

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Davinder Singh Dolla Narrative

Interview Date: November 10th, 2014

Davinder Singh Dolla was born on January 11th, 1954 in village Monakalam, District Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on December 7th, 1989 on the basis of marriage under the family immigration class.

When he came to Canada at the age of 35, there was much work available in the mills, farms, and in the local nurseries. Davinder Singh's first job was at a farm, and according to him it was very cold there. It was almost freezing temperature and he first saw snow in his first month in BC and Canada. He felt it was going to be very difficult to work in such cold weather because both January and February were also very cold months and work was slow on the farms.

After three months of his arrival to BC in March, 1990, Davinder Singh found a job in a mill in Mission BC, called the Inland Shake and Shingle. His uncle (*masarji* –maternal aunt's husband), S. Shangara Singh also worked at that mill as a foreman and thus he helped Davinder Singh. For a little while he worked there as a helper, but after that he began working as the Chipper Operator. The Chipper Operator was one of the main jobs at the mill. After working a few day-time shifts, Davinder Singh began working night shifts as well. He worked at that mill for approximately for three years after which the mill shut down.

Davinder Singh quickly found work at Fraser Cedar Mill (shake and shingle) in Maple Ridge, where he worked for ten years. This mill was also called the "Gill Mill," after the last name of the man that owned it. Initially, Davinder applied for the same job there as a Chipper Operator, which he received. On his days off from the mill, Davinder Singh started going with someone to work on a local farm so that he could earn money and save. After seeing Davinder's hard work, the farm owner offered him more work. Thus, in the year 2000, Davinder started working at the farm full time and continues to do so to this day. When Davinder Singh's parents and brother joined him in Canada, they too initiated the process to find employment. Since Davinder Singh maintained his connection with the farm owner he had worked at initially, he was also able to secure a job at that same farm for his brother and parents.

Before immigrating to Canada in 1989, Davinder Singh Dolla had come from an agrarian background and farming had been the mainstay of his family's previous generations. Although he had attended formal schooling for a few years when he was living in his village Monaklam, he wanted to learn a skill that would help him secure gainful employment. Therefore, after he finished school he enrolled in a program that taught him welding. After his schooling, Davinder Singh was married and immigrated to Canada on the basis of that marriage.

Davinder Singh says it wasn't hard to find work when he arrived in Canada because he was lucky that his his uncle already worked at a local mill and he had the connection. Davinder Singh had already conveyed to his uncle (when he was still in India), that he wanted to work with him when he arrived in Canada. This idea actually worked perfectly for him as his uncle assured him that he would assist him soon as he arrived. True to his word, his Uncle helped him find work in the mill shortly after arriving in Canada.

Davinder Singh quickly grasped the tasks assigned to him and sometimes he also used to help with some of the welding work whenever needed. He did welding work wherever he was needed, both during his job at the mill and at the farm, and even now, while working as a foreman he continues to assist with welding jobs at work. At the farm where he works now he takes care of the machinery and its maintenance. He says learning welding work in India was a great help to him in Canada.

Recalling his early memories of work days at the mill when he arrived in 1989, Davinder Singh remembers that it was extremely difficult and hard work. However, slowly and steadily he began learning and adjusting to his new setting. According to Davinder Singh, it was hard to find jobs for other people who had immigrated at the time, but with him it was different because the owner liked his work ethic. He worked as a Chipper Operator, a job that required careful attention for lumber waste product to pass through very large conveyers that break the waste product into tiny little pieces called chippers. These chippers are then converted into products like chipper board, sheets etc. that are made out of the waste from the wood. One of the main jobs at the mill was the work of a Chipper Operator. Davinder Singh also learned many other things at the mill including cubing and packing. Cuber men make the cubes of shingle shakes, ripping apart the lumber/wood. All in all the work was difficult but rewarding.

Working at the mill was good for Davinder Singh and all the workers were honest, good hearted people whom he enjoyed working with. During the time he worked as a Chipper Operator and at night it was considered to be better because the shifts were easier. According to Davinder, there were no problems between employees at the mill where he worked. Mostly all the people who worked at the mill were of Indian origin-there were hardly one or two people of European origin. In both the mills where Davinder Singh had worked, the majority of the workers were Punjabi Indians and both the mills were owned by Punjabis.

While work at the mill was considered to be very heavy work, and indeed "very hard work," all the employees worked with lots of energy and stamina. Davinder Singh Dolla is now a Canadian Citizen and lives in Abbotsford.