

## INDIAN FAMILY'S FRUITFUL LIFE

By Virginia Winder

One of New Zealand's earliest Indian fruitshops opened its doors in New Plymouth about 1914.

Then, for the next 67 years, the Moral family provided city people with bananas, pineapples, plums and peaches, turning fruit bowls into tropical still-life studies.

Retired businessman Singi Moral says his family's story begins with a different name, in a far away village, and with a young man keen to find a better life. In 1912, Wallabh Soma Morar decided to leave the village of Karadi to seek his fortune in the South Pacific.

Karadi, a tiny settlement etched with dusty unpaved roads and speckled with mud-brick houses, can be found in the India's western state of Gujarat. The village also played a significant part in the life of pacifist Indian leader Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, but that comes later.

First are farewells.

When the 21-year-old Wallabh departed his place of birth he left behind his 16-year-old wife, Dudhibai (nee Bhana). His plan was to set himself up in business, then send for her. In the end, the husband and wife were apart for eight years.

Strike changes plans

After travelling to Bombay, now called Mumbai, Wallabh boarded a boat bound for Fiji.

"But when they arrived there, there was a (wharf) strike on so the ship was diverted down to Christchurch," says Singi (now 78). "Dad stopped on board and went up to Auckland."

Before 1925, immigrants (apart from Chinese) did not need visas or cash to get into New Zealand. The only cost was Wallabh's correct name.

When he entered the country, immigration officials spelt his surname Moral. Fresh off the boat, the young man accepted the new label and went hunting for work. His first job was clearing bush in the King Country. Singi Moral says his father then returned to Auckland. "He started a fruit barrow down the bottom of Queen Street."

He explains why so many Indian immigrants began selling fruit in New Zealand. "They had no capital, not a lot of money behind them, so they used to be able to go to the market in the morning, buy what they wanted to, sell it during the day and then they'd have enough to buy more the next day. They'd make a profit out of it of course and they gradually got together capital."

NP's first Indian fruitshop

Eventually, Wallabh earned enough money to open a business and chose New Plymouth, but Singi has no idea why. "He was the first Indian here." Wallabh's first fruitshop was on Devon Street West near where Axis Music can now be found. A couple of years later the shop was moved to the corner of Devon Street West and Egmont Street.



Moral Bros: This photo, taken from the Post Office Tower in September 1929, shows the Moral fruit shop on the corner of Devon Street West and Egmont Street.

His success prompted other Indian immigrants to set up fruitshops in different parts of Taranaki, including Waitara and Eltham.

"Well that was the thing; everyone came out, followed whatever the people that came out here before were doing. Just like the Lebanese - they're just about all jewellers when you look at it aren't they; and the Greeks - fish shops and restaurants; Chinese fruit shops. So what one gets into, the others follow suit," Singi says.

'Nigger's Corner' prospers

While New Plymouth shop prospered, it was not always easy for Wallabh. "I can remember him saying they got a hard time from the locals about being Indians," Singi says.

"They used to call it 'Nigger's Corner' in those days."

While the European people could be unkind, the Maori community welcomed Wallabh.

He became close to members of the Keenan, Falwasser and Papakura families, and Alexander Boyd Witten-Hannah.

"Papakura, the old fella, he used to be in there every day. He used to come for his walk, because they used to live, you know where the Red Cross building is opposite the clock tower, there were some old houses there originally and they used to live there. He used to come down the hill and come in the shop," Singi says.

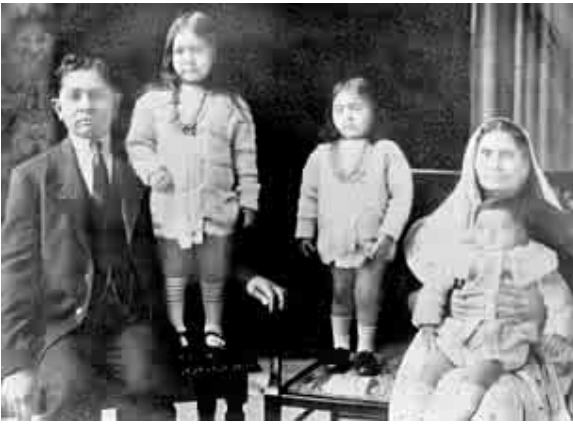
"And the bus stop was outside our corner, we had the fruit shop on the corner of Devon Street and Egmont Street and the trams used to pull up and all the Maoris [sic] used to be sitting there - the old ladies with their pipes and their mokos [sic], smoking away.

