



## The SS Komagata Maru Fiasco

A Diamond Jubilee is held in a British monarch's 60<sup>th</sup> year. Queen Victoria celebrated her jubilee in 1897, and this medal was a typical "military style" souvenir of the Victorian era. This trinket was treasured over the years by one of Vancouver's early pioneers before it was donated to the Old Hastings Mill Store Museum. For future royal memorabilia collectors, should she still be on the throne at the time, Queen Elizabeth II's diamond jubilee will be in 2012.

This statue of a Sikh soldier in British military attire, complete with turban, stood outside the Ross Street Sikh Temple at Marine Drive from 1996 until 2001. It is now on display at the East Indian Historical Museum at South Fraser Highway & Ware Street in Abbotsford.



RACISM IN BRITISH COLUMBIA was alive and well on 23 May 1914, when a boatload of Sikh immigrants silently arrived into Burrard Inlet and anchored just offshore. Baba Gurdit Sandhu, an affluent Hong Kong businessman, had chartered the *Komagata Maru*, a Japanese steamer, as a direct challenge to Canada's exclusionist laws. He was an Indian nationalist, anxious to get independence for India. Singh renamed the steamer the *Guru Nanak Jahaz* after the first Sikh Guru.

The first East Indians arrived in Vancouver on the Empress ships as Sikh soldier tourists to participate in Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1887. These men returned home with positive stories about the west coast's mild weather and the opportunity for employment in the lumber industry. The first East Indian workers, many of whom were ex-soldiers in the British army, began arriving in 1904 and 1905 to replace the decline in Pacific Ocean traffic from Hong Kong caused by the \$500 Chinese head tax.

Eventually many Canadian Sikhs became disenchanted with the British expanding their empire and setting up colonies throughout the world. The retired East Indian soldiers became politically conscious and realized that instead of fighting for the oppressed and downtrodden they were instead helping the British colonize in the conquered countries. The local East Indian community became fractured into three distinct groups. The larger, more militant group called for patriotism to India and advocated that the British get out of India. A second, smaller group, referred to as the "immigration group," were pro-British and co-operated with the Vancouver immigration authorities. A third group was undecided.

In 1908 the Canadian federal government paid a delegation to go to British Honduras and investigate employment opportunities, economic conditions and possibilities of settlement for all of British Columbia's Sikhs. The delegation consisted of James B. Harkin of the Interior Ministry of the federal government, William C. Hopkinson, Vancouver immigration official and interpreter, and two local Sikhs, Nagar Singh and Sham Singh.



PASSENGERS OF THE KOMAGATA MARU. Front row from left to right: Gurdit Singh Sandhu; his son Balwant; Daljit Singh, Secretary of *Komagata Maru*; Puran Singh, Store keeper of *Komagata Maru*; and Gurmukh Singh Lalton, first passenger of *Komagata Maru* to ever to return to Vancouver after their deportation in 1914. He came back to Vancouver in 1958.

When the Sikhs returned and reported back to the community about the unsuitability and poor living and economic conditions of British Honduras, the local Sikhs unanimously rejected the proposal and steadfastly declared their intention to stay in Canada. This evacuation plan was probably far too extreme ever to have succeeded, but it does give an indication of the intensity of the anti-Asian sentiments of that time and the stance of all levels of government on the issue. The two East Indian delegates suggested that Hopkinson tried to bribe them with \$3,000 to make a favourable report on the conditions in British Honduras.

Most pro-British Canadians prior to the arrival of the *Komagata Maru* sang the “White Canada Forever” and endorsed the many discriminatory acts by the government. The Election Act of March 1907 deprived East Indians from voting in provincial and municipal elections, and laws even prevented East Indians from placing their money into banks. The final insult was the government attempt to ship Sikhs to British Honduras.

On 3 October 1909 the Sikh Gurdwara (Temple) congregation gathered at their temple on 1866 West 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue just west of Burrard Street and agreed to burn their British military uniforms and medals in protest.

Three of the leaders of the Vancouver Sikh community of the time, Bhag Singh, secretary of the Guru Nanak Mining and Trust Company, Balwant Singh Atwal, religious leader of the Sikh Gurdwara in Vancouver and Hakim Singh Hundal, travelled to

India between 1909 and 1910, hoping to bring their wives and children to Canada. The mining and trust company had purchased property from the government in the Eagle Harbour district of West Vancouver.

