

## Sikh firsts in Placer County

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People like you reading this article may think the Sikhs, a community with origins in the Indian subcontinent, are new in northern California. No, actually they were here a long time ago. They farmed in the fertile lands here northeast of Sacramento over a hundred years ago. One became a Congressman.



In the early 1900s, Sikhs living in Sacramento, Stockton, Berkeley, Yuba City, Los Angeles and Imperial Valley agitated for the British to leave India. They had a political party, a newspaper and a voice in a free country to speak about the British injustices in Punjab. The Punjab was a kingdom until 1839 when the Maharajah died and within 10 years was annexed by the British in 1849. That is the year of the gold rush. Since the British had found Sikh men useful in their outposts around the world, Sikh soldiers had passed through the West Coast of North America as early as the 1890s. Some Sikhs come down to Placer County at that time and saw the fields and agricultural potential of the Central Valley and dreamed of farming here as they did in Punjab. Sikhs were able to find work on the railroad which cut northeast through Placer County on its way to Utah. Some worked as laborers on the Panama Canal in the early 1900s. Others found ways to farm as tenants in Placer County and Sacramento until the laws prohibited them from leasing farmland anymore. This was a gradual tightening of the immigration laws,

a national policy, which started with Chinese exclusion laws then miscegenation laws and finally land leasing laws.

# 1910 - 1920

## Sikh Farmers settle in California



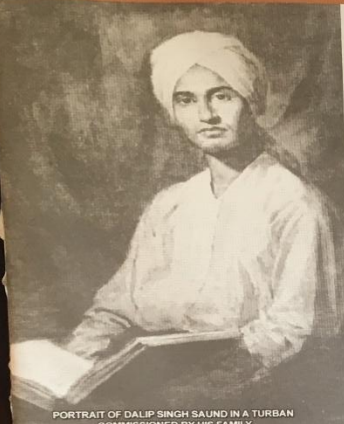
When and where they gathered, Sikhs talked about how to get the British out of India and be free again. The Ghadar Party, which means mutiny in Urdu, was started in Astoria Oregon where Sikhs had found work at the mills in the 1910s and then became a larger and more active community group in Berkeley, Stockton and Sacramento by 1913. It resulted in all the advocates being wanted by the British, if they returned to India, for treason and punishment. For those reasons, many Sikhs who were able to successfully find work and make a living in California could not return and expect not to be charged with crimes against the British occupation of India. They were people without a way back home. They chose to become Americans. However, America did not want Sikhs and others who were considered Orientals to become citizens, or to bring their families or wives to settled here. Laws did not change until the 1940s to allow Asian immigrants to adjust and gain US citizenship and then bring their families and relations. In August 1947, the British left India. The British divided Punjab into two regions, the west being for Muslim Punjabis and the east for Sikhs and Hindus. They gave the capital of the kingdom of Maharajah Ranjit Singh to Pakistan - Lahore. They put a border between Lahore and Amritsar, the holy city of the Sikhs only 55 miles apart. Sikhs have a long history in the Pakistan side of Punjab. The first Guru was born there, other Gurus and historical events took place there. I had the opportunity to make a pilgrimage to Pakistan in November 2018 and felt welcome there, the homeland of Sikh spiritual teachers and saints.

Sikhs in Placer County include Dalip Singh Saund and just before his time were farmers with names we don't know. Dhana Singh Poonian arrived to work in Loomis we think in the late 1900s. Dalip Singh Saund was the 'Congressman from India,' elected to represent Riverside and Imperial




counties in the US House of Representatives in 1956 and served three terms until 1963 when he had a stroke and returned to California.

**FROM THE RECORDS OF PACIFIC COAST KHALSA DIWAN SOCIETY**  
**"HON. DALIP SINGH SAUND - FIRST ASIAN IN U.S. CONGRESS"**




**PORTRAIT OF DALIP SINGH SAUND IN A TURBAN**  
COMMISSIONED BY HIS FAMILY



**DALIP SINGH SAUND MEETS PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY (R) AND**  
**VICE PRESIDENT LYNDON B. JOHNSON**

**CONGRESSIONAL PORTRAIT OF DALIP SINGH SAUND**



**Breaking Racial Barriers & Speaking in Defense of Civil Rights**

Before Judge Dalip Singh Saund became the first Asian to ever serve in the United States Congress (as well as the first Indian and Sikh), he served at Stockton Gurdwara.

Born in the Punjab on September 20, 1899, Dalip Singh Saund earned a bachelor's degree in mathematics at the University of Punjab before emigrating to the United States in 1920.

Saund arrived through Ellis Island in New York City and soon traveled to California. While he attended the University of California, Berkeley, he lived in the Guru Nanak Khalsa Hostel maintained by Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society. The hostel provided free room and board to select students so they could focus on their studies.

**Leader in the Stockton Gurdwara**

After graduating, Saund maintained an intimate relationship with Stockton Gurdwara as he progressed in his professional life. In 1930, the gurdwara paid him a \$1500 commission to write a book called, "My Mother India." The book offered a history of India and a plea for an end to its imperial occupation by the British.

