

Road to Mission: The Third Fork in the Road



Could the road less traveled be the third fork in the road?

(Continue reading)

Season One has plenty of people in history to tell this story and draw from, however, the mini-series isn't intended to be a straight historical piece or read like *Wikipedia*. Instead, *The Road to Mission: The Third Fork in the Road* will seek to tell the story of some of the known and unknown names and relationships of those Sikhs who dared to take the "third fork in the road"!

For instance, who were some of the above 9 Sikh women? What was their story or relationships? One only has to look to the strong and compelling relationships that helped turn motion pictures *Titanic* or *Slumdog Millionaire*, and popular mini-series *Hell on Wheels* (classic saga of building the *Transcontinental Railroad* across America), into major hits, and beloved films by audiences around the world. *The Third Fork in the Road* will strive to do no less.

Despite the lack of Sikh females, many Sikhs retained a strong religious identity, as relatively few Sikhs married outside their ethnic and religious identity. The first Sikh pioneers in Canada also had a strong desire to have a place to hold religious gatherings and to be surrounded by the *Satsangat*. The first Sikhs raised funds amongst the community and rented houses to conduct weekly *Satsangat*, or until Sikh temples could be built.

Many of the first Sikh settlers were limited to working as farmers and lumberjacks, Some later became successful sawmill and farm owners. In addition to this many Sikhs worked on the railways in British Columbia. While a significant number of the first Sikhs were relatively unskilled and uneducated, they were favored by employers, because of their strong work ethic and discipline, along with their willingness to accept considerably less pay than white men.

The central teachings of Sikhism served to guide immigrants' adjustment into Canadian society. Balance of work, worship, and charity, and the defense of rights of all creatures, and in particular, fellow human beings. Emphasis upon the concept of sharing—for the betterment of the community and others. Affirmation of the full equality of sexes, classes, and castes.

In response to widespread unemployment in Punjab, more and more Sikhs traveled abroad in search of better economic conditions. As part of this migration, Gurdit Singh Sarhali, a Sikh businessman, embarked in early 1914 on a Japanese steamship named the *Komagata Maru* along with 376 passengers, a group that included 340 Sikhs, 24 Muslims, and 12 Hindus (22 of whom, on board, were returning Canadian residents). The ship, which had been chartered in Hong Kong by Sarhali, arrived in Vancouver on May 23, 1914, following stops in Shanghai and Yokohama. The ship's arrival was met with extreme hostility from the residents of Vancouver and its passengers were not allowed to disembark, as some Vancouverites labeled its arrival as the "Hindu Invasion." The arrival of the *Komagata Maru* was anything but Canada's finest hour. The passengers were forced to remain on board the ship, as food was delivered to them by Caucasian, Japanese, and Chinese people. The Khalsa Diwan Society, along with many of the Indo-Canadian community raised funds for court cases and formally appealed to officials and authorities in London, England and Ottawa, with no acceptable resolution.

On July 23, 1914, those who had been previous residents of British Columbia were allowed to disembark, and after two long months in the harbour, the *Komagata Maru* was escorted back out of Canadian waters by Canada's *HMCS Rainbow*. After exhausting every possible legal tactic to get the ship to dock, and with local citizenry cheering, the *Komagata Maru* was forced back to Calcutta, where it was fired upon by the *Indian Imperial Police*. Some 20 Sikhs were killed in the skirmish.

Who were some of these Sikhs? What contributions could they have made had they been allowed entry into Canada, and not been killed or imprisoned?

That same year of 1914, Mewa Singh was caught by immigration inspector William Charles Hopkinson at the U.S./Canadian border with 500 rounds of ammunition and a pistol. Mewa had crossed the border into the state of Washington with two other Sikhs to make several purchases of handguns and ammunition, but had returned separately, Mewa being the only one arrested. Hopkinson wanted Mewa to give up the names of the others, so they could all be arrested and tried for seditious activity. In order to avoid 10 years in prison, Mewa made a statement and was released.

