

Gurdwaras in sawmill towns of B.C.

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The exhibit is curated by:



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The historic legacy of Gurdwaras

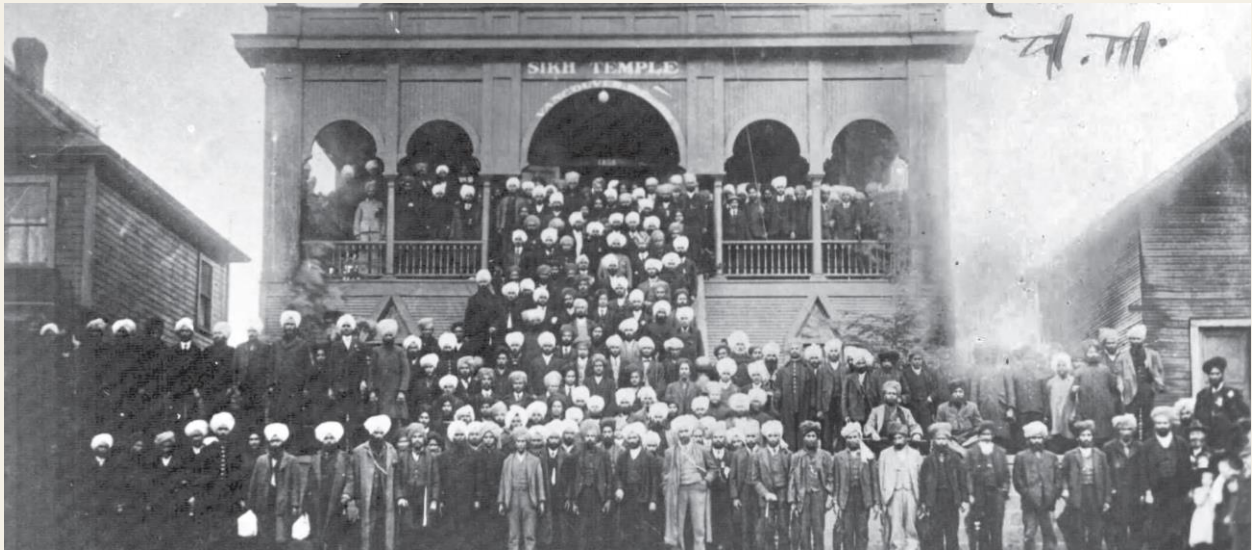
How the past informs the present



Exterior of Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Hong Kong
Khalsa Diwan, Hong Kong (Sikh Temple)



Exterior view of the Sikh Temple, National Historic Site, Abbotsford
(1977) MSA Museum Society; Gurdwara



2nd Avenue Gurdwara, Kitsilano, Vancouver, 1910
Komagata Maru: Continuing The Journey Exhibit Collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

In this exhibit we present B.C.'s legendary gurdwaras in small towns and large cities as sites of memory for Sikhs, providing us with a historic backdrop of community living. In 1903, Sikhs stationed in Hong Kong stayed in a gurdwara before taking the perilous voyage on ship from Southeast Asian British colonies to Vancouver. The first Gurdwara in Hong Kong, called Sri Guru Singh Sabha was built in 1901, by the Sikh members of the British Army Regiment stationed in Hong Kong. Since 1904, Sikhs have been in the pursuit of building gurdwaras wherever they went and settled in BC. It is commonly believed that the first gurdwara in Canada was in Golden, BC. According to firsthand accounts it was established in an old, unused structure provided by

the Columbia River Lumber Company. The first purpose built gurdwara (1908) in the Kitsilano, Vancouver on Second Avenue was a social, religious and political centre for all immigrants from India. It stood as a beacon of strength for Sikhs as they faced discrimination and harassment. The second purpose built gurdwara (1911) is in Abbotsford BC and is now a National Historic Site. As part of the exhibit Chandra Bodalia's life work offers an unparalleled visual record of B.C.'s diverse communities. His work is captured and preserved within the South Asian Canadian Digital Archive (SACDA).

