

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Gurbakhsh Singh Narang Narrative
Interview Date: November 25, 2014

Gurbakhsh Singh Narang was born on 11th August, 1931 in Sydney, BC. Although he was born a citizen of Canada, he was brought up in India until the age of 18 years. His father Bhagat Singh Narang immigrated to Canada as a student to UBC in 1919. He had come to BC as a student, but he used to work part-time to pay for the University fees even when he was not legally allowed to work in Canada while being on a student visa. Bhagat Singh was always scared that he might be caught working in Canada to support himself, so he left the country and went to United States and through Mexico he returned to India in 1929. He came back to BC as a married man and quickly down settled in Victoria. However, Bhagat Singh's stay was short-lived as he decided to go back to India and took his family with him in 1935 which included his wife, his one son (Gurbakhsh Singh) who was only four years old and a younger daughter.

Bhagat Singh went back to India because of the great recession taking place in Canada which was also called the "Dirty Thirties." Bhagat Singh used to tell his son that one could not imagine how much poverty existed at that time in Canada. It was even hard to earn money for simple bread and butter, so much so that some people would go to sleep hungry. Gurbakhsh remembers his father telling him that he worked at a mill as a handy man as well as running the planer machines. Slowly he worked his way up and became a foreman. Sometimes Bhagat Singh used to call his friends over to his house so that all of them could eat "*roti*" (bread) and spend some happy times together. While his father worked in the mills he also sold wood in his truck as firewood in the community. He said it was difficult to earn enough for a full meal of "Roti" at that time. His father told Gurbakhsh Singh that they bought a cow for \$5.00 when they were living in Victoria and they used to sell milk to the workers to make some money for living.

Gurbakhsh Singh lived in India until he was 18 years old, completing grade 10 while living with his parents in his ancestral village. When he became a strong young man, he started to ask his father to send him to Canada, knowing that he was going to have to work there. But he knew that his paternal uncle was also living in Canada and was working in the mill and would help him find work. Bhagat Singh was not too happy to send his young son to Canada when thinking about the amount of hard work his son would have to endure. But Gurbakhsh Singh was compelling him and his mother was agreeing with him because in India their living situation was also not very good. His mother gathered money from every source that she could and they took a loan for the ticket.

In 1949, when Gurbakhsh Singh came back to Canada, the recession was almost over. He had come alone at that time leaving his parents back in India while boarding a ship named Sardana from Calcutta to Hong Kong. He stayed in Hong Kong for 13 days, and boarded another ship line, called the President Line, which was going to San Francisco. There were approximately 40-50 Indians on the ship which had seen service in the war as a military ship. He remembers he paid

\$275.00 for the ticket. There were other nationalities of people also on the ship; however, no one ever mingled with each other. The Indians got to know each other by talking to each other, sharing stories about their village and playing cards on the deck, because it was a long journey.

Gurbakhsh arrived in San Francisco in late November 1949 and after an overnight stay to Vancouver by train. His paternal uncle who was living in Great Central Lake at the time picked him up from the CNR Vancouver Railway Station and took him to his home. Gurbakhsh Singh still remembers the date: 26th November, 1949 when he received the immigration stamp at White Rock to officially enter Canada. He received the stamp because he had crossed the border by train from America to Canada as a Canadian Citizen. He was just a child when his father had taken him back to India for the first time in 1934 but when he came back in 1949, he had grown up and was now a teenager. He did not pursue higher education, instead he acquired his first job at Great Central Lake through the reference of his uncle on December 15, 1949, at the BSNW mill where he worked until 1950. In 1951, that mill was shut down and merged with H & R McMillan, and soon after that mill got shifted to Port Alberni. The BSNW mill closed because the charges and costs of hauling lumber by train or truck was becoming too exorbitant.

After earning some money, Gurbakhsh Singh sent enough money to his father for his ticket to come back to Canada. Bhagat Singh returned to BC in 1952 by himself, leaving Gurbakhsh Singh's mother, sister and a brother back home in India. Gurbakhsh Singh's brother joined him and his father, later in 1953. His mother did not want to return to Canada so his father went back to be with her and he passed away in 1972 in India. After his father's death Gurbakhsh Singh went back to India in 1972 and brought his mother and sister to Port Alberni, BC because the rest of the family had already migrated, and he did not want to leave them alone in India.

