



**Mayo Singh**

**Film Summary:** An important and often unknown story of the town of Paldi, located on Vancouver Island, and the history of Indo-Canadian workers in BC's forest industry.

**Curriculum Application**

Social Studies 10  
Social Studies 11

**The Essential Question:**

Why was Mayo Singh's contribution as a "lumberman" and a community builder a significant event in the early history of British Columbia?

**Summary of the Lesson Activities**

1. Focus questions for the vignette provide a short lesson option. ( 15 minutes)
2. Discussion to examine the role of multicultural communities in the development of B.C.'s Forest Industry
3. Identification of the biases and prejudices that ethnic communities experienced in early British Columbia
4. A simulated newspaper writing assignment from 1928 on the community of Mayo (Paldi)

**Learning Objectives**

1. Identify and describe Mayo Singh and his Indo-Canadian community in a context of a racist "white man's country" in early 20<sup>th</sup> century British Columbia.
2. Identify and describe the uniqueness of the village of Mayo (later Paldi) among resource communities in early British Columbia.
3. To research and write historical narratives from multiple perspectives.

#### Materials and Resources Provided

- [Mayo Singh-Working People: A History of Labour in British Columbia](#)
- Document 1 Lesson Strategy
- Activity 1 Narratives
- Activity 2 Newspaper Assignment

#### Additional Suggested Materials

- The Story of Paldi  
<http://www.paldi.ca/?p=1>

#### Vignette Questions

1. Which groups of South Asians were predominant in the early Forest Industry of B.C? Why were they able to immigrate to British Columbia with greater ease than other groups?
2. Why did ethnic forest workers face discrimination?
3. What significant achievement was reached by B.C.'s Forest industry in 1908?
4. Describe the steps that Mayo Singh took to open his own sawmill in 1916?
5. Considering the ethnic conflicts in BC at the time of Mayo Singh's opening of his sawmill, how were his hiring practices different from other business owners?

#### Lesson Activities

1. The shorter version of the lesson can be taught as part of the final historical unit in Social Studies 10 that examines the experiences of ethnic groups in British Columbia before and after the Komagata Maru incident in 1914.
2. Social Studies 11 classes may use the materials to examine the immigration issues and practices that followed the First World War.
3. A lesson strategy and guidelines for discussion following the vignette are provided in Document 1.
4. A newspaper exercise simulating a reporter's assignment to cover the unique community of Mayo (Paldi) in 1928 is provided in Activity 2

Credit: Teaching Activities and Lesson Plan developed by Tony Arruda

## Document 1: Lesson Strategy

### Mayo Singh Manhas and the Unique Community of Paldi, B.C.

#### **Introduction:**

Although the Social Studies curriculum is under revision, this lesson is clearly aimed at Social Studies 10 and 11 students. Like many other lessons associated with Knowledge Network Vignettes, the Mayo Singh story dovetails well with discussions of resource development at the Grades 10 or 11 levels. However, as there is currently no Provincial Final Examination in the Social Studies 10 curriculum, teachers and students of Social Studies 10 may have more luxury to delve more deeply into this fascinating case study of individuals struggling in the intersection of prevailing racial attitudes and the resource exploitation of British Columbia throughout seven decades of the twentieth century.

The Mayo Singh story forms a rich basis for project, or student-based Inquiry. Among other topics, this lesson relates to discussions of the:

- Komagata Maru incident and the rejection by Canada of Sikhs (British subjects);
- Change and continuity in racial attitudes towards Chinese, Japanese, and Indo-Canadians;
- Participation of Indo-Canadians, Chinese, and Japanese in BC resource development;
- Role of Individuals and groups in community formation;
- Bias, viewpoint, and content emphasis in journalism, specifically newspapers