Form, function and aesthetics

History and Architecture of Gurdwaras

A gurdwara is a place of congregational worship and community service in the Sikh tradition. The first gurdwara was established by Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, in 1521 at Kartarpur, Punjab (present-day Pakistan). Guru Nanak, who traveled extensively to spread messages of peace, equality, and love, settled in Kartarpur, where he cultivated the land and introduced the concept of Langar—a free community kitchen open to all, regardless of caste, creed, or background. The town, founded by him on the banks of the Ravi River, became a spiritual and social hub for his followers. It was in Kartarpur that Guru Nanak composed many hymns included in the Guru Granth Sahib ji, the Sikh holy scripture, notably the Japji Sahib. He lived there for 18 years, fostering a close-knit Sikh community until his passing on September 22, 1539.



Gurdwara Sri Darbar Sahib, Kartarpur, Pakistan
Jaam Saqi, Adobe Stock

Gurdwara architecture in the Canadian diaspora

As Sikh places of worship, gurdwaras are significant markers of both faith and identity. Despite their cultural importance, little research has explored their architecture, particularly in diaspora communities. In Canada, where Sikh settlers first arrived in the 1890's gurdwaras have played a central role in both their spiritual life and community building. Early gurdwaras reflected western aesthetics before moving to traditional Sikh architectural features like domes and arches. Moghul influences like the domes are commonly ascribed to Sikh gurdwaras.

The blend and fusion of Sikh and Canadian design elements are seen in symbolic facades and devotional spaces. The hybrid nature of Sikh Canadian identity is reflected in the visual beauty of B.C. Gurdwaras. Today there are 100 gurdwaras across Canada and these spaces embody both religious devotion and the continuously evolving narrative of Sikh identity within the Canadian mosaic. Like sentinels, the Nishan Sahibs lay claim to sovereign space outside each gurdwara, draped in saffron and blue signifying the reformist faith's call for Sikhs to be eternal learners in conversation with the Guru Granth Sahib housed in the Gurdwara.



Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, Surrey-Delta
Chandra Bodalia fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara, Abbotsford
Chandra Bodalia fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Nanaksar Gurdwara Sahib, Richmond
Chandra Bodalia fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Lake Cowichan Gurdwara
Google Maps | World Gurdwaras



Ross Street Gurdwara, Vancouver
Chandra Bodalia fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Khalsa Diwan Society 1906~present

First Purpose Built Gurdwara in Canada – 1908



Sangat outside 2nd Avenue Gurdwara, Kitsilano, Vancouver
Komagata Maru: Continuing The Journey Exhibit Collection,
South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

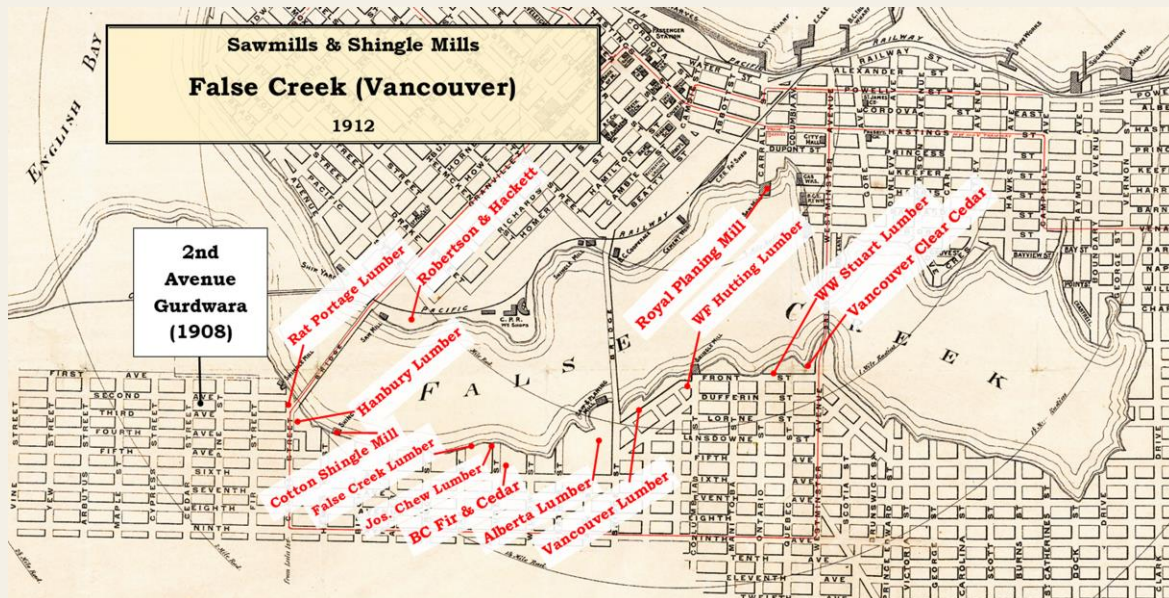


Exterior view of Khalsa Diwan Society, Ross Street Gurdwara,
Vancouver. Chandra Bodalia fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital
Archive

