

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Beant Singh Sidhu Narrative

Interview Date: November 21st, 2014

Beant Singh Sidhu was born on November 1st, 1940 in Sukanand, Punjab. He is a Canadian Citizen and his father was also a Canadian Citizen.

In 1964, Beant Singh got his first job at the Rainier Mill near Vancouver, which he attained with the help of his uncle who had been living in Canada since 1932. Rainier Mill was a very big saw mill where twenty men alone worked on the green chain. After working for two years and three months, Beant Singh quit working there in 1966 when he decided to go to India. When he returned back to Canada in 1971, he found work in a pulp mill named the McMillan Bloedel, another large mill which employed 250 people.

Beant Singh recalls that it was hard to work in the first few days at his job, and especially when he did not know what to do. Beant Singh found the work difficult and hard to get used to especially since he had never worked in his life before. Today however, Beant Singh reflects that the best job those days for men was to work in the saw mills. The wages in other jobs were from \$1.00 or \$2.00 an hour, whereas the real well-paying jobs were in the saw mills. In the saw mills the average earnings were \$2.09 an hour and by the time he retired after working many decades, it was approximately \$16.00 and today he estimates it would be between \$28 or 29.00 per hour.

According to Beant Singh, there was mixed population of workers in the mills in the 60's. There were some mills where there were 10% Indians and the other 90% were men of European origin, but in some mills there were 20% to 30% Indians. Wherever one Indian would start, the other Indians would come and join slowly through word of mouth and by referrals. All the men needed to work, but the Indian men were exceptionally strong workers. When Beant Singh started at the Rainier Mill, there were about fifteen Indian men working there out of a total of 400 men.

When Beant Singh came back from India to Canada in 1971 it was hard for him to find work. He remembers he would go from mill to mill looking for work. The mill owners at the time would only hire a man after they had received somebody's recommendation. The recommendation would have to be made to the foreman that there is a man from India and he is looking for work, and that person (usually a relative or kin) would make a strong recommendation to hire the new man. There were lots of Indian men working in all the different mills, so the owners were aware of their hard work ethic. Even when there were only five or ten men working the mills, it was very common that the Indian men would make good friendships with the foreman. It was also common in those days to give the gifts of alcohol and other things to the foremen on occasion. Once the friendships had matured, the Indian men at the mill would take a man (their relative or

kin) to the work place, introduce him to the foreman and tell him that he was very hard working and needed work. Invariably the foreman would agree to hire the person.

Beant Singh did not find it challenging to mix with men of European origin because according to him, it was hard for them to see that Indian men did not mix well. If a new man would start work, they would not be very happy about it and they would say that this new man would take one of their jobs. The men of European origin did not dislike the Indians that much and outside the mill life they did not face many problems according to Beant Singh. The workers in Vancouver had heard that fights used to happen in the mills in the Prince George area. Problems might have happened in earlier times in Vancouver as well; however, by the 1970's, overt prejudice had abated. According to Beant Singh, there might have been some problems 50-60 years ago, but during his time, there were no problems between the ethnically diverse workers in the mills.

After Beant Singh left the paper pulp mill in 1979 he came to Abbotsford where his friend had a farm. Beant Singh's friend tried to convince him that he can make an equal amount of money in farming just as he was making working in the mills. Thus, Beant Singh purchased some farming plots beginning with 10 acres and eventually purchasing 20 to 30 acres, all of which he later successfully developed.