#### **Classroom Activities:**

- 1. Begin with questioning and assessing students' prior knowledge.** Depending upon the ethnic constituency of the class students may be more or less familiar with early twentieth century ethnocentric and racist attitudes towards Indo-Canadians. Enquire what students already know of the participation of Indo-Canadians in the forestry industry.
- 2. View and debrief the Knowledge Network vignette, *Mayo Singh*,** which focuses on a single individual who, essentially, “learns the ropes” of the lumber industry, and who together with the help of a syndicate of resourceful relatives and other Sikhs, begins to purchase and operate sawmills in the Lower Mainland and southern Vancouver Island in the early 1900s. Emphasize and illustrate with examples, the common metaphor that workers, and not pharaohs “built Thebes.” Similarly, Mayo Singh is not the “lone agent” in community building. Given the racialized context and the low status of “Hindoos” in early British Columbia sawmills (See Select Narratives below), Singh employed kinship and ethnic ties (including relationships with Chinese and Japanese lumber co-workers) to not only survive, but thrive in a Canada that was relatively hostile to Indo-Canadians and other Asians. In sum, Singh helps build the ethnically diverse community of Mayo, in which

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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individuals, despite inevitable individual differences, lived in separate sectors of the community, but in a relatively cohesive manner.

If this is “too rosy a picture,” it may be useful to remind students that Mayo Singh arrived in British Columbia in 1906, a year before the 1907 Vancouver race riots against the Chinese and Japanese, but at a time of rising social animosity toward Indo-Canadians which culminated in the 1914 *Komagata Maru* incident. In one sense, the Mayo community is an artifact of a racist British Columbia society. The Mayo case study clearly illustrates what ethnic historians have termed, “psychic shelter” against an unfriendly and unsympathetic host society.

- 3. Handout and review, “Select Narratives for General Classroom Discussion.”** ([Activity 1](#)) The nine Sources help situate the Mayo Singh story in the context of Indo-Canadians, as well as Chinese and Japanese in the forestry industry. This discussion prepares students for the following newspaper assignment. If you wish to avoid that assignment for the sake of time, at least direct students to review the sources individually, in pairs, or in groups. The narratives form a good basis for a simple whole-classroom discussion lesson that in itself that might occupy half or more of a single classroom period.
- 4. Handout and review Assignment, “Writing a newspaper story for the *Victoria Times Colonist*, September, 1928.”** ([Activity 2](#)) Essentially, after becoming familiar with the Mayo Singh story, the Select Narratives (above), and the two online resources (identified below), students are asked to role play a *Victoria Times Colonist* journalist who travels to Mayo (renamed Paldi in the 1930s), on Southern Vancouver Island, in 1928 in order to write a “human interest” story on the bustling community and eight of its individuals. *Emphasize to students that for the purposes of this assignment, all characters except Mayo Singh, are fictitious.*

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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Guide students to the character profiles in the Handout, “Journalist’s Notes on the People of Mayo,” which has clear instructions to students. Clarify their task: use all provided resources (the *Mayo Singh* vignette, Select Narratives, and online resources) to develop their fictitious character profiles. Teachers should photocopy all necessary handouts. Ideally, they should make available a lab of computers, or make available the identified on-line resources for students.

As explained on the Assignment Handout, the final product is a newspaper article including:

- A title
- A brief biography of Mayo Singh
- Descriptions of the village of Mayo
- Very selective portions of interviews with some of its residents – the fictionalized characters – which will together create a portrait of a unique town; direct students to the the views of whites: the store operator, female schoolteacher, and retired sawmill owner.
- Journalist’s opinions on the town based on what s/he have come to understand
- Choice of a historical photograph or two attached to the story

### **5. Options other than a newspaper assignment:**

- Listed resources provide a good basis for project, enrichment, or Inquiry based learning for capable students;
- If the newspaper is too lengthy or complex as a component, students simply complete character profiles in order to prepare for whole class discussion; or
- Students complete character profiles by groups: Group 1 covers and “reports out” on Mayo Singh, while Group 2 covers and reports out for Surjit Singh, etc.
- Informal class discussion based on perhaps, Komagata Maru incident and Handout of Select Narratives (this might be appropriate in a fast-paced Social Studies 11 class);
- Other written assignments based on *Singh* vignette and Handout of Select Narratives.