Built in 1908 for the Khalsa Diwan Society and designed by William Henry Archer, the 866 West 2nd Avenue Gurdwara in Kitsilano was the first purpose built gurdwara in Canada. Serving a population of a little over 2,000 people at its inception, the Gurdwara continually served a variety of community needs for over sixty years as a space for dialogue and dynamic community engagement. This Gurdwara was the site for numerous momentous events in the early Sikh history in Canada.

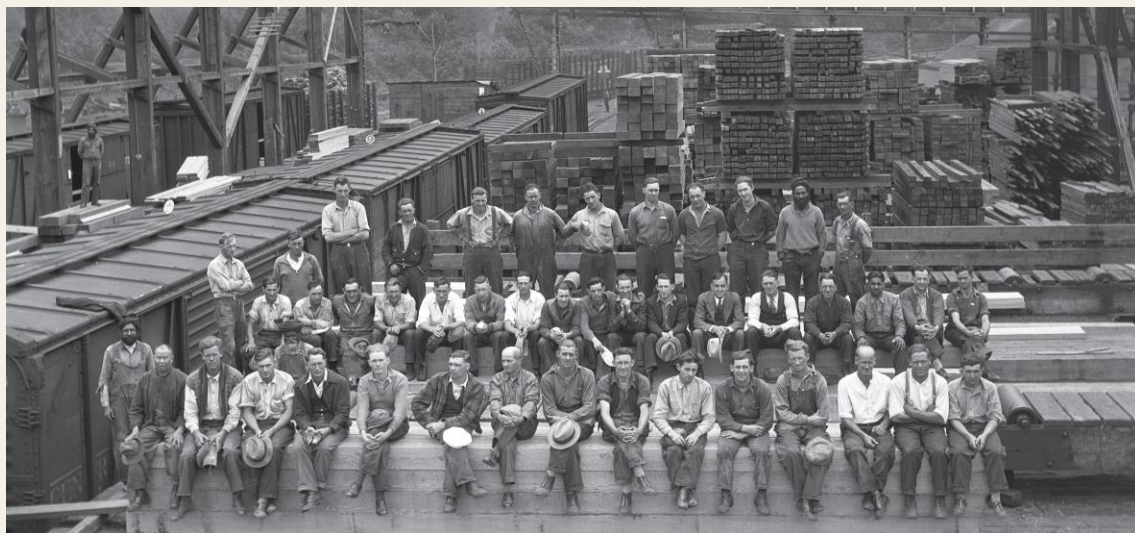
Centred around the religious, intellectual, revolutionary, political gatherings were balanced by personal events like weddings, births and deaths, fulfilling the needs of the early community's private joys, through comfort and solace from the everyday. An inter-religious space it was the

social, political, cultural and economic heart of the community. The Gurdwara was sold in 1970 to help build the Ross Street Gurdwara, but its impact on the lives of many it served is felt even today.



Map of sawmills & shingle mills at False Creek, Vancouver, B.C. indicating the 2nd Avenue Gurdwara
Labour History - Photographs Maps collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Gurdwaras in the sawmill towns of B.C.



Group photo of lumber mill workers at Industrial Timber Mills Ltd, Youbou, B.C.
Wilmer Gold collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Faith and Community Life Alongside the Mills

In 1897 Kesur Singh, a Risaldar Major in the British Indian Army was part to the Sikh Regiment that travelled across Canada enroute to England as part of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee celebrations. He and his fellow soldiers were part of the Imperial Sikh Lancers, the 25th Cavalry

Frontier Force and Sikh Infantry Regiment. Upon their return to Hong Kong, they told other men from India who were stationed there in service to the Crown about Canada and its many opportunities as a new daughter colony. Sikh migration to British Columbia started in 1903. Living in bachelor societies, the first kind of employment men acquired was in the forestry, mining and agricultural sector in small towns across B.C.. They made less money than European settlers, and whatever money they saved they sent most of it to their families and supported other men to come to Canada. They also started to build and congregate in Gurdwaras in B.C., building many in the small towns they called home.

