

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Dyal Singh Gill Narrative
Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

Dyal Singh Gill was born in 1942, in Village Sunam, District Jalandhar, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada as an unmarried man in 1965 when he was 23 years old. He was sponsored to come to Canada by his wife who was already living in Duncan, BC, Canada. Dyal Singh was studying for his BA degree at a college in Phagwara, however, he left it incomplete when he received his Canadian visa.

Shortly after coming to Canada, Dyal Singh's first job was working in the lumber industry. Someone he knew referred him to Honeymoon Bay where he was told there would be work available. He was quickly hired, and earned a wage of \$2.40 an hour. Dyal Singh would travel from Duncan by car every day to work – which was about 29 miles away from home. Dyal Singh used to share a ride with other men working there, each of them taking turns to drive to work. The mill was named the Western Forest Mill, which was unionized. Mostly people of European origin worked in the lumber mill. At first, Dyal Singh worked on the green chain where they pull the wood off the lines, and slowly he moved to shipping and production. He worked there for sixteen years.

Dyal Singh felt that the work was very hard in the mill to begin with, especially when someone comes from a country where one has never done such laborious work. He did not feel cultural shock as much because his family was with him for support. According to Dyal Singh, there are many more ethnic targeted programs on Radio, Television and films in the theatres too today as compared to when he first arrived. Earlier, Dyal Singh remembers that there used to be one Indian film shown in two months and they used to go to Lake Cowichan to watch it. In Duncan, there were barely 10-15 families of Indian origin, but Lake Cowichan had a larger Indian population as it was mainly a mill town. However small, Dyal Singh felt that Duncan and the region had a sense of community where people used to get together with other community members and share their lives.

Dyal Singh had good experiences while working at the mill because of his personal good health and comprehensive medical benefits. There was a mix of people working there, both people of Indian and European origin, and there was no problem working with other cultures. It was only in the beginning, for the first 2-3 months that Dyal Singh had some difficulty in understanding the Canadian accent, however later on, he became accustomed to it.

Dyal Singh worked at Western Forest Industries for 16 years whereupon the mill closed down because they did not have enough work and logs. There was another mill near Nanaimo at Duke Point - affectionately called the Doman's mill where many Indian people worked. Mr. Doman was a famous businessman in the region who had bought and

operated 5 to 7 mills through a public company. The mill was known as Doman Forest Industries, and Dyal Singh found work as a lumber grader as he had a grader ticket from Honeymoon Bay. He worked at the Doman's mill until 2003 and then retired. Dyal Singh worked a total of 21 years in that mill and a total of 38 years in both mills. He says he did not face any challenges while working in the mills, his only suggestion to other workers was to keep up with the flow, to gauge when there is more work or less work. There was no seniority system there, as they had only three types of jobs and no one could move ahead into other jobs. Working in the mills was considered to be a good job because even if people did not have outstanding qualifications it was still considered to be a respectable job. Workers received decent wages while working in the lumber industry.

Dyal Singh and his family ate regular Indian food –Roti and dahl most days, mostly simple fare and almost always Indian food as getting used to Canadian food was difficult. The family used to do their grocery shopping in Duncan and for a few things they had to go to Vancouver. Dyal Singh does not remember celebrating the Indian festivals much as it is done these days, but Christmas was celebrated in the home and around the community. He remembers going to the Victoria Gurdwara to celebrate Vaisakhi.

While Dyal Singh and his family did not face any discrimination he remembers that the ladies wore dresses outside in the community and some of them wore the Indian suits. His children went to University as this was a desire of the family to educate their children, as a result of which they did not work in the mills. His wife worked in the hospital kitchen, contributing to the family's prosperity.

Dyal Singh became a Canadian Citizen in 1970, five years after he came to Canada. The citizenship ceremony was in front of the Commissioner and it required taking an oath of allegiance to Canada in front of him.

Dyal Singh talked about the economy at the time of his migration - his first house was purchased for \$8000.00, which the family sold and bought a second one, which was then purchased for \$12,000. After 2-3 years they bought another one for \$24,000. Then they built the house in which they are living now. Now-a-days a three story house costs around \$500,000 to \$700,000 dollars, depending on the area.

Dyal Singh did not travel much as he felt that it is a current trend that people have started going for holidays, back in his working days, people did not travel much. He travelled to Edmonton, Calgary and California. In 1981, he went to Disneyland and took his children there for the first time. To take a break, he would just take a day off here and there and take rest as he worked five days a week.