

COMMUNITY



THAT WAS THEN . . . Sikh women tended to the home and gathered at the well in the early days at Paldi. Politics and

citizenship were left to the men.

At Paldi:

A Sikh woman recalls early days

The more we learn, the more interesting the story becomes. The picture of what life was like for the early immigrants from India is becoming much more clear.

As citizenship week falls in April, and 1987 is the 40th anniversary of the time the East Indian people were given citizenship and the right to vote in Canada, I sought out one of the first women to come to Canada from far off India.

Mrs. Maha Kour Lashman arrived in Canada in 1928 as a 16-year-old bride. Her husband Lashman Singh had been one of the first immigrants to Canada. They settled first in the bustling mill town of Paldi, where she bore three daughters and two sons.

Mrs. Lashman became very excited when I asked her to talk about the early days in Paldi. Those were the days of close neighbors and companionship, a time when each shared in the others joys and sorrows and a time when they made their own fun and always as a community.

The problems of citizenship, the right to vote and independence for India, were left to the men. Mrs. Lashman recalls many meetings and discussions taking place amongst the men but the women had no time for such things, as they lived a life of almost total self sufficiency.

They grew their own fruits and vegetables, making jams and canning for the winter months. She recalled with a broad smile the berry picking excursions up the mountain near Paldi where all the women and children picked together. The women made all their own clothes without patterns and all the clothes needed by the children. There were two men in Paldi who had cars so their wives would purchase the sewing materials and notions needed to make the families clothes, curtains, blankets, towels, etc.

Buckerfields' feed truck delivered feed for the animals and flour for the roti, the staple indian bread. A Chinese fruit and vegetable merchant came twice a week with fresh produce. Most families had their own cows and chickens so very little was needed

FORTUNATE IN THOSE

days to have a nurse living in the village who, along with an interpreter from the company office, drove any who needed medical attention to Duncan.

The women made their own fun meeting in each other's homes with their sewing, knitting and embroidery work. The Lashman family had one of the few wells in the village and as usually happens, the well became a gathering place. As most of the women came as young brides, the well became an outlet for child's play with water fights a common occurrence during the hot weather. Of course, none had ever seen snow before coming to Canada so snow ball fights and other frolicking were regular occurrences around the Lashman well.

When asked about the problems with the Canadian authorities regarding citizenship and voting rights Mrs. Lashman explained that a woman's life was so busy in those days, their day beginning at 5:30 a.m. and ending early at 8 p.m., they never had time to worry about such things. These matters were left to the men.

However, she does remember the visit to Vancouver in 1949 to meet Prime Minister Nehru, The first Prime Minister of India after

independence. Hundreds went from the island by bus carrying picnic lunches to be eaten on the ferry. He spoke in a large hall with so many people packed in to see him. It soon became unbearable inside. As the Prime Minister spoke only in Hindi, they were not able to understand very much but everyone travelled to the Vancouver Sikh temple to meet with him again and all shared in the meal served at the temple.

In his talk to the Sikhs, the Prime Minister encouraged them to continue their struggle for citizenship and voting rights. Although Mrs. Lashman arrived in Canada in 1928 she did not apply for her citizenship papers until a proposed trip to India in 1960. The men of the community had obtained their papers much earlier but the women did not concern themselves with such matters until a need arose.

By the time Mrs. Lashman applied for her document it was only a formality that was handled easily by a lawyer. She doesn't remember having any formal papers but admits they may be in the bank. Her husband died in 1969 and Mrs. Lashman still lives in the house he built for her in 1948 on the street named for her husband,

who was well liked and well respected in the Cowichan Valley