In "My Mother India," Saund wrote: "Even in our present stage of advancement we find that caste prevails throughout the civilized world. Its ugly symptoms are most prominent in America, Australia, and the white colonies of Africa. In the United States, the lynching of negroes in the South and the strict anti-Asiatic regulations of the state of California, and in Australia the "Keep Australia white at all cost" spirit among the population — both of these show how deeply the spirit of race hatred has penetrated into the system of the dominant white races of the world."

Later, Saund's wisdom was recognized when he was elected to the gurdwara management committee. From 1948 to 1950, he served as General Secretary of Pacific Coast Khalsa Diwan Society.

**Earned a Ph. D and U.S. Citizenship**

Saund earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from U.C. Berkeley in 1924. In 1925, he moved to southern California to work in agriculture. In 1949, he received his U.S. citizenship after working as president of the Indian Association of America to persuade U.S. Congress to pass the Luce-Cellar Act (1946) to overturn laws prohibiting Asians from naturalizing.

**Elected County Judge and then to U.S. House of Representatives**

In 1952, Saund was elected as a county judge in southern California. In 1956, he was elected to the United States Congress, where he was soon appointed to the influential House Foreign Affairs Committee. With three successful elections, he served from January 3, 1957 to January 3, 1963. He was compelled to withdraw from his fourth campaign for Congress after suffering a debilitating stroke.

Saund retired from public life to focus on time with his family, especially his devoted wife, Marian. After breaking racial barriers in the U.S. Congress and speaking for decades in defense of civil rights, Saund tragically lost his voice. He died on April 22, 1973.

*(Not printed at Government expense)*

**Congressional Record**  
PROCEEDINGS AND DEBATES OF THE 87th CONGRESS, FIRST SESSION

**Saund Amendment Sets Brakes on Foreign Aid Spending**

SENATOR  
**HON. D. S. SAUND**  
OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
Wednesday, April 11, 1961

**One of Saund's major successes in the House of Representatives was passing the "Saund Amendment" to the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act.**

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THE SIKH TEMPLE INC.  
 THE SIKH CULTURAL SOCIETY INC.  
 2611 Military Road, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20038

MEMORIAL SERVICES FOR DALIP SINGH (JINDI) SAUND  
 UNITED STATES CAPITAL, MAY 15, 1973

PROGRAMME

CONDUCTING GURGA SINGH DHILLON

2:00 Shabad (Hymn) Anja & Rukh party

2:05 Ban Kari Sad (Sikh scriptures)

2:10 Tributes -  
 Congressman Virender  
 Congressman Corbin  
 Congressman Johnson  
 Congressman McFall (Majority Whip)

2:20 Anand Sahib (Sikh scriptures) whole congregation  
 Anand Sahib, Mr. Ronald Torrey  
 Hukam Sahib (Sikh scriptures) whole congregation

2:35 Concluding remarks  
 Prakash Sahib

**After his death, Saund's life was commemorated in Washington, D.C. by a Bhog (religious reading) on May 13, 1973 and a special 1-hour program on the U.S. House Floor on May 15, 1973. Representatives from Stockton Gurdwara were specially invited.**

**Bhog**  
 in memory of  
*Judge Dalip Singh Saund*  
 1899 Amritsar - 1973 Los Angeles  
 Sunday, May 13, 1973  
 11:00 - 1:00 pm  
 The Sikh Temple  
 1971 Military Road, N.W.,  
 Washington, D.C. 20038

Congress of the United States  
 House of Representatives  
 Washington, D.C. 20515

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When he first arrived in America on September 27, 1920 by ship from Punjab, he was 20 years old. He learned that Berkeley had a Sikh community boarding house and Berkeley had a university where he could study agricultural food preservation. He was a polymath. Literally. He graduated from college

in Punjab with a math major and decided to change majors at UC Berkeley to get a Masters in Mathematics by 1922 and his PhD in 1924. There was no tuition for graduate studies. However, he needed money to support himself and found work in the fruit ranches of Placer County - King Road in Loomis, PFE Road in Sacramento. There are records of many Sikhs finding agricultural farm labor work here as early as 1902. Dalip Singh Saund graduated and could not find work in his professional career and moved down to Imperial Valley where there were lettuce, alfalfa and other farms and ranches that were owned by Sikhs.

