



Amani Saini was in Golden this week interviewing Golden pioneers of Punjabi origin, including Karm and Gurnam Barn, for a legacy project funded through a Canada 150 grant. Jessica Schwitek/Star Photo

Legacy project collecting oral history of Golden pioneers

A new legacy project is ensuring that the Punjabi Canadian history, including Golden's, is preserved

[JESSICA SCHWITEK](#) / Aug. 2, 2017 12:00 p.m. / [COMMUNITY](#)



When Gurnam Barn first came to Canada, she remembers how cold it was, and how awe inspiring the snow was.

"I couldn't believe, it was this high," she said, gesturing with her hand high above her head. It was a stark difference from her life in India.

Gurnam came to Golden in 1968, following her husband, Karm, who had come to Canada in '66. After staying with a relative in Vancouver, he made his way to Golden to find work at the mill in Donald. It was a common story for that time, Punjabi men and their families making their way to Golden to work in the mill. And it wasn't long before a community of Sikh families entrenched themselves in Golden.

"The Punjabi community has been in Canada for over a hundred years, first working primarily in sawmills, which is what brought them to Golden," said Amani Saini, coordinator to the Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project.

For Golden, that immigration is dated back to the early 1900s. The first Sikh baby who was recorded to have been born in Golden was in 1924. However a fire destroyed the mill, and the Punjabi families left Golden to find work elsewhere.

In the late 1950s, a new mill in Donald started attracting more workers from Punjab.

“The Barns were actually the first Sikh family in Golden from that second wave of immigration,” said Saini, who has been contracted to collect and record Sikh history and stories from communities around the province for a Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project. The Royal British Columbia Museum has partnered with UFV and the South Asian Studies Institute to complete the project through a Canada 150 grant aimed to celebrate B.C. communities and contributions.

“Punjabi history is lacking in our museums, and this project will help change that,” she said.

Following a workshop on the weekend held at the Sikh Temple, Saini has been conducting interviews with 25 families in Golden, including the Barn family, all of which are video recorded. The aim is to preserve these memories and accounts of pioneering families, before they are lost.

Saini speaks to the Barns in Punjab, translating for me when necessary. Karm lived in the bunkhouse in Donald for five years, before eventually moving the family to a more permanent home in Golden. Their bright white house became known to their friends simply as the “white house.”

They loved living in Golden, and like many of those in the Punjabi community here, they have chosen to remain here even as their children have moved on to other opportunities in bigger cities.

The Sikh community was instrumental in making Golden what it is today. In the late 1970s they got together and decided that they needed a physical place to meet the community’s needs, and started to fundraise to build the Gurdwara, or Sikh Temple, which is now located on 6th Avenue South.

“Gurdwaras are very important as a community gathering place,” said Saini. They are used for weddings, services, events, small gatherings (such as the interviews Saini was conducting), and so much more.

It took two years to fundraise for, and build the temple, which was completed in 1981.

“The labour was all done by the community. They built this place with their own hands,” added Saini.

There are more interviews to conduct, but Saini says that Golden has been a wealth of information, more than she had expected.

The information collected here will go to enhance the South Asian presence at the Royal British Columbia Museum, as well as the Golden Museum. And once the interviews are translated, Saini says that will also be put into some kind of online archive.