Tension continued to mount as one of Hopkinson's informants entered a Sikh Temple and desecrated it by shooting and killing 2 Sikhs and injuring 9 more. Seven weeks later, Mewa Singh shot Hopkinson in a corridor of the Vancouver courthouse prior to a grand jury hearing involving his informant's court case. Upon Mewa Singh's execution, 400 Sikhs gathered to carry his body to a funeral pyre at Fraser Mills. His continued veneration, stirring national controversy, continues today with annual observances in Sikh Temples.

By the 1940's large numbers of Sikh women and children arrived. At that same time Indo-Canadians who had fought in World War II were granted the right to vote in the provincial elections. It was not until India gained its independence in 1947 that Indians were granted a quota permitting the entry of 150 persons a year, plus close relatives such as parents, minor children, and fiancées. The quota was further increased to 300 in 1957. The immigration of Indians to Canada and the numbers entering British Columbia increased steadily after this. British Columbia remained the most popular destination for East Indian immigrants until 1963, when Ontario took the lead.

Season One saga ends with the identifiable core cast of Indo-Canadian community characters having achieved some successes as having contributed to the larger Canadian society, and becoming the symbols of modern day Canada..... to a point where Punjabi was declared the third official language of Canada.

Season Two begins with 56 East Indian immigrants migrating to Canada in 1927. One of those was Herman Singh Braich Sr. At only age 16, young Herman left his family in the village of Braich, Punjab.

Two years prior, when Herman was 14 years old, he happened upon two cobras fighting alongside the road. With their hoods exposed, Herman realized the danger in approaching the cobras. The intrigue regarding the legendary lore of killing a cobra and this bestowing one with insurmountable courage, caused Herman to proceed to kill not one but both of the cobras with only his bare hands.

Making Victoria, British Columbia his initial home in Canada, Herman quickly found work. Being a studious and a quick learner, eventually young Herman mastered every job in and around the sawmill. While working and saving his money, Herman swiftly moved up the ranks. When opportunities presented themselves, Herman would take advantage of them, and better his station in life. This meant moving his business interests to Vancouver.

Herman kept in close contact with family and friends in India. In fact, he traveled back and forth often. On one of those trips, he married Bachan Kaur, the mother of his first three daughters, who were all born in Vancouver. Also, Herman was quite involved in politics, and in particular the struggle for India's independence.

In the 1950's, Herman moved to Mission City. Given Herman's business sense, charisma, and contributions he quickly earned the respect of British Columbians.

However, with all of Herman's successes, and his having anything in the material sense in life a person could ever want, he did not have a son. Due in part to this, an amicable divorce ensued with Bachan. Herman ended up building her and his daughters a home in India, and moved them there to live and become familiar with the culture and all in Punjab.

In 1954, Herman married Surjeet Kaur in *Patiala, Punjab*. Surjeet's younger brother, Iqbal "Ike" Singh Sekhon ended up introducing them to one another. Ike thought it would be advantageous for his sister to marry a millionaire, and he himself wanted to come to Canada. So he advocated for and arranged Surjeet's engagement to Herman.

Herman didn't wear the traditional turban or grow a beard common to most Sikh men. He smoked tobacco; drank alcohol, ate certain meats, and loved gambling. For these and other reasons, Herman was not accepted by Surjeet's father, Trilochan Singh Sekhon. So much so, that Trilochan refused to attend his own daughter's wedding in Patiala. However as he was not at home for the engagement ceremony, as apparently he had left town for a few days when this took place; Trilochan refused to veto his daughter's matrimony on account of "reneging" would be creating a negative reputation for the Sekhon name!

Ike who later became "Uncle Ike" to Herman and Surjeet's first son, Erwin Singh Braich Sr., eventually came to Canada. This is when and where Herman tasked him with a job in a sawmill. The cold weather and laboring in it did not satisfy Ike.

He borrowed enough funds from Herman to purchase a car and traveled south to *Fresno, California* to pursue his education. After graduating from *Fresno State College* Ike head to *Dallas, Texas*. After enrolling at *Southern Methodist University* to begin to earn a Master's degree he met and quickly married a Texan named Dolores "Dee" Brooks.