The East Indians aboard the *Komagata Maru* in Burrard Inlet were British subjects and should have been entitled to enter Canada, but the federal government in 1910 had given the law firm of Bowser, Reid, Wallbridge and Ritchie the task of drafting legislation with safeguards that would exclude East Indians from entering Canada. The new legislation amended the Immigration Act by taking away from the courts the right to interfere with decisions of the immigration authorities. One amendment required that any applicant for admission have \$200 in his possession on landing in Canada, while another amendment required that all immigrants into Canada come “by continuous journey and on through tickets from their country of birth or citizenship.” The makers of this new legislation knew that few of the ocean-going ships could take on enough fuel to travel direct from India to Canada and those that did were the CPR’s Empress line. This steamship company

was excluded because they travelled to ports throughout the world and never directly from India to Canada. The legal powers wasted little time and passed the amendments into law, knowing full well that although morally wrong it would be legal. Many of the key players that played roles in the creation of legislation to keep the East Indians out of Canada were Masons. Even J. Edward Bird, the lawyer hired as counsel for the applicants aboard the ship, was a Mason.

For two months the passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru* were denied fresh water and food in an attempt by all levels of government to force them out of Burrard Harbour and into taking the ship back to India. Malcolm J. R. Reid, the head of the immigration department in Vancouver, and William B. A. Ritchie, one of the ablest lawyers in Canada, were given the task of manoeuvring through the tangle of red tape to keep the ship’s Sikh passengers from ever setting foot onto Canadian soil. Ritchie was incredibly connected. He had been a partner with Robert L. Borden in the Maritimes, but their law practice broke up when Borden went on to become Canada’s eighth Prime Minister. Ritchie decided to come west in 1911 to join the prominent Vancouver law firm of Bowser, Reid and Wallbridge. William John Bowser had been the provincial Attorney General since 1907, while Robie Lewis Reid was a well-known lawyer and historian. All four men were from the Maritimes. Robie L. Reid was the Masonic historian who later wrote “The Inside Story of the *Komagata Maru*” in the *Biographical Journal of Freemasons: British Columbia and the World*. He went on to become the Grand Master in 1929-1930.

Immigration officer Reid was a strong conservative supporter and a former schoolteacher who owed his immigration position to Henry Herbert Stevens, the Chairman of the Asiatic Exclusion League and the Conservative Member of Parliament for South Vancouver.



William John Bowser served as Attorney-General in the cabinet of Sir Richard McBride from 1907 until 1915, when he succeeded McBride as Premier.

HENRY HERBERT STEVENS. As the Chairman of the Asiatic Exclusion League and the Conservative Member of Parliament for South Vancouver, he was a major player in the *Komagata Maru* fiasco. He later played a role in the construction of the Lions Gate Bridge and the development of British Properties in West Vancouver.





His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Rainbow*, recently refurbished in Esquimalt, sits off Brockton Point in readiness to aid in the deportation of the *Komagata Maru* on 21 July 1914. The tug *Sea Lion* and many small vessels also sit in the harbour in anticipation of a confrontation.

Stevens was a racist who embraced the “White Canada Forever” mindset. An adventurer in his youth, Stevens had become a soldier of fortune at the turn of the century and joined the United States Army to participate in the Boxer (Opium) Rebellion in China. He impressed the Americans, and they placed him in charge of receiving 80 tons of silver from the Chinese Imperial Mint as compensation for riot damages to the victors of the conflict and getting it back to the US. On coming to British Columbia, Stevens first worked in the mining camps before becoming a firefighter for the Canadian Pacific Railway. On coming to Vancouver, he got into the grocery business and then real estate. As a politician, he was assisted by lawyers Reid and Ritchie to keep the country pro-British. Stevens said in 1907, “We contend that the destiny of Canada is best left in the hands of the Anglo-Saxon race, and we are ‘unalterably and irrevocably’ opposed to any move which threatens in the slightest degree this position.... As far as Canada is concerned, it shall remain white, and our doors shall be closed to Hindus as well as to other Orientals.” Behind the scenes, Member of Parliament Stevens urged Prime Minister Borden to refurbish the west coast’s only naval ship, the *Rainbow*, at Esquimalt with guns in readiness to blow the *Komagata Maru* to pieces if its captain and his passengers refused to leave Vancouver.

Bill Hopkinson was a secret-service officer who spied on East Indians for the British and Canadian governments regarding any suspicious revolutionary activities. An Indian-born ex-police officer, Hopkinson was fluent in several Hindu languages.

The “White Canada Forever” British Columbians were openly hostile to the 376 Sikh passengers on the *Komagata Maru*, and

precautions were immediately taken to prevent any passengers from being landed surreptitiously with help from local East Indians. The vessel was not allowed to dock but was kept anchored far out in the inlet, and a constant patrol was maintained about the ship both day and night. None of the local East Indians were allowed on board for fear of weapons being smuggled to the passengers. On one occasion authorities from the tug *Sea Lion* were repelled from boarding the ship to search for weapons that the passengers might have brought with them from China.

On the 21 July 1914 men from the 6<sup>th</sup> Duke of Connaught’s Own Rifles and the Irish Fusiliers stood by as the HMCS *Rainbow* sailed into the harbour and trained its guns on the *Komagata Maru* and unceremoniously escorted the ship out into deeper waters. The *Komagata Maru* was quickly provisioned with food and Gurdit Singh Sandu was told to prepare to lift anchor and return home to India.

