

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Dogar Singh Bains Narrative
Interview Date: February 10th, 2015

Dogar Singh Bains was born on October, 1940 in the village of Palahi, district Kapurthala, Punjab, India. He came to Canada on the 22nd of July, 1959 when he was approximately 19 years old. Before he left for Canada he had mostly done farming along with his father in India, and he did not have much formal education. He went to school only up to grade three or four and does not remember much about his schooling years. He came to Canada because his grand-father's brother had come to Canada in 1906; and his father's brother (uncle) had come in 1932. Dogar Singh's uncle then sponsored him to migrate to Canada in 1959.

Dogar Singh's uncle lived in Victoria on Mark Street alongside his grandfather, whose name was Rattan Singh Bains. Dogar Singh was able to immigrate to Canada by way of the quota system when there used to be an immigration quota for relatives. He remembers at that time approximately 150 men came as a result of that quota. Later, with new laws and changes to immigration, many immigrants started coming to Canada and the number of people arriving in BC started increasing. Previous to the 1970's there were very few people in BC of Indian origin and very few had been coming since the 1920's when immigration laws restricted their arrival. Dogar Singh sponsored the rest of his family to come join him in Canada after 7 years of his own arrival when he was financially stable. Dogar Singh was already married when he migrated to Canada, as he was married at 17 years old. His wife and two children migrated to Canada together and he and his wife had a third child in Canada.

Dogar Singh worked in the lumber industry all his life as did the Uncle who sponsored him. Dogar Singh looked for work in the mills soon after arriving as it seemed readily accessible other type of work was limited. After not finding any work immediately, Dogar Singh went to Vancouver and worked on a farm for some time. When he finally found work in the mills he started working part time as he was also working part time on the farms. After around four years of unstable employment, he finally found steady work in a mill. He preferred working at a mill because the wages were better and it was a union job. Though working in the mill was very heavy work, he was young and he knew what he needed to do as a young father and husband.

Dogar Singh worked at the Plumper Bay Sawmill located in Victoria for three years and then the Hillcrest Masachi Mill located in Duncan for one year. Later, he worked in Sooke sawmill, after which the town was later named. He worked at the Sooke mill for 26 years, which was the longest period of time he worked at one place. Sooke is around 22 kilometers from Victoria and some of the men used to carpool together when they had the same shift. His first job at the mill was on the green chain to pull the lumber. Dogar

Singh would also work on the planer feeder, as a trim sawyer and as a spare man helping the foreman in the end.

Dogar Singh was never a supervisor or a grader because he did not take the necessary training, though his seniority kept on accruing. The supervisors were mostly people of European origin. According to Dogar Singh there was no conflict with them as all the men worked together in harmony. The Plumper Mill was owned by people of Indian origin and the supervisors were also Indians, but there was always supervisors of European origin.

Dogar Singh started working at a wage of \$2.00 per hour as there was a large number of new employees in 1959. But after working for two to three years, the salary would increase. When he was forced to leave the Sooke mill which was shutting down due to its bankruptcy, some of the employees began a co-op, running it on their own, but eventually this shut down completely. Due to the closure, Dogar Singh took the retirement package to retire at 55 years because he was not entitled for old age pension or any other pension. It was his choice to retire and to take the limited pension package. After retirement, he bought his own strawberry farm in 1992, near the ferry in Victoria where he is living presently with his family.

In the mills there was a mixed demographics of people – there were people of Indian origin, European origin, Japanese origin, Chinese origin and members of First Nations Aboriginal people. Dogar Singh suggests that everyone was courteous with one another, and that there were no ethnic or racial differences expressed in the day- to- day work at the mill. Dogar Singh mostly lived in the house with his uncle when he worked in Victoria, but he lived in a bunk house for approximately one year while he worked in Mesachie Lake. He would stay there for five working days and come back to his uncle's house on the weekends. Dogar Singh said that he had a very good experience living in the bunk house at the Hillcrest lumber mill. It was owned by a Chinese company that also allowed for the construction of a Gurdwara on the property. The Indians assisted in the payment of the Gurdwara although the company would maintain the Gurdwara and paid for the Granthi (Priest). The Granthi was in charge of the general upkeep and seva (selfless service) of the Gurdwara. The lumber mill was quite a powerful employer in the area.

Dogar Singh says that the Indians lived in a bunk house that was separate from the Chinese and Europeans, although they were close to each other. Both bunk houses had their own ethnic cooks as there were lots of men living in those bunk houses. There was a total of 300 workers employed in that mill, although some men lived in their homes too with their families. One bunk house could hold as many as forty Indian workers at a time. Their cook was Punjabi and he would cook proper Punjabi food. There was a robust menu and directions given by the men for what was to be cooked in the cookhouse. At breakfast, they would eat Sewiyan or kheer (vermicelli noodles in milk or rice pudding) with lots of ghee (butter) which gave them stamina. Dogar Singh remembers eating Kheer at breakfast, pulling lumber all day and wiping the sweat off his forehead and wringing the same sweat off from their clothes.

Dogar Singh enjoyed good health for most of his life although he later developed asthma due to the exposure to the cedar logs. Cedar has a sweet smell like honeydew, so it does not seem to be harmful at first. He realized after he stopped working that his lungs had cleared on their own although he had been taking some medicine at the time for relief. Asthma was a common condition among men who worked at the mills.

Dogar Singh adds that he always had a good benefits package while working in the mill although he never mis-used it to take sick time off for small problems. According to Dogar Singh, Indian men would not take any undue advantage of the benefits they received. The elderly men used to advise that if someone were to be ill, to add some ghee to the milk, drink it and they would feel better and go to work. He remembers that even he used to take such a remedy. Dogar Singh took his citizenship after ten years of living in Canada.

Dogar Singh has five children- two sons and three daughters, but none of them have worked in the mills. All his children are educated and work in different professional fields. The circumstances were different when Dogar Singh first immigrated to Canada, and he realizes how much things have changed since then. Two of his children were born in India and three were born in Canada. There was limited cultural shock for the family when they came to Canada because Dogar Singh had arranged everything for them. He had bought his own house, a twenty year old home, in 1965 for \$7500.

According to Dogar Singh, the economy was better those days than now. They used to spend more freely than now. Everyone lived quite happily and everyone worked together happily. Dogar Singh worked 8 hours in a day. He used to do roofing work in the evenings and sometimes farming on the weekends, and that brought in extra earnings.

Dogar Singh recalls how cultural celebrations were simple and on a small scale, weddings were simple and there were no grand parties. People would go to the Gurdwara, visit the people they were close with and that was it. Vaisakhi was celebrated in Victoria, the large Jor Mela was celebrated in Vancouver, India's Independence Day at Hillcrest, and Gurpurab in Abbotsford. There were four main Gurdwaras at that time: Khalsa Diwan Society of Victoria, Khalsa Diwan Society of Vancouver, Sukh Sagar and Khalsa Diwan Society, Abbotsford. Indians from all over BC would go to these different sites to congregate for each of the four different celebrations. Vaisakhi in Victoria and everything was done voluntarily. Even the musicians would not accept any money in the Gurdwara on those days. Everyone would work together and everyone was happy, since it was a small, close-knit community.

Dogar Singh remembers that he used to send money back to his parents in India as a good son would. His parents did not want to come to Canada because they were too elderly and were comfortable in their position at home in India.