The Golden Gurdwara



Exterior view of Gurdwara Sahib, Golden, B.C.
Golden B.C. Museum

First Sikh immigrants went to Golden to work with the Columbia River Lumber Company working in the lumberyard, planer and sawmill. The first Sikh gurdwara in Canada was established in Golden B.C. in 1905 in an old, unused structure provided by the Columbia River Lumber Company. It was a plain wooden structure, just 12x20 feet in size with a gable end roof and a Nishaan Sahib outside proclaiming its sovereign presence. The building was always open, and the inside was adorned with ornaments and a beautiful rug with an altar for the Guru Granth Sahib ji at the front end of the room.

Gur Sikh Temple, National Historic Site, Abbotsford

A hundred+ years old Sikh religious institution, built by struggling settlers (started in 1908, completed in 1911) in Abbotsford B.C., the Gur Sikh Temple is a testament to the pride, vision and steadfastness of a settler community at the turn of the last century. The first Sikhs had arrived in the Fraser Valley in 1905, from Punjab, India and settled in the Valley by working on the farms and in the forestry industry. Soon after, in 1908, local Sikhs started to build a Sikh gurdwara in a true community effort, under the auspices of the Khalsa Diwan Society. It would take the fledgling community four years of hard work and great commitment – both financial and physical – to finish building it.

The project was spearheaded by Sunder Singh Thandi, who along with Arjan Singh purchased a once acre property on a prominent hill adjacent to the mill at Mill Lake where about fifty or so Sikh men worked. The foundation stone was laid by Bhai Balwant Singh and Bhai Ram Singh Dhuleta. Records show that in 1910, the Abbotsford Post carried advertisements calling for tenders for steam heating for the gurdwara.

On July 31, 2002 the Gur Sikh Temple was designated as a National Historic Site and after extensive renovations, on April 1, 2007 the Gurdwara reopened with community wide celebrations.

In 2011, one hundred years after it was opened, a Sikh Heritage Museum was established which holds exhibits and encourages visitors to visit and guided tours are organized. The gurdwara functions fully as a centre for prayer, congregation and memory for Sikhs and as a site for all Canadians to visit and learn about Sikh history.



Exterior view of the Sikh Temple, 1977
MSA Museum Society; Gurdwara



Interior of Gur Sikh Temple, National Historic Site, Abbotsford (1977). MSA Museum Society, # N1371

The Hillcrest Gurdwara

The Hillcrest Gurdwara, built in 1935 was located on the Sahtlam Mill near Duncan BC in the middle of housing for mill workers, making it a social, cultural and religious centre for Sikhs. The mill paid for all the costs associated with the Gurdwara like heating and electricity. At this time, major celebrations were divided between the different gurdwaras on Vancouver Island. For example, Vaisakhi was celebrated at Victoria's gurdwara, and Canada Day was always held at Paldi gurdwara and the Jor Mela continues even today. These days held special importance to the community and Sikhs from as far away as Vancouver would also come to attend. These were exciting times when everyone would get together and even arrive a few days earlier to help out. Families would get busy with preparations and chores such as finding mattresses and washing linens for the guests that would arrive. In 1948, the gurdwara moved to Mesachie Lake's new Hillcrest location. It was moved by separating it into three parts and was then reattached. In 1968 the Hillcrest Gurdwara was moved to Lake Cowichan when the mill at Sahtlam shut down. The new gurdwara in Lake Cowichan was built by using parts of the Hillcrest Sikh Temple.



Hillcrest Gurdwara, Sahtlam Mill near Duncan B.C.
Wilmer Gold collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Mesachie Lake, Youbou

Mesachie Lake is a small community on Vancouver Island in the Cowichan Valley, known for the Hillcrest Lumber Company founded by Carlton Stone in 1943. Stone relocated his Sahtlam based Hillcrest Lumber Mill to the new community and continued to operate it till 1968. After that the mill was dismantled, machinery was sold and the site cleaned and levelled. Today the mill is the home of beautiful Camp Imadene. The actual closing date of the historic mill occurred on Friday, Aug. 23, 1968. B.C.'s Attorney General Mr. Wally Oppal was raised in Mesachie Lake and later worked there to help pay for his university education. The significant Sikh community in Mesachie Lake made it their home while they worked at Hillcrest. The Hillcrest Gurdwara stood there till it was dismantled to become a part of the Lake Cowichan Sikh Temple, which still stands today.