"They'd be talking and Dad, he knew a bit of Maori, you know. He'd have a bit of a talk with them and they got on really well."

Nickname sticks for life

Wallabh did so well that by 1920, he had also opened a shop in Marton.

"In those days Marton was a big railway centre," Singi says. "It was the junction of the main trunk line to New Plymouth, to Auckland and Wellington." That was also the year that Dudhibai came to New Zealand. For a few years, the couple lived in Marton, where Keshiben was born in 1923, Parvatiben in 1925 and Gulab in 1926.



First Five: The Moral family is, from left, Wallabh, Keshiben, Parvatiben and Dudhibai holding baby Gulab (better-known as Singi).

Gulab Wallabh Soma Moral is Singi's real name. "When I was in Marton I played a bit of cricket. At the time, Ranjitsinghi was a famous cricketer in England, so they called me Singi, just as a nickname because they could not pronounce Gulab very well."

The nickname stuck - for life.

"Everyone calls me Singi, but people who know me very well do know my first name," he says.

The real "Singi" was Prince Kumar Shri Ranjitsinghi. In 1888, he went to further his studies in England, where he excelled at cricket. He is generally acknowledged as the Father of Indian Cricket although he played only in England.

In 1929, when Singi was three years old, Wallabh took his family back to India for a couple of years.

Grief, goodness in Karadi

The voyage had moments of drama. "I got into a lot of trouble," Singi says. "I walked off the ship at Perth. They were looking all over for me and I was wandering around on the wharf. This is what my uncle (Dayha Panchia) told me because he went back too. He reckons I was a real mischievous bloke."

Back in Karadi there were more dramatic events - one personal, one political. While giving birth to her fourth child, Dudhibai and her baby died. Wallabh was heartbroken.

Meanwhile, in April 1930, Karadi found itself on the world stage.

While Singi was too young to recall details of that political time, family friend Dayal Kesry (84) has vivid memories of the "Salt March", led by Gandhi.

Dayal, who has lived in Waitara and worked in the Patel brothers' fruitshop, is also from the Karadi area.

Gandhi challenges salt law

He explains that the British Government had imposed a tax on salt. This made it illegal for workers to freely collect their own salt from the coasts of India, making them buy salt they couldn't afford.

Gandhi decided to challenge the tax by breaking the law. On 12 March 1930, he began the 241-mile (388-kilometre) march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi on the coast. He started with 78 followers and disciples, but the numbers increased by the day.

At that time, Dayal Kesry was aged 10 and living in Karadi. "I saw the procession going to Dandi," he says. "It was a remote village with no roads and no water."

On 5 April, Gandhi arrived at Dandi, where short prayers were offered and he addressed the crowd.

At 8.30am, Gandhi picked up a small lump of natural salt, therefore, breaking the law. Within moments hundreds of others followed suit. Many were arrested and put in jail.

That night Gandhi stayed in Karadi and, at midnight, he was arrested by British police.

Wallabh and his family were living there at the time.

'India woke up'

Dayal says that although Gandhi was in jail, the campaign of civil disobedience carried on. He always had another leader waiting to continue the passive resistance, who then appointed another leader, who chose another leader, so the chain of leadership was unbroken, like the reflection of a mirror in a mirror...

"The whole of India was woken up," says Dayal, who says he was brought up to believe that India should govern itself. "It was a great battle of non-violence against violence. The British police had guns and batons, but Gandhiji's people had nothing."

The "ji" at the end of Gandhi's name means a highly respected person.

Both Dayal Kesry and Wallabh Moral were passionate Gandhi supporters. Later those ideals would get Wallabh in trouble.

Meanwhile, in 1931, the widower had to make decisions about his children's future.

"He left my two older sisters there in India with my grandmother to care for them and they were brought up in India, in Karadi. By that time he had raised enough money to buy a new property in Karadi and build a house," Singi says.

"So then I returned with my father to New Zealand about 1931 and I went down to Marton where I was looked after by an uncle, Dayha Panchia."

In 1938, Singi moved back to New Plymouth and went to Central School.

Stranded by war

The following year, Wallabh returned to India to remarry, leaving his son with another village relative, Bhana Panchia, who also kept the New Plymouth fruitshop operating.

While Wallabh was in India, World War II was declared and so he was stuck in his homeland.

He was not idle.

In 1940, Wallabh married a woman called Valiben, who had three children - Babu in 1941, Deviben in 1943 and Hari in 1945.

