



Surrey resident Balbir Gurm. (File photo)

Museum logging display updated with help from Surrey's Gurm, Punjabi-Canadian community

Immigrant workers from the Punjab region helped build B.C.'s forestry sector

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SURREY — A fresh look at the history of Punjabi-Canadian loggers and millworkers in British Columbia has been created with the help of Surrey resident Balbir Gurm.

The logging display in the “Becoming BC” gallery at Victoria’s [Royal BC Museum](#) has been expanded to include recollections about immigration, work and life in the province.

Museum officials say that although Indigenous peoples and settlers to B.C. from around the world contributed to the creation and success of the province’s logging industry, “this diversity is not clearly depicted in the text panels or imagery in the logging display, a permanent feature created in the 1970s.”

Two years ago, Gurm was excited to get involved in the project as chair of an advisory committee.

“I was thrilled when they asked me to be on the committee, because I thought, ‘Oh my god, now I get to actually learn more about my own history,’ because it’s not anything I’ve ever read in a text book, I can tell you, and I’ve gone to school for a very long time,” said Gurm, an instructor at Kwantlen Polytechnic University.

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Gurm grew up in Vancouver and moved to Surrey when she began teaching at KPU. Her family first immigrated to Canada in 1906.

“Back then,” she said, “one of the earliest businesses my great-uncle had was providing logs to homes for stoves and heat. That was our family business for the longest time, and then my uncle worked in a sawmill on the Island. ... My dad also used to work at a sawmill as well, and the companies went through some name changes over the years.”

No question, those were busy days in the B.C. logging industry.

“There were a lot of companies down here that employed South Asians,” Gurm noted, “and as long as I can remember, back to the 1960s, it was a sought-after job. Like, people tried everything they could to get work at a sawmill, because that’s where the wages were.”

Royal BC Museum is partnering with the South Asian Studies Institute (SASI) at the University of the Fraser Valley to help create a Punjabi Canadian Legacy Project “to preserve, explore and share the contributions that Canadians of Punjabi descent have made to the history of B.C. and Canada.”

Part of that effort is the revamped logging display at the museum, which includes a new multi-media station.

“It is critical for the Royal BC Museum to partner with diverse communities to identify and then broadcast the stories of those who have been left out or written out of our collective history,” said Jack Lohman, CEO of Royal BC Museum.

“With this dynamic addition, we invite visitors to reflect upon the historical contributions of immigrant workers from the Punjab region to B.C.’s forestry sector.”

The display notes that migrant workers were needed to fill a labour shortage in B.C.’s forestry sector. Starting in the early 1900s, migrants from South Asia – most from the Punjab region of today’s India and Pakistan – settled and worked in rural communities across the province.

Museum officials say the insertion of the multi-media station, featuring images and interviews of Punjabi-Canadian workers, is the first step in a long-planned incremental “refresh” of the museum’s core galleries.

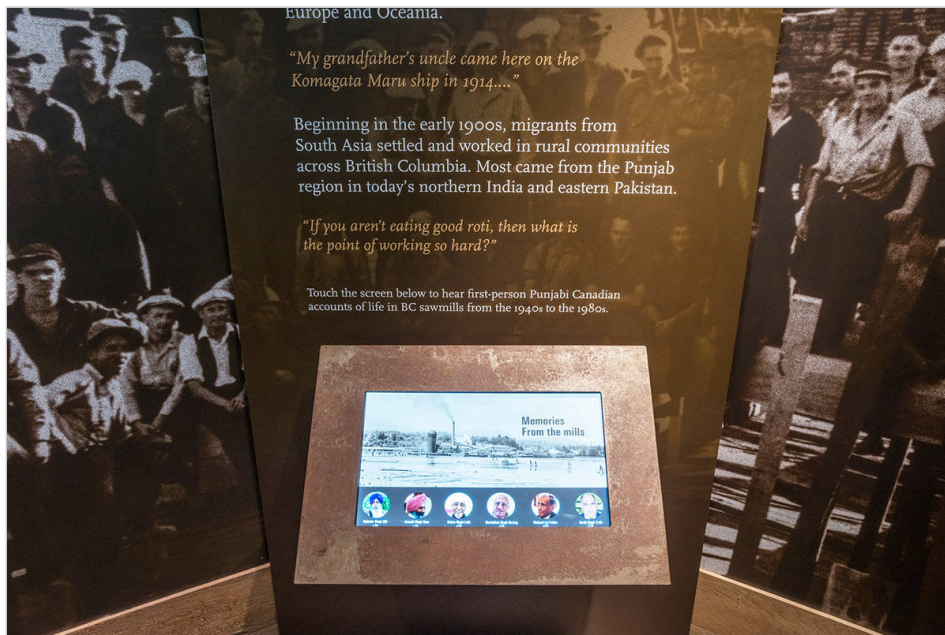
“As part of the refresh,” notes a museum press release, “other Royal BC Museum galleries will benefit from the introduction of new perspectives, content and live programming. For example, in November, 2017, the Tsimshian artist Tsmiinbaan (William White) provided a multi-day weaving demonstration in the First Peoples

Gallery. The finished woven work-and information about the cultural importance of weaving-will be integrated into the gallery in 2018.

“Partnering with diverse cultural groups to help revise decades-old museum content is not a new approach for the Royal BC Museum, which successfully worked with the First Peoples’ Cultural Council to develop the award-winning feature exhibition ‘Our Living Languages: First Peoples’ Voices in BC’ in 2014.”

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A view of the revamped logging display at Royal BC Museum in Victoria. (submitted photo)