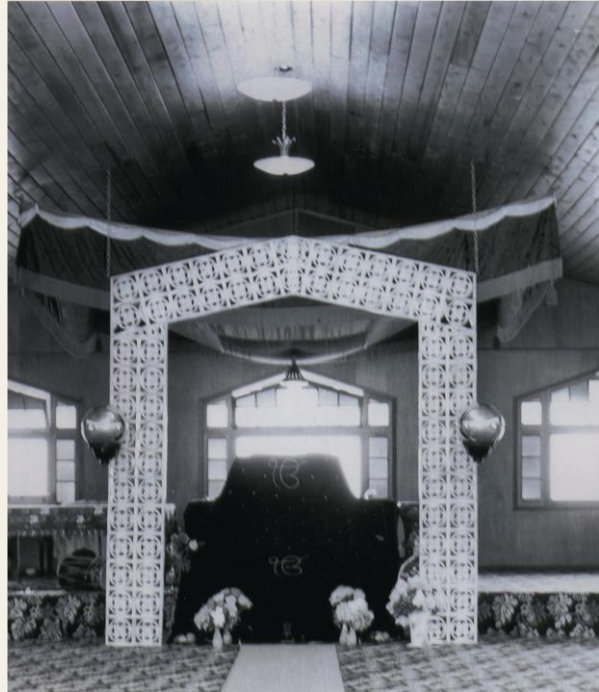


Bunkhouse and cookhouse for the labourers at Industrial Timber Mills Ltd, Youbou, B.C.
Wilmer Gold collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Paldi Sikh Temple



Front view of the original Paldi Sikh Temple
Joan Mayo Fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Interior of the Paldi Sikh Temple
Paldi collection, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

The Paldi Sikh Temple and Cemetery are provincially recognized under Section 18 of the Heritage Conservation Act, as they epitomize the Sikh rural experience in British Columbia. Paldi was a small, tight-knit logging community located between Duncan and Lake Cowichan on Vancouver Island. Originally, it was called Mayo Siding, but the name was later changed to Paldi, after the village in Punjab from where its founder, Mayo Singh, had migrated.

The town was established in 1916 by shareholders who purchased timber rights in the area — including Mayo Singh Manhas, his brother Ganea Singh Manhas, Attar Doman Singh, and Kapoor Singh Siddoo. As the town developed, it grew to include a lumber mill, the Mayo company store, a school, post office, a Japanese temple, bunkhouses for workers, and family housing for Sikh, Japanese, Chinese, and European labourers who worked in the mill.

The first gurdwara (Sikh temple) in Paldi opened in 1917, and a Japanese Buddhist temple followed in 1923. In 1949, India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, visited Paldi during a tour of British Columbia. At its peak, Paldi was home to 1,500 people, but during the 1960s, when the Paldi sawmill closed, residents gradually moved away from this intercultural village. The original gurdwara was torn down and replaced by a new one in 1968, which continues to serve the community to this day. There's a small museum inside the langar hall, and community members still gather here every year on Canada Day.

Equality, Sangat and Faith

Langar: A Tradition of Service and Equality

Langar, the communal meal served in Sikh gurdwaras worldwide, is a cornerstone of Sikh faith and community, embodying the principles of equality, generosity, and selfless service (seva). Open to all, regardless of race, gender, class, or caste, langar fosters inclusivity and unity. Rooted in the teachings of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the founder of Sikhism, this centuries-old practice continues to nourish both body and spirit, with meals traditionally prepared by volunteers and served vegetarian in accordance with Sikh values.



Mata Khivi Ji serving langar: Wife of Guru Angad Dev Ji, she established the Sikh tradition of community kitchen, offering meals with equality and care. Sikhi Wiki Encylomedia of Sikhs

Guru Ka Langar: The community kitchen as a site for Seva

Wherever there is a Gurdwara, it is made sure that there will be a Langar Hall (dining room). A Sikh Gurdwara without Langar is inconceivable. All the devotees and visitors who come to the Gurdwara and attend sangat (holy congregation) in the Gurdwara are offered and partake in Langar.



