

JUNDAH SINGH - PIONEER MIGRANT BUSINESSMAN LITIGANT

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Pioneers have an important place in our history. They confirm our beginnings and give us role models. Over the years, as a community retells its history, it sometimes relegates a pioneer to the basement or the margins. It is not done on purpose or through malice; more likely from embarrassment, controversy, shame or misunderstanding. Jundah Singh is one such pioneer.

The Punjab was Jundah's place of birth, his mother Nohan and father Sohun/Sonk, who is listed in certificates as both a farmer and a hawker. It is a region with a long history and rich cultural heritage, situated in the far north-west of India. Because of its placement as the gateway to the Indian sub-continent it has had connections over the centuries with Persians, Greeks, Scythians, Egyptians, Turks, Mongols and Afghans. In this multicultural area Sikhs live among Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

I haven't discovered why or exactly when Jundah came to Australia. He arrived as an adolescent at the turn of the twentieth century, seeking, I am sure, what all immigrants want: security, contentment and a good productive life.

In 1910 Jundah married Harriet Emily Louisa Bromwich in the Holy Trinity Church of England at Kelso and started both a family and business in the Portland area. On his marriage certificate his occupation is listed as Indian Hawker. That title puts him in a box; but evidence shows he was multi-faceted. During the eight years they spent around Portland he had a farm at Cheetham's Flat (also known as Sodwells), a general store there and one at Rydal, and a butchering business. The fact that he bought a block of crown land in the village of Rydal shows that he was having some success.

In mid 1918 the family settled in Kandos. Jundah was one of many from Portland who were Kandos pioneers including JB Simpkins and the McGrath and Walsh brothers.

The town of Kandos at that time was less than three years old. It had a hotel, butcher and baker shops, the Angus Hall with its Saturday night picture show, a railway platform and shed, McGrath's fine double-story shops and residence, a fully operational cement works, buildings under construction (though no churches), and numerous corn-bag partitioned shacks. It was a feverish, optimistic town with great expectations.

Much of what I have learnt about Jundah Singh's life comes from court and council records. It is obvious from these that Jundah was not afraid to stand up for his rights, take on his opponents or argue his case in a court of law. Feisty is one word that might describe him, also litigious, perhaps antagonistic. At times he and his family experienced discrimination. At times cultural differences caused misunderstanding and conflict.

Even before he arrived in Kandos, Jundah had had a few court-room skirmishes. In 1912 he won a clash with his neighbour Mr Jenkins at Cheetham's Flat, who claimed ten pounds

compensation for Jundah's straying sheep. Jundah was able to prove Jenkins' fencing was in poor condition. Two years later the Portland health inspector took Jundah to court for selling meat without a licence and keeping dirty premises. He was fined two pounds plus one pound. On getting a licence Jundah protested to council against another resident who was selling without a licence.

Soon after he arrived in Kandos, Jundah Singh was in trouble with council about burying a horse in his back yard. The sanitary inspector demanded he remove it. Jundah's casual indifference led to a ten shillings fine, "Guilty your honour. I had intended to remove it but was prevented by other business," he explained.

Six months later there was another court appearance. A local carrier mistakenly delivered extra cases and bags to Jundah's business. Jundah denied getting them though he had signed the paperwork. He was ordered to return the goods (or pay the cost of them) and pay witnesses' expenses and court fees. His literacy skills weren't good and it is possible it was a genuine mistake on his part.

There was obviously an altercation while police were investigating this incident. First-class Constable Cove brought charges against Jundah Singh for assault and abusive language and Jundah Singh brought the same charges against First-class Constable Cove. The assault charge against Constable Cove was dismissed while Jundah was fined one pound.

During their first nine years in Kandos the Singhs appeared to have a productive, successful life. In 1919 Jundah purchased a block of land in Angus Avenue, in 1920 three more blocks and in 1924 another three. Three of those blocks were side by side in Rodgers Street and it was here that Jundah built a store, which is still standing, though since converted to a house.

There didn't seem to be any further court appearances, however Jundah sometimes complained to council about poor drainage in the street. The *Mudgee Guardian* reported "Opposite the business place of Jundah Singh the street is simply a morass, and if not attended to very soon by the Rylstone Shire Council, residents will require an aeroplane to negotiate the stretch... The little lake leads from the centre of the road to the front door step [of Jundah's store] and looks quite Venetian."

Harriet's and Jundah's family grew to nine: five boys and four girls. Their sons Bertie and Roy are listed in the *Mudgee Guardian* as receiving prizes at school. Jundah drove at different times a cutting cart (for meat) and a hawker's cart (often fruit and vegetables) and also operated a general business.

