elections.

After many trips to the pro-

vincial legislature in Victoria with no results a committee was sent to Harrison Hot Springs where a convention of B.C. mayors was in progress. Duncan mayor, the former mayor Wragg, was in attendance. The committee spokesman pointed out to the convention that three of their committee, Mayo Singh, Kapoor Singh and Naranjan Sing, operated sawmills which employed hundreds of men of all nationalities, where their white employees were allowed to vote and they were not. A resolution was immediately put forward which passed with a sizeable majority and East Indians were given a vote in municipal elections.

Provincial and federal voting rights followed soon after. As a result of their persistence, the Chinese, Japanese and Native Indians, all citizens of Canada, were also given the right to vote.