Lesson: Mayo Singh

**Activity 1** - **Select Narratives for General Classroom Discussion**

**Handout: Select Narratives for General Classroom Discussion**

The early decades of the twentieth century were pivotal years in establishing the present Indo-Canadian communities. For the first three decades of the twentieth century Indo-Canadians survived by working in the forestry industry, mostly in the most arduous and worst paid tasks. They struggled against racism. Some individuals like Mayo Singh Manhas were able to band together, pool resources, and begin to purchase their own sawmills thus securing some measure of independence for their families and other racial minorities in an unfriendly host society. By 1934, in the middle of the Great Depression, Mayo employed 600 workers in his sawmills.

Analyze these narratives which were selected to help you develop an historical context for Mayo Singh. Make short point form notes on a separate sheet of paper. This information can be used for general class discussion or the newspaper assignment. Most excerpts are from the excellent resource: Richard A. Rajala, “Pulling Lumber: Indo-Canadians in the British Columbia Forest Industry, 1900-1998. *British Columbia Historical News*. 36, 1 (Winter 02/03):2-11.

The narratives are arranged in chronological order from 1908 through the 1920s.

Source 1:

*By this time [1908] the forest industry had ascended to the peak of the province’s economic hierarchy, surpassing mining and the salmon fishery. The Lower Mainland and southern Vancouver Island were the primary coastal lumbering centres linked by rail to booming Prairie markets or by steamship to Pacific Rim destinations. Although the scale of logging and milling operations varied widely, the largest had taken on a highly mechanized, mass production character. In the woods, steam donkeys “yarded” logs with steel cables to railways, which carried logs to tidewater for towing to the mills. There electrically or steam-driven circular saws and band saws cut the logs into cants. Moving chains carried these to edgers and trimmers for sawing into the appropriate dimensions. The rough lumber might then be piled in the yard, or run through planers to produce a smooth finish prior to stacking in large sheds. By 1900 powered conveyors had eliminated some of the manual handling inside the most sophisticated mills, but once the lumber emerged from the plant human labour performed much of the stacking and shifting around the yard.* (Rajala, 3)

Source 2:

*In the mills, where the vast majority of the East Indians were destined to find employment perhaps 35% of the workforce was Chinese in 1891. Japanese workers grew more numerous in the 1890s, most relegated along with the Chinese to unskilled labouring jobs. White workers occupied the most highly skilled positions, as machine operators, engineers, and tally men. The curtailment of Chinese immigration [by head taxes] provided immediate opportunity for the pioneer East Indians in the sawmills of the Lower Mainland and Victoria …. A 1908 estimate put the total number of workers in major Vancouver sawmills at 2,443 divided among 1,067 whites, 802 Japanese, 399 Chinese, and 175 East Indians*. (Rajala, 3)

Source 3:

*The East Indian pioneers confronted a volatile atmosphere as concern mounted among whites among the perceived threat Asians posed to British Columbia’s status as a “white man’s country.” A fear of economic competition underlay much of the hostility, buttressed by a deeply-ingrained sense of [whites’] racial superiority. Although numerically insignificant, East Indians came in for a disproportionate share of suspicion because of their distinctive appearance, highlighted by the traditional Sikh turban and beard, poor housing conditions, and a popular conception of India as a land of poverty-stricken peasant masses. Within a short time of their arrival many British Columbians viewed them as the least desirable of the Asian immigrants. As early as August 1906 the Vancouver and Victoria Trades and Labour Councils protested the unrestricted entry of “Hindoo” workers, and the press depicted Sikhs as “alien, foreign, diseased, and immoral.”* (Rajala, 4)

Source 4:

*“British Columbia must remain a British and Canadian province, inhabited and dominated by men in whose veins runs the blood of those great pioneering races which built up and developed not only Western, but Eastern Canada.”* *(Infamous speech by future Prime Minister Borden, leader of Conservatives at time of 1907 Vancouver race riots)*

Source 5:

*“That Canada should desire to restrict immigration from the Orient is regarded as natural, that Canada should remain a white man’s country is to be not only desirable for economic and social reasons.… is necessary on political and national grounds.”* (*Report by W.L. Mackenzie King, C.M.G.,* Deputy Minister of Labour, 1908)

Source 6:

*“East Indians drew specific attention in 1912 when the change in immigration regulations permitted the entry of a few wives and children. ‘The fate of Canada as a white man’s country is in the balance,’ one unionist warned. ‘The great question of whether this country is ours is to be the heritage of our children or the heritage of the yellow and black races must be decided now, once and for all.’”* (Rajala, 6)

Source 7:

*Beginning in 1914, groups of East Indians with kinship or village ties began pooling resources to lease or purchase small sawmills in the Fraser Valley. Typically the partners laboured in the mills alongside their Sikh employees, hiring additional Chinese and Japanese workers and sharing whatever profits their enterprises generated. Mayo Singh would take this route to become British Columbia’s most prominent East Indian lumberman. A worker at the Fernridge Lumber Company in Rosedale when that mill failed in 1912, three years later he joined with thirty-five other ex-employees to purchase the operation. When their newly renamed Cheam Lumber Company exhausted the plant’s timber supply in 1917, Mayo’s syndicate took over the Marcum Lumber Company near New Westminster. “Still another coast mill has been taken over by Hindoos,” observed the* Western Lumberman *[publication].”* (Rajala, 8)

Source 8:

*“[At Mayo] the syndicate established a sawmill and ethnically diverse community later named Paldi, after Mayo’s village in India. The plant went into production in late 1917, supplied by a two-mile logging railway and an assortment of steam donkeys. Mayo built a temple for his Sikh employees in 1919, and by the early 1920s the settlement had become a ‘neat looking mill village consisting of East Indian, Chinese, Japanese, and white sections.’”* (Rajala, 8)

Source 9:

*“At Paldi Sikhs worked in the most highly skilled positions, as high riggers and hooktenders, illustrating the extent to which East Indian ownership provided opportunity at the very apex of the logging labour force.”* (Rajala, 9)