

ANGEL ISLAND

IMMIGRATION STATION

SOUTH ASIAN IMMIGRATION

From 1910 to 1940, Angel Island Immigration Station in San Francisco Bay was a major port of entry for many immigrants from the Pacific Rim and Central and South America.

South Asian Migration in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries



The majority of South Asian immigrants to the western United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries came from Punjab, a northwest region of India. Most were Sikhs, but a small percentage were Muslims and Hindus. In 1849 the British annexed Punjab and instituted changes in land usage and ownership, depriving many inhabitants of their livelihood or threatening their land holdings. Faced with a deteriorating economy along with droughts, famine and epidemics, Punjabi families encouraged younger sons to work abroad. By the beginning of the 20th century, Vancouver, Canada (also in the British Commonwealth) became the primary Pacific coast destination. South Asians embarked on the long journey from either Hong Kong or directly from Punjabi villages. From Vancouver some of these former soldiers, policemen, farmers and artisans found work in lumber mills in Washington and in railroad construction in California. They also found work as day laborers in orchards, vineyards, and citrus groves in the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Imperial valleys.

After the Canadian government terminated immigration from India for all but a few, South Asians came directly to the United States. The great majority of these immigrants entered in San Francisco. Most saw their move as temporary and planned to return home after making sufficient money to accomplish their goals. In the United States as in Canada, they were not welcome. Other workers saw them as a threat to their jobs. As a result of anti-South Asian sentiment from white laborers and politicians, the U.S. government passed the Immigration Act of 1917 prohibiting immigration from India as part of the "Asiatic barred zone." This policy remained in effect until the Immigration Act of 1965 abolished restrictive quotas based on race and nationality.

Approximately 3,000 South Asians were among those processed in the early days of the Angel Island Immigration Station. Officials used existing provisions in the immigration law to carry out an informal policy of exclusion. The officers cited disease, Muslim belief in polygamy, and local prejudices that would prevent employment and increase the likelihood of becoming a public charge (poverty) as reasons to exclude South Asians. In one instance, when South Asians tried to enter the country from the Philippines, inspectors amended a rule that allowed them to arrest a group of 75 immediately after being admitted. Many appealed their exclusions and arrests. Many, however, were deported. During their stay at Angel Island, they were housed separately from the Chinese and probably other Asians as well. Because of the crowding, their quarters were unsanitary. Today, writings in Punjabi and Urdu carved on the walls detention barracks are evidence of the presence of the South Asians at Angel Island.

At the Angel Island Immigration Station

Hazara Singh 'Janda' arrived at the Angel Island Immigration Station on September 1, 1913. He left behind his two sons and his wife in India, with the dream of creating a life for them in America. The ship encountered many storms on its three month voyage. Fellow passengers on the Manchuria regretted leaving their homelands, while others tried to remain hopeful despite the poor conditions on the ship.

An Individual's Story: HAZARA SINGH 'JANDA'

Hazara Singh survived the treacherous voyage and was deemed 'good enough' to remain in the United States by the Immigration Station inspectors. Mr. Singh described his stay at Angel Island as "akin to 'horse stable-like' conditions." He remembers that immigrants went through full medical examinations. If they had an ailment which could not be cured, they were turned away and sent back to their homelands. If a condition was easily treatable, immigrants were kept in the hospital until they recovered.

Once in the United States, Hazara Singh settled in Biggs, California, just north of Yuba City, which was a major settling point for immigrants from Punjab, India. He worked hard to make a living and send money to his family in India. He labored on railroads and farms, hoping to own his property one day. Prejudice was high and people were suspicious of South Asians. Hazara Singh missed his family and looked forward to bringing them to the United States. However, that dream would never come to be. Singh received notice that both of his sons had died in India and his wife was no longer healthy. Singh remained alone in the United States for nearly two more decades.

In the early 1940s, Hazara Singh married Gloria Melendez whom he had met in Gridley, California. He also saved enough money to buy his first ranch and rental properties in Gridley. Through his hard work and honest dealing, he gradually acquired approximately 400 acres of land. He also assisted many of his relatives who arrived in the United States in the 1960s. Gloria and Hazara had eleven children and are survived by a large family that settled in Yuba City. Today the Janda family has tailored their lives to their American surroundings and has maintained much of their Punjabi cultural roots.

Activity

Sisters Harjit K. Gosal and Hardeep K. Gosal have pieced together the biography of their great-grandmother's brother Hazara Singh from stories that he told his relatives and from his file in the National Archives. Choose a family or older community member to learn more about. Interview relatives, look at documents, and visit local archives to find out a story about their past.

Today many South Asians come to the United States to work in the technology industry. Look though the newspaper to find a story about this industry in California. What are some issues concerning today's employees?

photos: California State Parks graphic design: Stephen Lowe
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