

SILICON ALLEYS



Gay Singh

THE ROAD TO JALANDHAR *The author surveys his father's hometown.*

TREE ROUTES

A genealogical journey from downtown San Jose to India **BY GARY SINGH**

WITH GENEALOGY ALL the rage these days, I became driven to make an ancestral journey, tracing my roots from downtown San Jose to India.

The inspiration came from many sources, including author Stephen Alter, who wrote of “the instinctual need to physically locate the past, to set foot on the ground where our forefathers once lived. For this reason, our inner compass leads us back to those places which were once our home, even if that home was abandoned before our birth.”

An American born and raised in India, Alter’s sense of family history was inextricably tied to geography. When he visited Pakistan, where his father once lived, he felt the same emotional pull as he did when returning to his own birthplace or even to his mother’s childhood home back in the US.

I went the other way. My father arrived to attend San Jose State around 1958, where he eventually met my mom, a San Josean of pure Anglo heritage. My own ties to geography were thus similarly inescapable, although before returning to India, I just had to write about San Jose for 20 years first, so it

took a while for the inner compass to orient itself. Which is fine. The phenomenon of “slow travel” is actually a thing these days.

When my dad first showed up in San Jose, he lived at 277 E. San Salvador, an address that no longer exists. The house was destroyed so the college could build the Seventh Street Parking Garage.

I still have a few of my dad’s possessions, including an old math textbook. Inside the front cover, in his handwriting, is the long-gone San Salvador address. Talk about ghosts.

After 277 E. San Salvador was demolished, he briefly moved across the street and then to South Sixth Street between William and Reed. After my parents were married, they lived at 470 S. Fourth St, in an apartment complex that still exists today. All of this was easy to trace—I’ve known for several years—but it was only recently that I felt compelled to follow the steps even farther back.

As a result, a few months ago I returned to my dad’s hometown in Punjab for the first time in decades. He grew up in a building that was now reconfigured a bit, but the bones of the structure were still present.

To arrive at the former family residence, we ascended an old concrete staircase that rose from the street near a busy intersection. Upstairs, the original rooms and partitions were gone, but the space was the same. Renovations were underway and a wall had been replaced, but much of the brickwork and original wooden doors remained intact from 70 years earlier. There were piles of wood, remnants of an old balcony, building supplies, tables, scrap metal and other materials all accumulated during the remodeling process. One could still stand and overlook the tumultuous traffic below, just as my dad’s family had done decades earlier.

After 20 years of writing about former inhabitants of downtown San Jose, including my dad, I’d now made it to his childhood home in Jalandhar. I finally felt I was part of a larger story.

Yet this was only one half of the family. I came back from that trip already laughing about the next adventure.

My mom grew up on Minnesota Avenue, not far from the Willow Glen Library. Her mother, my grandmother, spent her own college years in a house near Sixth and Empire. This branch of the family has already been traced back to the first governor of Massachusetts, then over to England, up through generations of Dudleys and Suttons, on through the Plantagenets and eventually to Charlemagne. However (cue bad History Channel music), if you can get this far, to Charlemagne, you can then easily go all the way back through Dagobert, Clodius, Merovech and several others right to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, that is, if you believe the conspiracy that they sired children.

That will be a future trip. I will trace my mom’s roots from Willow Glen to Galilee. It may take another 20 years, but that’s fine with me. Happy New Year and may your travels be slow. 🍷