Natara Singh and Bhuton Singh serving prashad
Joan Mayo Fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



A group of women preparing roti with ghee for the langar
Chandra Bodalia, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Langar: A Tradition of Service and Equality



Langar Seva at the Gurdwara Dashmesh Darbar Langar Hall
Chandra Bodalia, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Langar Seva in the Gurdwara Langar Hall
Chandra Bodalia, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Langar Seva at the Paldi Gurdwara Langar Hall
Joan Mayo fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

Food of Langar

Sugar and other sweet foods

Represents the sweetness of piety & community with God.

Salt

Symbolizes purity and incorruptibility.

Roti

The transformation of raw wheat to finished bread, used as an analogy for spiritual development.

Dal

The poor man's protein.

Vegetables

Any mixed vegetables/curried vegetables are cooked to complement the dal.

Ghee

Used to cook Kadah Prasad.

Parashad

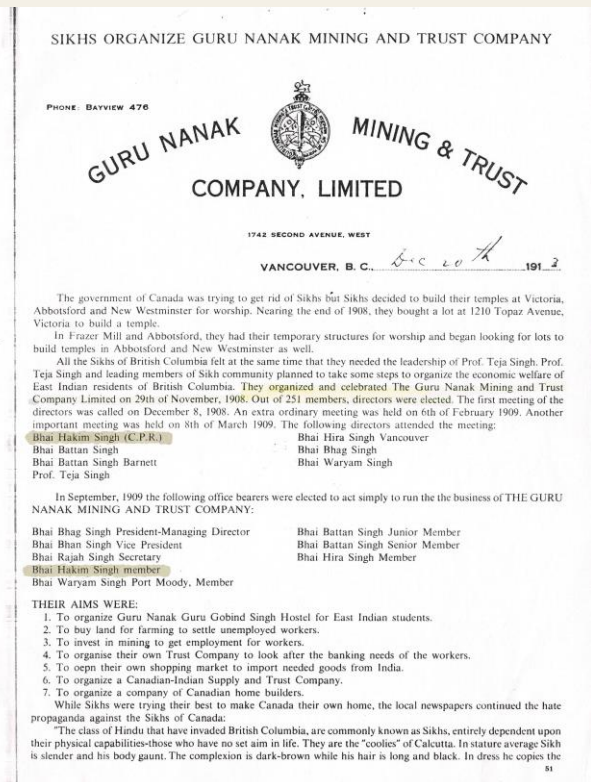
"Gracious gift" – halva made with equal portions of whole wheat flour, clarified butter, sugar and triple the water. It is offered to all visitors to the Darbar Sahib in a Gurdwara. "Gracious gift" – halva made with equal portions of whole wheat flour, clarified butter, sugar and triple the water. It is offered to all visitors to the Darbar Sahib in a Gurdwara.

One Family, Endless Strength

The Hundal Family



Hundal family in front of their family home in Point Grey, B.C. Hakam Singh Hundal's family (Hakam's grandmother, Bishan Kaur and children Atma Singh Hundal, Ikball Singh Hundal, Teja Singh Hundal, and Jerry Singh Hundal). Paul Hundal family fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive



Photocopy of a document from the Guru Nanak Mining & Trust Company, where Hakam Singh Hundal is listed as a founding director under the name "Hakim". Paul Hundal family fonds, South Asian Canadian Digital Archive

In 1906, Hakam Singh Hundal arrived in British Columbia, having traveled from San Francisco with his brother Jiwan Singh Hundal, who settled in Astoria, Oregon. Hakam worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway, cleared land for the Vancouver Golf Club in 1910, and labored at the False Creek Lumber Company by 1918. Determined to reunite his family, he fought tirelessly after U.S. authorities denied their entry in 1911, forcing them back to Hong Kong. After nearly two years of advocacy, the federal government granted them entry through an Act of Grace in June 1913.