Rose Fitzgerald in her family history *Victory in Her Veins* recalls Jundah's and Harriet's shop: "people looking and poking into corners and like us finishing up buying more than they had come for. He sold everything, food, materials, knitting needles, cottons, lanterns, tin dishes, buckets and billy cans hanging in a conglomeration from every available rafter or displayed on numerous shelves and counters around the store."

Fitzgerald's description of Jundah and Harriet however is stereotyped: "He stood silent and impassive behind the counter, his large soft brown eyes veiled and inscrutable and blending

so exactly into the environment that he could have been a wax-work figure, but a sharp brain for business lay at the back of that deceptive empty gaze.” She says of Harriet, “His wife came from India and they had a large family of young girls, dumpty, black eyed and raven haired.” Memory often lets us down.

It was April 1927 when Jundah’s contented life came to an end. That’s when his wife of seventeen years was admitted to Rylstone Hospital with pneumonia. The doctors were obviously concerned about her condition because there were three in attendance, Doctors Hansard, W Darton and J Darton. Unfortunately Harriet died two weeks later, at the age of 39, leaving her children in Jundah’s hands. They were Bertie 17, Roy 16, Irene 14, Arthur 12, Emily 10, James 8, Violet 6, Victor 4 and little Cora 2. It must have been a daunting task. While there were no social workers in those days in a small country town, Jundah did have some family that I know of. Harriet’s brother and his wife, Henry and Florence Bromwich lived at Kandos.

Three advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* show that Jundah employed a housekeeper when he could, though he had trouble getting a local woman. The third advertisement on 28 June 1932 reads: “WANTED Housekeeper for the country. Apply to Jundah Singh c/- The Sydney Cafe 735 George St City Wednesday 12 o’clock noon.”

It was in the years after his wife’s death that Jundah had most trouble with the bureaucracy and some people in the community. He was in court twelve times, charged with petty offences: cattle, horse and sheep straying, detention of property, tenancy matters, unclean premises. Jundah was still feisty. He often pressed counter charges against residents who offended him. Usually it was because of insulting language or assault.

Within a year of his wife’s death an inspector from the Board of Health charged Jundah with keeping his Rodgers Street shop premises in a dirty condition: “the worst case he had ever inspected”. Fined twenty pounds or two months’ imprisonment. On the same day Jundah was charged by the local health inspector for contravening an order to close his premises in Buchanan Street. Fined thirteen pounds ten shillings. Both seem excessive punishments for those days.

Jundah also dealt with two crises at his children’s school. One was an extreme case of discrimination (on the part of bureaucracy) and bullying, when an ex-student spread rumours that Irene was pregnant by a member of her family. There was an inquiry to discern whether Irene was likely to corrupt the morals of children at the school. She was exonerated.

In the other case Jundah complained that a teacher had used excessive punishment on Arthur for not having learnt his spelling. The teacher was reprimanded and the Chief Inspector assured Jundah that steps had been taken “which will obviate further cause for complaint”.

Unfortunately stress took its toll and by 1934 Jundah was a broken man. One day he ran amok at Kandos and next day, Anzac Day, he was deemed to be insane and not under proper care and control. He was sent to Orange Mental Hospital where he died four months later on

30 August from inflammation of the kidneys and gall bladder. His death certificate suggests that he had had the condition for many months.

Six weeks after his breakdown the five youngest children were taken to court as “neglected children” and committed to an institution, in the case of the girls, to the Salvation Army Girls’ Home at Arncliffe. James was put in the care of a local resident.

Jundah died intestate and his estate was valued at 202 pounds, half in cash and half in real estate consisting of six land titles. He was buried in Rylstone Cemetery, as Harriet had been, though neither have headstones¹.

There were some at that time who grieved Jundah’s passing and recognised his worth. This eulogy appeared in the *Mudgee Mail* on 3 September 1934:

“The Late Jundah Singh

Jundah Singh, one of the familiar figureheads of Kandos, died at Orange on Thursday after an illness of several months. In the early days of Kandos he came to town and opened a general store which he conducted until failing health intervened. Deceased came to this country from India when a young man and during the past ten years returned to his homeland on two occasions. He spent many years in the Portland-Mt Lambie districts. At that time he was a lithe and athletic type of man. He was an excellent horseman and a sound judge of horses. Any steed which Jundah bought could be relied on to stand up to the most exacting test. Several years ago deceased’s wife died at Kandos. He leaves a family of several sons and daughters. The remains were interred in the Rylstone cemetery on Friday, the service being conducted by officers of the Salvation Army.”

Jundah’s athletic talents included boxing. Apparently he held his own in the boxing ring, earning the title of champion. His sons too were not afraid to fight. All five enlisted and fought for their country in the Second World War.

It was my mother who, when I was a child, first told me about Jundah Singh, in an attempt, I think, and perhaps out of guilt, to establish his place in Kandos history.

¹ A cross with details has since been positioned at his grave.