

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Bant Singh Brar Narrative
Interview Date: November 1st, 2014

Bant Singh Brar was born on April 2, 1940 in Dedarewala, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on 31st August, 1972 as a visitor and applied for full status immigration while he was in Canada. Before coming to Canada, he was living in Sydney, Australia where he was working as a teacher. Today, Bant Singh is a proud Canadian Citizen.

When Bant Singh arrived he looked for work and began working at the mill almost immediately. He invested in a small operation named the Mission Shake and Shingle. It was situated in Mission, BC on the bank of the mighty Fraser River. Bant Singh was a half shareholder and partner in the mill with another shareholder. However, within six months of running the mill, he met with an accident and his legs were crushed while working in the mill. The accident happened when he was pulling logs out of the river, his legs were squeezed in between the forklift and the log, breaking and crushing them both. At that time, they had to take on another partner. The new shareholder was given eleven shares in the company and now there were three partners. Due to the difficulties he faced, Bant Singh mostly looked after the work in the office and the other two partners did most of the management of work at the mill.

Bant Singh's memory of owning the mill suggests that it was tough to work in the mill and they had to do a lot of hard work as there was little wages earned in the beginning. It was quite a tough life. However, they worked really hard and faced certain hardships and later they were quite successful. Bant Singh has some interesting stories to tell about working in the mill. Sometimes when the workers went to pick the logs out of the river, someone would invariably fall into the freezing river and it was very hard to retrieve them.

As a mill owner, Bant Singh job entailed buying logs and selling shakes, doing the payroll and supervising the mill during the dayshift. Although today he does not remember the cost of buying wood, he recalls that it was much less costly than today.

Bant Singh's experience of owning the mill was very fulfilling. He mentioned that all of the workers were very hard working and it used to be like a family working together and they went through a good time at the job. It was really a rewarding experience for Bant Singh, as he remembers that everyone used to help each other at that time as they all had the same experiences and difficulties. According to Bant Singh "[i]t was different at that time; it was not an employee-employer relationship, it was like a family, we used to treat our employees like a family and they were honest and dedicated workers".

Most of the workers at Mission Shake and Shingle were of Indian origin, but there were a few European origin workers too. The most memorable thing Bant Singh shared about his experience was that despite having a free trade agreement with the Americans, their mills had been with a

tariff that was destroying their shake and shingle business. The Americans had imposed a 35% import duty on shakes and shingles, and people in the industry were thinking that surely this was the end of the shake and shingle industry. Since most of the shingles were being exported to the US, mills were badly hit. But as luck would have it, 1988 to 1989 were the best years for their business because the price of logs came down and they were making more money than they were making earlier.

Owning a mill was not as simple as it would seem according to Bant Singh because the mill had to be open for seven days a week in order to make any profit. For six days the employee worked long shifts in the mill and on the seventh day repair and maintenance work was carried out. Bant Singh felt a great deal of pride that they created hundreds of jobs and contributed to the economic wellbeing and progress of BC and Canada.

Bant Singh recounted there were many difficulties and challenges in those days as an owner of the mill. People of European origin used to say, "We will buy you out" as they felt some discomfort at the Indians continued success and willingness to work very hard. Bant Singh and his partners had to overcome these challenges and they did it very successfully. These were real problems and physical threats were made to the owners in 1989. On top of it all, an Indian man was murdered in Mission and local mill owners were very scared because of the threats they received from people of European origin. The murder occurred at Fraser Cedar Mill on Lougheed Highway, the owner of which was a Mr. Gill. The person who was murdered was a watchman at that mill. No one knew what actually happened and why that murder occurred, but Bant Singh and his partner were very cautious and luckily for them nothing happened at their own mill. The police investigated but they could never find any clues of the murderer, and the case remains unresolved to this day.

When Bant Singh owned Mission Shake and Shingle they hired approximately 100 employees. There were also five or six other mills owned by Indians in the local area. Bant Singh bought another Mill called Redwood Shake and Shingle in 1987 and he had 35 employees working in that mill. Though there were other shake and shingle mills as well in the region, they all worked independently and had nothing to do with the other mills in the vicinity. The mill owners had no contact with each other and everyone worked independently.

In 1990 due to some conflicts in the partnership and also because he was allergic to cedar dust, Bant Singh sold his share in Mission Shake and Shingle. The allergies occurred due to Bant Singh's exposure to the cedar and sawdust over a prolonged period. In 1991, he also had to sell Redwood Shake and Shingle.

Bant Singh remembers that in his early days it was very tough to settle in Canada because every immigrant had to start from scratch with very few resources. There were indeed many challenges but they persevered and worked hard to overcome them. Since owners of shingle mills needed capital to buy the raw logs, they were being financed by a broker who was making large profits lending them the money. Thus, the mill owners did not have any choice although they knew that

the broker was taking advantage of them. As a result of this unfair advantage, the brokers in Mission were often called referred to as “The Mission Mafia.” The well established and well organized group of mill owners in the region tried to crush the newcomers but Bant Singh and his partners were hard working people.

According to Bant Singh, the workers would begin work at the mill at 7am, with the mill running two shifts every day – a day shift and an afternoon shift. When the market for shingles was good the mill used to run six, or sometimes seven days a week. Bant Singh is proud of the hard working ethic of the Punjabis that worked in the mill and he felt that they were very committed people.

Bant Singh also has some good memories of social get-togethers in the mill; for example, the New Year’s party at the mill. The workers used to bring sweets, pizza and some drinks. They used to eat, drink and enjoy their time together.

At Bant Singh’s mill, there was no cook house (shared housing and cooking area) and the workers used to bring their own lunch from home. People used to eat the same Indian food that was cooked at home and bring it for lunch-which was available at the time. There were some shops that sold Indian grocery in Vancouver, although there were not many stores. There was a store on main Street, Vancouver, called the “All India Store” where people went from Mission to Vancouver for grocery shopping. They would buy lentils and beans etc. and dried goods stock for one year. All the sweets (mithai) that they wanted they also used to get sweets from there. They used to celebrate Vaisakhi and Nagar Kirtan (religious parade) in Vancouver too and although in the early years, there was no Nagar Kirtan or Vaisakhi festivals, over time the community rallied and developed a strong Vaisakhi tradition. In the early years there were fewer Punjabi families, but as the population started growing, cities such as Surrey, Vancouver and Abbotsford began to hold their own Nagar Kirtans. Indian women would get together and cook at the temples (Gurdwara) and would make sweets (mithai) themselves for weddings and other occasions.

Bant Singh I feel good about it all he has achieved, because according to him, at the end of the day “I was a winner and that’s what matters.”