### **Closure:**

Given the nature of the subject matter, and the tendency of this subject matter to promote discussion vectors in unintended directions, teachers must be sensitive to the racial composition of their classroom and approach this assignment employing professional judgment and discretion.

## 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)*

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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### 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)*

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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### 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)*

## Lesson: Mayo Singh

### Activity 2 - Newspaper Assignment

#### Writing a newspaper story for the *Victoria Times Colonist*, September, 1928.

In this activity, you must role play John Silverton, a fictitious journalist with the *Victoria Times Colonist* newspaper. In 1928, you are directed by your editor to travel to Mayo, near Lake Cowichan, a few hours' drive north of Victoria. There you must interview what the editor has heard is a "unique" community in which the major employer of hundreds of lumber workers is not a "white," but a Sikh man from the Punjab region of India. In this the "Roaring Twenties," a year before the Great Depression, you, John Silverton, travel by road to the community of Mayo (later renamed Paldi as it now known), and find it a multicultural settlement. Mayo is thriving in a booming 1920s economy that requires lumber for building, bridges, and railway ties, among other uses. Through the use of interpreters, assume you are able to meet and talk with eight fictitious characters living in and around Mayo in 1928, including Mr. Mayo Singh Manhas, founder of the Mayo Brothers Lumber Company.

Your role is to interview and prepare notes on each of the eight characters. While this is fictional and so requires use of your imagination, there is much you can do to develop an understanding for what life was like for these characters in 1928. You should:

- View the Knowledge Networks, vignette, *Mayo Singh*
- Analyze Select Narratives regarding Indo-Canadians in the BC Lumber Industry
- Go online to the following site which provides a simplified history of Mayo Singh who established Mayo. First, skim read the article:  
<http://www.paldi.ca/?p=1>
- Go online to get a deeper look into the life of Mayo and the unique multicultural community he founded and nurtured. This is a critical source for your assignment. Read the article:  
<http://www.mosaic-bc.ca/forestry/paldi.html>
- As you read both online articles, use the following organizer, "Journalists Notes on the People of Mayo" to make notes in the space under each character profile. Ask questions from the point of view of each of the characters. For example, how do Surjit or Amerjit Singh feel about the many unmarried men in the community? How do whites such as Betty Freeman or Andrew Sawyer regard the community? What was it like in the Mayo community during the three day "Jor Mela" celebrations? Add "quotes" under each character. For example, Mr. Williams Jackson might have

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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said, “I don’t know how they manage to keep that mill going, but they do.” You might later quote that in your article. In addition, examine the photographs as you try to imagine life in the community from the point of view of each character.

- Finally, develop your product, a newspaper article of around 250 words. Add your own title, and by-line (*by John Silvertown*) in which you write about Mayo Singh and the community of Mayo, B.C. Remember newspaper articles covering communities and the individuals in them frequently include short quotes from actual individuals. You may find and incorporate a useful photograph in your story.

Important note to teacher and students: An interesting variation involving more co-operation and dialogue between students is to organize students in groups of four and break down the work into more manageable “chunks.” Perhaps make each individual responsible for only two character profiles. Students would then contribute their thoughts to a collectively written article. Alternatively, the whole group might produce a single article. One student might write the opening paragraph, two students prepare the body including narratives, and the fourth student might write a conclusion to this piece of journalism.