Very noteworthy is the fact that his father – Trilochan – in only a few years since boycotting his daughter's wedding to Herman, had evolved to where he could now accept a mixing of differing ethnicities, religious beliefs, and cultures. Ike's loving father attended the entire plethora of ceremonies in Dallas.

Early in Ike's long and storied life in Dallas he was the well-known turbaned General Manager of one of the world's most famous restaurants – *La Tunisia*. He was a pioneer Punjabi Sikh in the city, and a great humanitarian; having served as founding President of the *India Association of North Texas*, the *Punjabi Cultural Association of North Texas*, and the *Sikh Gurdwara of North Texas*. Ike also founded the *Indus Golf Association of North Texas* and honoured to have the "*Iron Ike*" Golf Tournament bear his name. He founded *The Dallas County Cricket Club* and never missed a *Dallas Cowboys* home game!

An important aspect of the union between Ike and Dee was the fact that legendary bank executive Fred T. Brooks Sr. (Dolores' only brother) became Erwin's "Uncle Fred".

Certainly another huge influence and role model for Erwin Braich Sr.

In due course Surjeet Braich's younger sister – Sharnjit Kaur Virk and her husband Darshan Singh Virk and their children also made the move from *Patiala, Punjab* to settle in *Dallas, Texas*.

Just a few of Herman's many accomplishments include:

- Expanding his forest products enterprises and becoming a lumber baron.
- Setting the record for bidding the highest amount ever in British Columbia for a Crown timber purchase.
- Building his own complete thoroughbred horse training facility on a portion of a large parcel of land in Mission City (as it was then named).
- First person to ever send a brand new white *Pontiac* sedan to India from Canada.
- Breaking records frequently for the highest price paid for yearlings or other thoroughbreds at North America's most prestigious auction sales.
- Had private aircraft pick him up routinely to go and gamble in Las Vegas.
- Was a very close friend of K. "Kirk" Kerkorian, majority owner of the largest hotel casino empire in Las Vegas including the *MGM Grand, Bellagio, Mirage, Mandalay Bay, New York New York* and others.
- Hobnobbed and gambled with the famous *Rat Pack* (Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis Jr., Peter Lawford, and Joey Bishop)

While business was a primary focus, Herman also enjoyed expanding the scope of his thoroughbred horse racing and breeding ventures in North America. Over time his stable extended into thoroughbred racetracks in Ontario, Florida, Kentucky, New York, and California.

In raising Erwin, Herman groomed him to work in the family business. He traveled with him; "If I was lucky!" exclaims Erwin. On one occasion, which Erwin remembers fondly "was when I was 12 years old, Dad asked if I wanted to go to *Toronto's Woodbine Racetrack* to watch the *Queen's Plate* horse race. Of course, I jumped at the chance to go! My Dad's friend won the race with his horse named *Merger*. But what were the most memorable parts of this trip for me were that *Merger's* jockey - Wayne Harris - flew from Vancouver to Toronto with us! I think Dad assisted him with some legal matter. Prominent Canadian businessman, Frank McMahon, co-owned three year old *Merger* with Mr. Max Bell. My Dad and Mr. McMahon were good friends. Mr. McMahon owned *Majestic Prince* also. He was the winner of both the *Kentucky Derby* and *Preakness Stakes* in 1969. Former super jockey Johnny Longden was the trainer of these two racehorses."

"But the absolute highlights that I remember was that I felt out of place that day at the *Queen's Plate* because everyone else wore tuxedos and top hats or fancy dresses. Dad said to me 'don't let it concern you son!'. Then Dad and I sit down in a VIP box and he introduces me to 'Uncle Conn'. Yes!.....Conn Smythe, the owner of the *Toronto Maple Leafs* and *Maple Leaf Gardens*, one of the largest sports and entertainment companies

in Canada. Unbelievably my Dad never said a peep about this to me prior to that day! Even when he watched them play on *Hockey Night in Canada* on television with me!”

