

Sikh crematorium at Paldi on heritage cemetery tour

One beautiful sunny day in April a bus load of people attending a symposium on Heritage Cemeteries visited the Sikh crematorium built by the Paldi Khalsa Diwan Society. The symposium was organized by the B.C. Historical Federation and led by John Adams of Victoria. Myrtle Haslam of the Cowichan Historical Society showed the way and introduced the group to Meetow Singh, president of Paldi Sikh Temple, Ajab Jaswal, secretary and Ajeet Bawa, spokesperson for the visit.

The 65 people on the bus were from many parts of the Pacific Northwest including Oregon, Vancouver, Chilliwack, Golden, Grand Forks and Kamloops as well as Victoria and Duncan.

Following introductions, the group was led inside the crematorium where they sat on the benches provided for mourners and listened as Ajeet Bawa explained the history and some of the Sikh customs.

Prior to the building of the present crematorium in 1954 the Sikh people of this area used a crudely constructed brick burner on the Paldi roadside. Before that small burner was built, funeral pyres were makeshift, using the hot ash from the saw mill's burner at Paldi. In 1954 there were so many complaints about the crude facilities and the fact that the people had to drive past it every time they went in or out of Paldi, a committee was struck to find a place for a permanent and more suitable facility.

In order to ensure privacy the committee purchased 21 acres on the north side of the Old Lake Cowichan Road. B.C. tax laws only allow for five acres of cemetery land tax free so the committee has an on-going fight with the ten people to have the rest of the land needed to ensure privacy exempt from Provincial taxes.

The building is constructed of



Indo Canadian
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cement bricks and is just one large room with benches for the mourners. The windows are covered with heavy wire mesh to discourage vandals and the space containing the huge burner is enclosed by a wrought iron gate which is kept padlocked. Against one wall is a barrel stove to provide some warmth during the cold winter months.

There is a room at the back set aside for receiving the body from the funeral chapel.

Most Sikh funerals are scheduled for Saturdays to enable more people to attend. Until recently the coffin containing the deceased had to be delivered to the crematorium Friday afternoons as the union chapel workers refused to work on a Saturday. This caused great hardships for the family of the deceased as one or two family members were forced to spend the night in crude quarters to protect the coffin. After much negotiating the funeral chapel people have now agreed to deliver the coffin to the sight Saturday morning and the family must bear the extra cost of paying the driver on his day off.

Inside the building, a bird has built its nest on a ledge which to

the people of India is a sign of good fortune. Outside is a huge pile of logs waiting for a work party to volunteer their labor cutting and splitting the wood needed for the fire.

Anyone is welcome to use this facility and as there is no charge the church committee depends on cash donations and volunteer labor.

The Sikh funeral service begins at the funeral chapel with just the immediate family present. The larger gathering of mourners waits at the crematorium sight for the family to arrive behind the hearse. The Sikh priest travels with the coffin and upon arrival at the crematorium the casket is opened while each of the mourners files past. The casket is then closed and the congregation stands while the priest offers the last rites according to the Sikh scriptures. The coffin is then placed inside the burner by the men present and the oldest male members of the family ignites the flame.

Following this emotional ceremony the entire congregation drives to the Sikh Temple where the priest conducts a short but consoling service which concludes a very difficult day.

Funeral Chapel workers have very little to do with the death of a Sikh. If the deceased is a woman the senior women of the family travel to the chapel where they bathe and dress the body and prepare it for cremation. Likewise if a man has died the senior men of the family perform this duty. Three days after cremation, the ashes are gathered by the men of the family and usually scattered in a flowing river. The Sikh people do not normally erect a headstone.

The Heritage Cemeteries Symposium had an interesting look at yet another custom and promised to return on a later date to see and learn more about the Sikh people.