

Swaran Kaur Kooner

Swaran Kaur Kooner immigrated from Dhani Pind, district Jalandhar, Punjab to Canada on July 1, 1960 with her husband, Mohinder Singh Kooner and their two and a half year old daughter, Mandy. Swaran Kaur's sister, Nasib Kaur Sall, had sponsored the Kooner family to join her and her husband, Beant Singh Sall, in Lake Cowichan, Vancouver Island. The Sall's were a prominent family at the time and Beant Singh's elder brother, Nand Singh Sall was very well-known in the community.

Upon arrival, Swaran Kaur and her family joined the Sall's and lived in Mesachie Lake near Lake Cowichan. Swaran Kaur explains that in those days they were not allowed to wear suits. Pants, dresses and skirts were to be worn when going in public or taking the ferry. She remembers how the Caucasians would stare at them because they were of a different culture and dressed different. At Mesachie Lake, they used to live in houses provided by the mill to its workers and their families. Nand Singh Sall was one of the major leaders at the mill during this time. There were bachelors who had bunk houses and there were about 15-20 homes for families. These homes were free of cost and close together so it felt like a small pind (village). At the time, it was very rare that someone visited the city. The people there would send one person to the city to run errands for everyone. For nine months, Swaran Kaur and Mandy lived with Nasib Kaur Sall while Mohinder Singh worked in Pemberton near Whistler.

Later, the Kooner family moved to Pemberton for a bit. They lived in a small house with one wooden stove. Here, they had to live off whatever the land provided because it was in the middle of nowhere with not many resources. Swaran Kaur recalls how she used to get water from the lake and a Fijian girl would sometimes help her and have her over for tea even though they could not communicate with each other. Without knowing how to speak English, the two still understood and helped each other. It was at this time that a man by the name of Lashkar Singh Sall sent a message for Mohinder Singh to move to Kamloops. So, Mohinder Singh went there to a mill about twenty miles from Kamloops and worked for two weeks. After getting paid, he came back to get his family and they travelled to Kamloops via train. Upon arrival, they found a hotel and lived in one room. Mohinder Singh would go to work for one week and then return to his family. Income started growing so they were able to purchase many necessities. However, the pay rate was very low at the time so life was very hard. After living in the hotel for two months, the family found a basement in a house owned by Punjabis. This basement was located in a residential area where the rent was about thirty dollars. At the time, Kamloops was predominantly Caucasian and Aboriginal with very few Punjabis.

Swaran Kaur remembers a funny story about Mandy as a child during Christmas in Kamloops. She says that at the time they did not have much money and Mandy really wanted a Christmas tree. When she told her daughter she could not buy it for her, Mandy ran off and found one set up somewhere. After asking someone for permission to take it, the three and half year old girl dragged the tree all the way home! Swaran Kaur remembers how everyone laughed and wondered how this little child had managed to do that. In those days, neighbourhoods were safer and it was not dangerous for children to walk around alone outside. After bringing the tree home, Mandy went and bought Christmas lights for three dollars and lit the tree. Then she would sit there and simply stare at the lights; in those days there was not much for children to do so they

would find entertainment in the simplest ways. After living in Kamloops for a year, the family moved to Vancouver.

Mohinder Singh found work at The Bay Lumber Mill near B.C. Place in Vancouver so the family found a place in North Vancouver which had a wooden stove. However, this apartment was on the third floor of a building so Swaran Kaur would have to carry blocks of wood up three floors up to fuel the stove. They used to heat water with the stove and had a metal tub to shower in. Since there were no built in showers, the water from the tub would have to be spilled in the toilet. Swaran Kaur states that when she came from India, she had only brought five suits with her thinking that she would buy more when she went back to India. However, she soon realized that life was very hard in Canada and it was obvious that making a trip to India would be in the distant future. Commuting was mostly done on buses and by walking to places. Ladies used to attend the gurdwaras wearing long frocks and chunnis (head scarves). Back then there were no Vasakhi parades, weddings would be the only special functions at the gurdwaras.

Nowadays everyone has relatives living nearby to help out but back in those days, everyone was on their own and there was much more racism in society. For example, there was a time when her daughter was a child and ran to the neighbour's house while it was suppertime. The door was open but when they saw the child standing there, they shut the door on her and called her people 'dogs'. Swaran Kaur is thankful for all that she has been blessed with and realizes that society has moved on and there is a big difference in people's attitudes now but those initial hardships cannot be forgotten.

In 1967, Swaran Kaur started her first job working in blueberry farms picking berries. Then in 1968, she changed jobs and did laundry at a hospital in Vancouver for about a year. As time went on, the Kooner family grew and Swaran Kaur had two daughters, Sheila and Daljit, and a son, Michael. Over the years, Swaran Kaur went on to learn English from her children. The first time she went back to India was after twenty years for her eldest daughter, Mandy's marriage. Presently Swaran Kaur Kooner resides in Delta, B.C. with her family and enjoys spending time with her children and grandchildren.