Also, Erwin was shocked and pleasantly surprised when on trips with his dad and larger than life celebrities knew his father. Once American composer, songwriter, record producer, pianist, and singer who has composed hundreds of pop songs Burt Bacharach approached his father, called him by name, and asked how he was doing. United Nations Ambassador, and American singer, actress, and television show host, Dionne Warwick also knew Herman.

Erwin watched and listened intently as world famous jockey, Bill Shoemaker who for decades held the world record for total professional jockey victories, came up to Herman at the track on a “dark” day and they talked for almost two hours.

“Another colorful friend to Dad was Texan oilman and real life JR Ewing, Nelson Bunker Hunt, son of H.L. Hunt. H.L. Hunt sired 15 children by three wives. Nelson Bunker was arguably the acorn that fell closest to the oak tree in my opinion. His brother Lamar Hunt owned the *Kansas City Chiefs* from the *National Football League*.” Said Erwin.

“I will never forget when I received a call from one of Mr. Hunt’s personal assistants after Dad died. I was told that Dad had represented Mr. Hunt in the winner’s enclosure after *Dahlia* had won a very prestigious stakes race in Los Angeles. I can’t remember if it was at *Hollywood Park* or *Santa Anita*. Mr. Hunt wanted to express his condolences and also inform me that a photograph was being sent to us. I really believe it was truly fitting that in the photo the trainer was the legendary Charles Whittingham with jockey Bill “The Shoe” riding! Once again, Dad had not said a thing about any of these events. That is the essence of the man.”

“I should add that Nelson Bunker was at one time considered to be the world’s wealthiest man. Like Dad, Bunker Hunt loved thoroughbred horse racing and playing cards. Every opportunity they had, they spent together. During the time of their friendship, Mr. Hunt owned more than 1,000 thoroughbreds in stables all over the globe. Having that wildcatter spirit, he even funded expeditions to find the *Titanic* and *Noah’s Ark*. No wonder Dad and him got along so well.”

“There are so many memories that I have about his fortitude or lack of adoring celebrities. So many! Like the time he wrote to the Pope in the 1950’s about his desire to buy some nice view property in Mission. Obviously he was referring to Westminster Abbey. Or when he told me in the elevator going up to our four bedroom two-storey suite in a Casino Resort property in Las Vegas that his luck changed when ‘the guy in the white suit’ sat down at the baccarat table.....So he abruptly quit playing. Of course, he was referring to Colonel Sanders from *Kentucky Fried Chicken* fame.....Whether he was real or an impersonator.”

In those days, the only way to emigrate from India was to find a sponsor. Believing

that he could provide the same opportunity for his countrymen that he himself enjoyed, Herman became a sponsor of many such men. Vouching as to their character, he employed the newcomers at his businesses. He built bunkhouses for laborers to live rent free on the mill grounds. This allowed immigrants to save money and become established enough in Canada to bring their families over from India, or to buy land and start businesses themselves. . Many settled in the Mission “flats” which soon became known as “Little India”. It is estimated that hundreds of men came to the area through the opportunities offered by Herman.

Herman Singh Braich Sr. continued to be an important figure in Mission. A gregarious and very generous man who believed in giving back, he donated to a number of charitable causes and organizations throughout the world all of his life. Whatever he could afford.

Led sometimes by his “hand itching” or simply believing an opportunity just felt right, Herman was regularly poised to close deals and make things happen.

His pioneering work in the forest industry, along with his entrepreneurship, love of thoroughbred horses, gambling lifestyle, having two marriages, and nine children gained him recognition in Canada, the United States, and India. When he died unexpectedly in 1976 on his 65th birthday, his loss was felt not only by his large family, but also the town where he had invested so much. The Braich family still continues to call Mission their home; as his son stated, “Mission is in our DNA.”

The latter portion of Season Three and continued on into Season Four deals with the eldest son, Erwin Singh Braich Sr., taking over the family business at age 20.