

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Amarjit Singh Heer Narrative

Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

Amarjit Singh Heer was born on March 13, 1952 in Kharhacharwar, Punjab, India. He was a student at the Government College of Hoshiarpur where he completed his Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts education. He came to Canada in August 1972 as a visitor and was able to immigrate based on the point system that was in place at the time. Amarjit Singh became a Canadian citizen soon after his arrival in 1975. He began working in the saw mills 4-5 months after he arrived in Canada. He was married in 1979 in India whereupon his wife came and joined him in Canada soon after.

The first sawmill that Amarjit Singh worked at was a small operation located in William's Lake. He received the sawmill work through Sohan Singh Bains, a man who had lived in his neighborhood back in India and had studied with him in college before coming to Canada. When Amarjit Singh first arrived in Canada, the PNE fair was taking place during that time and Sohan Singh Bains suggested that they visit the fair. It would be Sohan Singh Bains who would also ask Amarjit Singh to move up northern BC in order to work in the saw mills.

Amarjit Singh first worked the green chain for 5-6 months at that sawmill located in the North. During this time he had been living with four other men in a house but they soon discovered that the four of them could not live in the bunkhouse because of the existing bylaws. Because both Amarjit Singh and his friend had been the last ones to move in to the house out of the other men, they were forced to leave the house and find a basement to rent. The landlord of the house forbade them from cooking in their unit because of the "smell" of Indian food, and so they were forced to eat somewhere else while they rented the basement. Amarjit Singh only lived there for a month. He remembers eating raw eggs in milk for breakfast in the mornings before heading to work in the saw mill. After work, he would eat at a local hotel.

On weekends Amarjit Singh would go visit his friends at 100 Mile House. One day he called a friend that was living in Merritt and explained his food situation. The friend in turn suggested that he move to Merritt because Indian food was more accessible there. As such, Amarjit Singh took a bus to Kamloops and joined by his friend, they moved to Merritt. They both lived in a cookhouse in Merritt for the next 4-6 months. Amarjit Singh worked on the green chain in a Merritt sawmill that was owned by an Indian man named Tara. He earned \$4 per hour working in this unionized mills. Because he had left his mom, dad, brother and sister in India when he immigrated to Canada, he had to send much of his earnings back to support them in India. His main expenses at the time were for rent and food whereas everything else he would save and send to his family.

In the summer of 1973, Amarjit Singh went to visit his cousin in Duncan for 2-3 weeks. His cousin's father-in-law was a foreman at a Duncan mill called Nanoose Forest Products. Nanoose Forest

Products was owned by the Doman family. A plainer shift became available at the mill and Amarjit Singh began working there. He worked at this mill until 2002 where upon it closed. He then worked in a Nanaimo mill (Nanaimo Forest Products) which was also owned by the Doman family. He was hired there based on seniority and worked there for six years from 2002 until 2008. Amarjit Singh commuted from Duncan to Nanaimo with 3-4 other workers every day. He didn't make as much money at this mill as he did at Nanoose Forest Products because starting work at a new mill meant he had to build up his seniority again from the bottom. In 2008, Nanaimo Forest Products closed and the owners said they would contact him if they needed workers in the future.

In 2009, Amarjit Singh began working in a mill in Cowichan Bay. He worked there for two years from 2009 to 2011. Once again, he had to start from the bottom again and rebuild his seniority just as he had experienced at the previous mills. For the same reason, the work wasn't steady for him because workers with seniority received steady work. Amarjit Singh was hired in Cowichan Bay because a graveyard plainer shift position had become available. In order to join the mill union, a worker needs to work in a mill for 60 days. On the 60th day that shift ended and Amarjit Singh only got called in to that mill to work when other workers went on holiday or to do clean up on the weekends. Every time a worker would move mills, they would lose union protection because they were at a new operation. When workers got laid off they would have to rebuild their seniority at a new mill. After 24 months, unions made mills pay workers severance pay if they were laid off. Mill operations were smart at the time and would keep mill shifts that lasted 23 or 23.5 months to avoid paying workers severance pay.

In 2011, Amarjit Singh started working at Western Forest Products in Chemainus and still works there today. He has worked in several Indian-owned mills where Indian men have held the position of foreman. The mills in William's Lake and Merritt had only a few Indian workers while the mills in Duncan, Chemainus, and Nanaimo have had an even mix of Indian and white workers. Outside of the mills, Amarjit Singh witnessed discrimination against the Indian community. He remembers having to walk in groups to go get groceries because Caucasian people would swear and harass them. The mills were largely free from overt discrimination except for the early days in William's Lake. When Amarjit Singh started working in William's Lake, he noticed that there was tension between the Indian and Caucasian communities because the former were given shifts by mill supervisors over Caucasian workers due to their hard work ethic. Caucasian workers on the other hand, felt that Indian men were taking their work and discrimination arose from the situation. While discrimination against the South Asian community has decreased dramatically since the 1970s, Amarjit Heer's house still gets vandalized through egging by youth in his community to this day.