The family settled in Point Grey, where Hakam built their home on Lot 24. His son, Ikball Singh Hundal, excelled academically, graduating from Point Grey High School in 1919 and earning a Bachelor of Science in Mechanical Engineering from the University of Washington in 1925. Despite his achievements, Ikball faced racial discrimination that barred him from professional engineering work. Choosing activism over compromise, he joined the Ghadar Party and returned to India in 1930 to fight for independence, vowing to remain unmarried until India was free—a promise he kept until 1948. He returned to Canada in 1955 but tragically lost his life to random violence in 1965. The Hundal family's story reflects courage, sacrifice, and an enduring commitment to justice.

Records indicate that the Hundal family was an active and significant contributor to the Khalsa Diwan Society, Vancouver. In 1927, Atma Singh Hundal, son of Hakkam Singh Hundal, also served as a Director of the society.

Small town Gurdwaras in B.C.

100 Mile House

The first Gurdwara in 100 Mile House, British Columbia, is named Gurdwara Sahib. It was built by the 100 Mile House Sikh Society in 1978 and is located on Blackstock Road.



Source: 100 Mile House Gurdwara Sahib, Facebook page.

Mackenzie

The first Gurdwara in Mackenzie was known as the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple and was built in 1974. It closed in 2022 due to the dwindling Sikh population in the town. In 2025 the local Sikh community donated the building to transform it into a community centre.



Source: World Gurudwaras

Merrit

The first Gurdwara in Merritt, British Columbia, is known as the Merritt Sikh Temple. It serves as a place of worship and a community center for the Sikh population in the Nicola Valley.



Source: Harpreet Sandhu, Wikimedia Commons.

New Westminster

Khalsa Diwan Society – Gurdwara Sahib Sukh Sagar, was established in 1919 by Bhai Bishan Singh at 344 Boyne Street in New Westminster.



Source: New Westminster Archives.

Port Alberni

The Alberni Valley Gurdwara, founded in the 1950s, was the first Gurdwara in the community and remains the longest-running Gurdwara in Port Alberni to this day.



Source: Alberni Valley Gurudawara Society, Facebook page.

Prince George

In 1974, friends created the Gurnam Culture Association in Prince George. They all then purchased a church on Fifth Avenue and Kelly Street and started the Guru Gobind Singh Sikh Temple. The temple was the city's first gurdwara and opened on Christmas Day in 1978.



Source: www.southasiancanadianheritage.ca.

Quesnel

The first gurdwara, named the Cariboo Gur Sikh Temple, was built in 1974 in West Quesnel which is near Vanderhoof.



Source: Cariboo Gur Sikh Temple, Facebook page.

Terrace

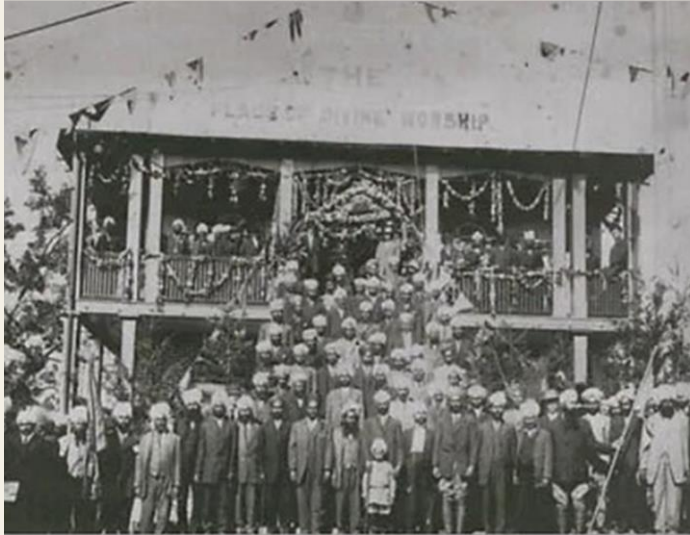
The first Sikh Temple in Terrace, located on Medeck Ave., was built in 1978.



Source: WorldGurdwaras.com

Victoria

Established in 1912 Gurdwara Sahib Khalsa Diwan Society at Topaz Avenue, Victoria B.C. is one of the oldest Sikh Community settlement in North America. Designed by architect H.S. Griffith, the temple opened with a massive parade of 1,200 Sikhs.



Source: Khalsa Diwan Society, Victoria.

Williams Lake

The first Sikh temple in Williams Lake, the Guru Nanak Sikh Temple, was built in 1974.



Source: Monica Lamb-Yorski, The Williams Lake Tribune