During the war years, the stranded man served his people. "He was a gentleman and he was a social worker for the village area. In Karadi during wartime rationing, he managed the rationing distribution," Dayal Kesry says.

He also acted as a wise counsel for people, who would come to him to have disputes settled.

On the political front, Wallabh was heavily involved in the nationwide civil disobedience campaign started by Gandhi with the intent of ousting Britain's imperial rulers.

Indian people were urged to stop co-operating with British administration. "The basic things - such as the police and justice department - they were to be boycotted."

On the run from police

For his efforts, Wallabh became a marked man. "There was a warrant issued in his name," Dayal says.

Singi says his father went on the run. "He'd go to other little villages and the people there would hide him so the police couldn't find him. One time they

came to our home in Karadi and they beat up my stepmother, trying to make her tell where he was."

The police never caught Wallabh. "He was one step ahead of them. They'd never catch up with him. The whole community was behind Gandhi in those days," Singi says.



Back in New Zealand, young Singi had moved on to New Plymouth Boys' High School - and saving lives.

With so many fit young men away at war, the beaches were kept safe by young volunteer lifeguards. Singi was one of those who helped patrol East End Beach.

In 1945, WWII ended and Wallabh was finally able to return to New Zealand in 1946. He left his new family in India and they joined him in 1951. "He got the first passenger boat back, the Dominion Monarch, and landed in Wellington. It was part troop ship and part civilian," Singi says.

**Independence and racism**

In 1947, India regained its independence.

So did Singi, who went to Victoria University to study science.

**School Days:** Wearing his New Plymouth Boys' High School uniform, Singi Moral

He also came face to face with racism.

stands in the front garden of his family's Devon St East home, which was built where Beamish's Denture Services is now located.

"The first I ever noticed of a bit of discrimination was when I went to Wellington, to university. I remember I rang up for somewhere to board in a boarding establishment. And I rang on the phone and the women answered - and of course I've never had an accent, nobody would recognise that I was an Indian - and she said 'yes there's a vacancy'. So I

went along, knocked on the door and as soon as she saw me she said 'I'm sorry it's been taken - there's no vacancy'," Singi says.

"Well I just didn't say much, and anyhow I got one of my cobbler's at university to ring up about three or four hours later and there was still a vacancy there."

**In the end, Singi boarded with a distant relative**  
**Basketball brilliance**

After a few years at university, the young man switched to teachers' training college and gained his diploma. Looking back, he knows he excelled at sport rather than his studies.

"I had a good time playing basketball," Singi says.

He also became extremely good at the indoor sport and was chosen for the Wellington representative team.



**East End Boys:** During World War II, Singi (crouching at right) was a member of the East End Surf Life Saving Club. With him are fellow lifeguards, back, from left, John Carrington, Bill Dalley, Peter Halliwell, Bill Spence and, crouching at left, Alec Priest.



**Airborne Athlete: Singi in action at a basketball tournament in Gisborne during the early 1950s.**

About 1949 or '50, he got selected for the New Zealand universities basketball team and in 1951 he toured Australia with the side.

He also coached the Wellington women's representative team. "We won the New Zealand champs. I started off coaching the B team in Wellington - the women's - and they won the New Zealand champs too."

In Taranaki, Singi played for New Plymouth and also coached teams in the Celtics club. "And won the local titles."

Another of his claims to fame is instigating the annual Queen's Birthday Weekend tournament in the late 1950s. "It was the largest tournament in New Zealand when it took off," he says. "Gee it was enormous."

Singi was also on the basketball association for about five years in the late 1970s and early '80s.

Heart gives up before Singi

Even more remarkably, he was still on the court.

Many Taranaki people will remember watching or playing against the small, lithe forward with wily ways. "I was still playing it when I was 65. Why did I give up? I had a heart attack!"

Not while playing, but at home on New Year's Day 1994.

He bounced back, but not enough to resume shooting goals.

While his long basketball career had gone on in leaps and bounds, his teaching career barely got off the ground.

In 1955, with his teaching diploma in hand and a bright future ahead, Singi decided he wanted a year off to see the world.

"I asked for leave of absence so I could go overseas and the secretary of the Education Board wouldn't give me leave of absence and I said, 'Oh well, you can take your job, I'm not interested, I'll go'. I didn't want to be paid..."

The determined young man even turned down pleas from the principal of the teachers' training college. "He tried to talk me out of it but I said, 'No, I'll go'."

So he did.