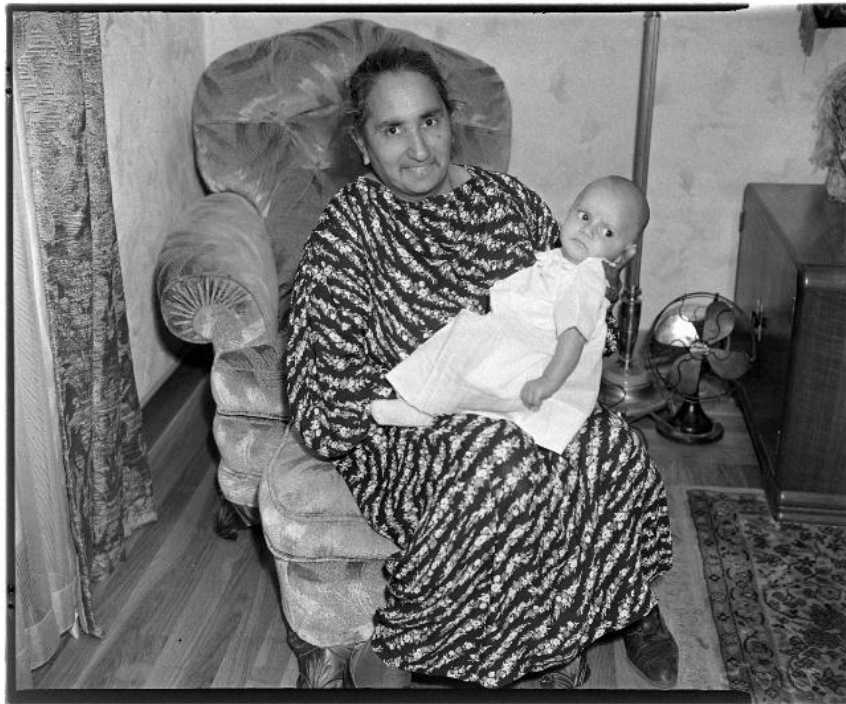


Down in the border region, Mexicans and Punjabis had found ways to own land despite the California and federal laws that barred them from doing so. Maybe it was that they were all brown people who liked tortillas and beans and didn't speak much English and worked on farms. As a result, Sikhs and Mexicans married. Several families became successful and their next generation, sometimes called Mexican Hindoos by their own people, eventually settled in central and northern California. There was a daughter of an Arizona Sikh who became the matriarch of a family now in Yuba City who was from this community. Her name was Janie Poonian. More about her is in an imagined conversation with Raj Kor, her mother-in-law, in the next article of this series on Sikhs and Sikh firsts.

Dalip Singh Saund had to settle for work as a foreman for many years in the southern border area of California. He was a PhD and had to return to the farm work of his people because there was no other employment available due to his race and national origin. He saw and suffered the Great Depression, married and raised a family, and got involved in local politics. Democrats were the group in power. In 1949, he became a US citizen. He ran for a position as Justice Court judge in 1953 which at that time was not a job that required a law degree. He was not a lawyer. He was a mathematician and a brilliant man

who loved to read, so he read the law books and probably could have passed the bar exam. At that early stage, California's legal community was made up of people who 'read the law' in a law office and then sit and take and pass the bar exam and then practice. I think he did that. His family could not confirm. Once he was a judge, he got known as Judge Saund by the communities around Westmoreland and Imperial Valley and so he ran for Congress when there was an open seat. He was elected in 1956 and served 3 terms until his health failed and he returned to California in 1963. Photos of him with President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson are everywhere. He is celebrated as the First Asian to serve in the US Congress. He was also the first farm worker, who worked the fields of Placer County, to be able to reach that far. Coming here as a 20 year old, he did hard work those first 3 to 4 years in the summers in the orchards and farms of Placer County, so had money to attend UC Berkeley during the academic year.

The first Sikh to be born in Placer County was Dalip Raymond Poonian. He is only 4 months old in a photograph by Raj Kor, his grandmother, the mother of his father Paritem Singh Poonian. The first Sikh born in Placer County was biracial. His father had the first Sikh divorce, the first criminal case, and they were the first Sikh family to farm in Loomis and then Roseville. After selling the nursery, they bought the biggest house in Roseville in the mid-1950s. All the kids graduated from Roseville High School. Sikhs firsts here include the first Sikh millionaire from Placer County and benefactors of the first Sikh temple in the area built in Yuba City in the early 1970s.





# Dalip Raymond Poonian



## Dalip Poonian Obituary

Dalip Raymond Poonian, 76, died Tuesday, April 7, 2015 at Sutter General Hospital in Sacramento California, after a brief illness.

Dalip was born in Sacramento California and was living in Yuba City.

He is survived by his son Nicholas Poonian and siblings Banti Baker, Santi Bains and Paritem Poonian.

Dalip was a very loved, caring and compassionate man that will be missed by his friends and family.

They find peace in that he joins his Father Paritem Singh Poonian, Mother Janie Poonian and siblings Thanti Powers and Irene Wilkinson whom preceded him in death.

My law office is probably among the first of a Sikh lawyer to locate in Placer County, where I started practice in 2004 and have been here over 20 years. I was the first Sikh to run for Superior Court judge in 2018. Soon after the Roseville courthouse opened in May 2008, I was one of the first lawyers (and only Sikh so far) who heard small claims cases as a judge pro tem for the court system as a volunteer judge. I wore a black robe. The bailiff announced Judge Kulvinder Singh presiding. Litigants appeared before me and I decided their cases. In the March 2018 primary election for Superior Court judge, an open seat, I got 9% of the vote in a county where Sikhs who are citizens and who vote probably are under 1% of the registered voters. More firsts by Sikhs include those Sikhs who currently serve in commissions, on boards and likely in the near future as elected officials. There have been Sikh candidates for offices including city council in Rocklin and public service community boards and commissions since 2000. The future is bright and diverse. Do you agree? Time will tell.