By the time the *Komataga Maru* returned to Calcutta the world was at war, and many of the returning passengers were either arrested or shot. The British treated the passengers as freedom fighters or mutineers. Gurdit Singh Sandhu managed to escape and lived in disguise for eight to nine years until being persuaded by Mahatma Gandhi to give himself up. Although their leader and some other men escaped, the treatment of the East Indians by the British resulted in many British Columbian East Indians leaving and returning home.

The last straw in these incidents in Vancouver came on 6 September 1914, when Bela Singh Jain, an informer and agent of Inspector Hopkinson, pulled out two guns and started shooting at the Khalsa

### Mahatma Gandhi Quotes:

“Whatever you do may seem insignificant to you, but it is most important that you do it.”

“Be the change that you want to see in the world.”

“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.”

“A coward is incapable of exhibiting love; it is the prerogative of the brave.”

“You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.”

“A man is but the product of his thoughts what he thinks, he becomes.”



**BHAI MEWA SINGH.** Although a murderer in the eyes of the Canadian legal system, he was a martyr to the Indian cause for shooting immigration officer William C. Hopkins in the Vancouver courthouse on 14 October 1914. Singh was convicted in the same courthouse at 7:45 AM on 30 October 1914 and was executed by hanging on 11 January 1915 in Burnaby.

Diwan Society Gurdwara Sahib on West 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. He murdered Bhai Bhag Singh, President of the Society, along with Battan Singh and Bela Singh. He was charged with murder, but Hopkinson agreed to appear as a witness at his trial, and the East Indian community knew that his testimony at the trial would likely result in Bela Singh being acquitted.

Amongst the local Sikhs a few spoke up against this injustice, one of them was Bhai Mewa Singh a religious-minded Sikh, a reciter of the Guru Granth Sahib who came from the village of Lopoke in Amritsar, India. On 21 October 1914 Bhai Mewa Singh shot Hopkinson repeatedly on the steps of the Vancouver courthouse with two revolvers because he believed Hopkinson was a spy who had made up much of his testimony at the trial for Bela Singh.

Mewa Singh made this statement in court: “My religion does not teach me to bear hatred to anyone, no matter what class, creed or religion he belongs to. I had no hatred for Hopkinson. I heard that he was oppressing my poor people very much. On finding this to be a fact, I, being a staunch Sikh, could no longer bear to see the wrong done both to my countrymen and the Dominion of Canada. This is what led me to take Mr. Hopkinson’s life and sacrifice my own, and I, in performing the duty of a true Sikh and remembering the name of God, will proceed towards the scaffold with the same amount of pleasure as a hungry babe does towards its mother. I shall gladly have the rope put around my neck thinking it to be a rosary of God’s name. I am sure God will take me into his blissful arms.”

Singh was hanged on 11 January 1915 at the Oakalla Prison Farm in Burnaby. He was the first and only Sikh to be executed in Canada. Leading up to execution of Shaheed Bhai Mewa Singh were many different acts of injustice and harsh discrimination against the Sikhs.

On 13 April 1919 British soldiers fired on a crowd of 20,000 unarmed Indians at Bhai Mewa Singh’s place of birth at Amritsar during a religious holiday. The confrontation at a holy temple turned out to be a passive resistance that resulted in the death of many Sikhs. It was the beginning of the end for British colonization in India. At the end of the Second World War Mahatma Gandhi asked the British to leave his country. He explained that the British military in India stood at 100,000 men and that the population of India stood at 350,000,000. The British did the math and decided that it might be in their best interests to leave India. King George VI gave India its independence on 15 August 1947. The sun had set.



Aerial view of Vancouver’s Lost Lagoon & Coal Harbour, circa 1935.

## Vancouver Millionaires

THE VANCOUVER MILLIONAIRES franchise had its origins in Renfrew, Ontario, in 1909 with a team then known as the Creamery Kings of the National Hockey Association. Ambrose O’Brien, son of railway builder and mining magnate Michael J. O’Brien, owned the club that was soon renamed the Renfrew Millionaires after players Frederick W. “Cyclone” Taylor and brothers Lester and Frank Patrick began demanding salaries of \$5,200 and \$3,500 to “skate up” to play. Because of the senior O’Brien, Renfrew became the home of the NHA.

Prior to their introduction of hockey to Vancouver, the Patrick family owned and operated the Patrick Lumber Company in the Creston Valley near Nelson, with 100 men working in the mill and another 100 in the woods. Joseph Patrick, the father of the

- 1 Deadman’s Island
- 2 Ballantyne Pier
- 3 CPR Piers B & C
- 4 CPR Pier A
- 5 Marine Building
- 6 Oil Tanks
- 7 Brooks Iowa Lumber Co.
- 8 Denman Arena
- 9 Stanley Park Armoury