A wife in waiting

"I wanted to go to England and Europe and that. Dad said, 'You'll have to stop off at India' and when I got there they'd kind of arranged a marriage. The relatives said, 'You've got to get married before you go anywhere'. So, that's when I met Sante."



Celebration Time: Singi's best man, Jessubhai (seated in middle), gets engaged. Taking part in the Indian ceremony at Karadi are Sante (left) and Singi (right).

Singi clearly remembers his first encounter with the beautiful young woman. "It was all very secretive. Sante was brought along by her aunt in a middle-ground place and I went with my friend and we discussed whether she wanted to get married and whether she wanted to come to New Zealand and the rest of it. And of course it was an opportunity to view."

Singi and Sante were married in a Hindu ceremony at Bodali, the next village to Karadi.

Afterwards, instead of seeing the world, Singi went on a sightseeing holiday around India with his best man, leaving Sante behind in the village.

In January 1956, after the "honeymoon", he took his new bride back to New Zealand and the Egmont Street fruitshop, which by then had moved a short distance along the street towards the sea.

New bride alone, lonely

Because she spoke little English, was without the support of her family and was a foreigner in a faraway country, Sante felt alone and lonely.



Newlywed Couple: Singi and Sante Moral in 1955.

"It was hard," she says. "But after having the children one after the other it was not so bad. Time just passed on me - you don't have time to feel lonely," she says, her Indian accent turning English into an exotic melody.

In order, her now grown-up children are Dinu, Praba, Aarun, Ramila and Sununda. Sante also found solace in the Hindu religion, meeting with others for puja (prayers) and singing.

Even now, her faith is part of her daily life.

During the first interview with Singi, his wife sits quietly on the couch praying to Krishna, her fingers counting thanks on Tulsimala (prayer beads).

"It's supposed to be 16 round(s) every day, and I think it's 112 beads...but I usually go eight. Eight is enough for me."

Sante gets peace from the chanting, as does Singi when he listens.

"Most people wear small Tulsimala just like this, they wear it all their lives," she says fingering her necklace.

During the second interview, Sante sits knitting a scarf for orphans in Kosovo, her quick click-click stitches as meditative as the Hindu prayers.  
Saris and vegetables only

This traditional Indian woman mostly cooks food from her native land - curries and rice - but now and then makes a roast meal. She only eats the vegetables, never the meat.

The strict vegetarian is just as firm on her dress - saris only. Wrapped in rich pink cloth, Sante says she has never worn European clothes and never will. Singi is the opposite. He has always dressed as a typical Kiwi bloke. In fact, he no longer has any Indian-style clothes in his wardrobe.

Being New Zealand born and bred, he has lived that way. He has always been part of the community, playing sport, joining groups and dealing with the public in his shops.

In 1959, his father died, so Singi took over the fruitshop. In 1963, he left the store to be run by his stepbrothers and opened a new shop on St Aubyn Street.

The Moral children all went to West End School and Singi was on the school committee. He also became a member of the Masonic Lodge and is still a member of the New Plymouth Rotary Club, which he first joined in 1967. And he can put the letters JP at the end of his name, being a Justice of the Peace.

In 1981, the Morals sold the fruitshop and bought the Iona Dairy, finally retiring in 1983. That's when the couple got to see the world; finishing off the trip Singi began back in 1955.

Better life for girls

Now Singi and Sante are grandparents, with Praba, Aarun, Ramila and Sununda all married with ten children between them. Only Praba's marriage was arranged. The others chose their own life partners, and are wed to non-Indian New Zealanders. Dinu has never married.

Looking back, Singi is pleased his father came to New Zealand and has been content to watch his own children grow up in a prosperous country with so many advantages.

Especially, his three girls.

When he first went to India and married Sante, he found life in the village greatly different to New Zealand ways.



"It was a real eye-opener, like the women folk would do everything. We were used to carrying our own luggage and all the sort of thing, but over there, the women folk pick up the luggage and put it on their heads. They get up early in the morning and get the water, because in those days there was no reticulated water supply; they had to go and get the water from the well early in the morning and they'd come back to the house, heat the water up so you could have a bucket bath in the mornings and do the washing and then they'd get the cooking ready."



Singi wanted a different life for his daughters: "A bit of independence and be able to speak up and speak out and not be intimidated by anything or anyone. And that's possible here. It's a better lifestyle for girls and women by far."

**Fresh Water:** Many people get their water from the Karadi reservoir.  
(This photo was taken before independent)

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"If we fight, we may not always win, but if we don't fight, we will surely lose."  
ARVIND.



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