**Journalist notes on Mayo and residents** (remember except for Mayo Singh, all characters are fictitious)

### **(add comments and possible quotes for each resident)**

1. **Mayo Singh Manhas** arrived in Canada to join his older brother in 1906. He emigrated from the Punjab region of India and for a time worked on the railway around San Francisco before working up the coast to join his brother at the Fernridge Lumber Mill, at Rosedale, near Chilliwack, B.C. A diligent worker, Mayo Singh joined a syndicate of over thirty Sikhs and purchased the ailing mill in 1916, renaming it the Cheam Lumber Company. In 1917, this syndicate purchased another mill, the Marcum Lumber Company near New Westminster. With the assistance of the syndicate Mayo then moved to Vancouver Island, built and equipped the Mayo Brothers Timber Company. He currently employs Indo-Canadian, Japanese, Chinese, and “white” workers many of whom have worked for Caucasian mill owners. In 1925, he marries Bishan Kour in the Punjab, returns and becomes known as a simply dressed, unassuming, and very generous employer and community minded man. By 1928 Mayo is a diverse community with a school and community hall as well as an Indian and Japanese place of worship.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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2. **Surjit Singh** is an Indo-Canadian who worked alongside Mayo Singh in the old Fernridge Lumber Company near Chilliwack. When Mayo and thirty five other Sikhs purchase the mill in 1916 and rename it Cheam Labour Company, Surjit remains one of their favourite and trusted employees. He moved to Vancouver and helped Mayo Singh establish the new Mayo Brothers Timber Company, in Mayo, near Lake Cowichan.
3. **Amarjeet Sangh** is Surjit's spouse. Like other Indo-Canadian wives in the community, she married Surjit in an arranged marriage in India during his visit in 1924. She has a three year old, a toddler, and is expecting a third child. She assists newly arrived Indian women and their families. As a result of the unique cultural background in Paldi, she has learned a special "Paldi" form of English. She is sometimes visited by Ms. Freeman, the young schoolteacher, when Ms. Freeman requires advice on dealing with Sikh families in the community.
4. **Hiro Fujimura** worked as a fishermen on the BC coast before working in the Marcum Lumber Company mill near New Westminster, BC. In 1917, Mayo Singh and his syndicate of over thirty men purchased the company, and later invite him to work alongside Surjit in helping to establish the Mayo Brothers Timber Company in Mayo. Unlike the Chinese and Indo-Canadian workers, Hiro and several other Japanese men have had wives and children living with them in Canada for many years. He is happy his employer and his countrymen have also been able to bring wives into the community over the last few years. His children are doing well in the Mayo school. His wife, Ryoko, speaks good English and occasionally visits Ms. Freeman in the school.
5. **Andrew Sawyer** is 48, an older "white" Caucasian mill worker who has worked at several mills along the BC coast over the last thirty years. He witnessed the hatred and violence of the 1907 riots while working in a Vancouver sawmill. He has worked alongside Asian lumber workers for years. He moved from the Cheam Lumber Mill near Chilliwack, B.C., to work in the Mayo mill in 1925 and then began work in the Mayo company store in 1927.
6. **Ning Zhang.** Ning is a peaceful man who lived in Vancouver and experienced the violence of the 1907 race riots in Chinatown and Japantown. Like other Chinese men in Mayo, he supports a wife, children, and an extended family in China but cannot visit them because of the Chinese Immigration Act, 1923 (known as the Asiatic Exclusion Act) which now prevents any newcomers from China, or prevents any Chinese currently in Canada from ever returning if they do leave the country. He welcomes the relative peace of Mayo and the Cowichan Valley.

## Working People: A History of Labour in BC

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7. **Miss Betty Freeman** is a nineteen year old unmarried schoolteacher from Victoria now teaching in the two room Mayo School. She has lived and taught in the Mayo community for two years, somewhat of a rare occurrence in the history of rural schooling. She has the unique viewpoint of seeing children of Indian, Japanese and “white” families in her mixed grades classroom. She also assists in setting up some afterschool and weekend events such as choirs and plays involving children in the Mayo community hall. She is well respected by the families.
  
8. **William Jackson** lives just outside Paldi. He is a retired owner of a sawmill that closed down near Duncan. He now writes columns for newspapers as well as publications such as the *Western Lumberman*, a publication which was not always kind to Indo-Canadians in the BC lumber industry. For example, when Mayo Singh took over the Marcum Lumber Company near New Westminster eleven years earlier in 1917, the *Western Lumberman* had written, “Still another coast mill has been taken over by Hindoos.” William Jackson is inclined to agree with the general anti-Asian viewpoint then alive in British Columbia.