

Sohan Singh Birak

Sohan Singh Birak was born on July 1, 1944 in the village of Virk, district Jalandhar, Punjab. Sohan Singh came to Canada on May 3, 1960 to Lake Cowichan, BC after being sponsored by his sister, Kashmir Kaur Johal who came to Canada in 1956. Sohan Singh Birak arrived in Canada with some clothes and only \$60 in his pocket. In India, he left behind his father Dalip Singh, mother Nachattar Kaur, sister Jageer Kaur and two brothers Sewa Singh and Gurbaksh Singh.

After arriving in Canada, Sohan Singh lived in Lake Cowichan for six months and then moved to Abbotsford in June 1960. He worked on a farm called Marris Growers where he picked strawberries for \$0.65 per flat until 1963. During the three years he lived in Abbotsford, he became friends with Tarlok Singh Bassi, Avtar Singh Bassi, Gian Damer, Dara Singh Maan and Jagtar Singh Gill. All of these men also accompanied him while he worked on the farm. Sohan Singh and the other farm workers lived together in the cabins on the farm. Each of them did housework such as buying groceries from the South Poplar grocery store on Huntingdon Road and making food by themselves. The work on the farm was seasonal running from June to November therefore for the rest of the year Sohan Singh remained unemployed. Due to this, he would usually go to visit his sister in Lake Cowichan and would only return in May or June.

In 1963, Gurdial Singh Dhama provided Sohan Singh with a job at the Silk Spruce Lumber Company mill. Upon receiving the job, Sohan Singh moved to a town named Donald near Golden, BC to start work. Since Gurdial Singh Dhama had a contract for work at the mill, he enrolled Sohan Singh and the other Punjabi millworkers in school for one year for them to learn English. Sohan Singh resided and worked in Donald for three years earning \$1.28 per hour and then in April, 1966, he moved back to Lake Cowichan. In Lake Cowichan, Sohan Singh started work at a rate of \$2.50 an hour at the Western Forest Industry mill on Honeymoon Bay. He worked at Western Forest Industry until his retirement in 1990. Although he was injured while working on the farm in 1963 when a tractor went over his legs, it wasn't until 1990 when his legs started getting weak and he had to undergo knee surgeries that he was forced to retire.

Sohan Singh Birak married Bachni Kaur Mander at the Paldi Gurdwara on July 13, 1969. He sponsored her from India before marriage and she arrived in Canada on June 23, 1969. For an individual to sponsor a family member, the requirement was to obtain a job letter and have a bank balance of \$1000. Sohan Singh then went on to sponsor his brother Gurbaksh Singh in 1969. When his father passed away in 1972 Sohan Singh then sponsored his mother and younger brother Sewa Singh in 1974. By the time his mother and younger brother arrived in Canada, he had bought a house in Lake Cowichan on Johel Road and had settled down with his wife and three children: Harvinder Singh Birak born on May 10, 1970, Kulwinder Kaur Birak born on May 10, 1973 and Jagwinder Singh Birak, born on August 28, 1979. The very first time Sohan

Singh visited India was in 1978 to meet his relatives and family there. The Birak family then moved to Abbotsford in 1991 for the higher education of Harvinder and Kulwinder.

When Sohan Singh Birak came to Canada for the first time, he recalls it being very nice but the work was very hard as he was only 16 when he arrived. One of the major difficulties he faced was not knowing the English language. He recalls having some funny conversations at the grocery store when he asked the salesperson for *murga* and after he remember that its called “chicken” in English. Sohan Singh learned to drive from his friend Tarlochan Singh Dhami and received his license in 1965, the same year he bought his first car which was a 1958 Chevrolet Impala. The community was very tight knit in Lake Cowichan since there were only about 50 families there. Everyone knew each other and attended the Lake Cowichan Khalsa Diwan Society Gurdwara for weekly gatherings.

Today Sohan Singh Birak lives his children and grandchildren in Abbotsford and enjoys spending time with his family and friends.