Gurbakhsh Singh worked in Port Alberni from 1951 until 1954, when he left to get married in India, at 23 years of age. Gurbakhsh Singh was married on March 20th, 1954, living there for two years and coming back to BC in November 1956 without his wife for whom he had to apply to immigrate. He got back to work right away as he knew where to go and find work, and the company where he had worked before respected him and hired him immediately. At that time that sawmill was known as H & R McMillan. Gurbakhsh Singh travelled back to see his wife and his first daughter, Parmjit who was born in 1957. He stayed with his family until 1962 before returning to find that there was a huge shortage of work in the region. He headed out to Williams Lake where there was work in the mills and he worked for about 15 weeks but left soon after because he did not like the area and the working and living conditions there. He left to come back to his home town of Port Alberni.

The reason Gurbakhsh Singh did not like the work and living culture at Williams Lake was because he said the Punjabis living in that region did not conduct themselves with brotherly behavior towards each other. All the Indian men had to live in crowded homes that were provided by the mill owners, sometimes 10 to a room with inadequate bathing and washroom facilities and they shared the food expenses.

Gurbakhsh Singh said that there were a few other reasons to leave Williams Lake - the work culture was not ethical, and since there was no union in that mill, everyone did as they pleased. He shared that it was a trend in that mill to bribe the supervisors (who were of European origin) with a bottle of alcohol and get assigned an easy job and ask for favors to by-pass others to get promotions. The Punjabi men were doing this very often, as a result of which those (like Gurbakhsh Singh) who did not bribe were assigned the difficult job positions.

From Williams Lake, Gurbakhsh Singh went to New Westminster to meet a friend where he stayed for about a month, finding work at Wonnoc Lumber sawmill in Mission, owned by a person of European origin. He had just started working there for barely one month when he got a call from India from his wife, asking him to return as she and the children were still living there. He went back to India in 1962, helped his family out and returned to Port Alberni in 1963. Gurbakhsh Singh's family joined him in Canada just before Christmas, on 12th December, 1965. By this time, he had three children, two daughters and one son. His 4th child, a daughter, was born later in Canada. When his family arrived, he was fortunate that he was already working in Plywood division in Port Alberni and had a stable job. In 1963 he had started working at the Longshore Mill in Port Alberni part-time, where ships load and unload the lumber. But he told his friend, who was of European origin, that he really wanted to work at a Plywood unit. He was called for an interview along with his friend and both went along together for an interview. They met with the supervisor, Ray Morse, who asked him to fill out an application for the job again as he had been doing it for last few weeks, but this time, when he gave his application in the morning he was called for an interview in same afternoon at 4pm, making him very happy. This was a plywood unit, where he earlier he had worked at the Longshore Mill as a Spare Board as a part-time worker. The Spare Board loads the lumber and plywood onto the ships. When he got hired in the plywood plant on 5th July, 1965, he worked there for 25 years. His job title was that of a Dry Feeder.

Gurbakhsh Singh worked in the Plywood Division of Weyerhaeuser where they used to make veneers from the logs. This company owners were of European origin, although a lot of the workers were Indians, where he worked till 1990 for 25 years. He preserved a photo of his 25 years of service award. The mill was shut down in 1990 because the company was losing money. Gurbakhsh Singh took early retirement with full pension and benefits in 1990 when the mill shut down.

Gurbakhsh Singh recalls when he came back to Canada in 1949 and after he moved to Port Alberni, he worked at another mill, called the Ahsis Saw Mill. That mill ran two shifts and he worked in one of the shifts. Shortly after, he and few of his friends came to know that there was a mill in Campbell River, which also had two shifts, and all these friends went to explore work in that mill, wanting to work and make money, sometimes on two shifts as well, which is what made going there attractive. They went to Campbell River from Port Alberni by car – Gurbakhsh, his brother and another friend. Gurbakhsh Singh laughingly recalls how his friend and brother had rolled their sleeves up to show off his muscles but when he went to talk to the supervisors face-to-face to ask if they had any work for them, only Gurbakhsh Singh got the work and not the other two boys. All these temporary jobs were in the time frame of 1962 to 1963 when his wife

and children were still in India. He found accommodations in a hotel in Campbell River, but he had to leave that job after six weeks, because his shift was terminated. Gurbakhsh Singh worked on the Green Chain in Campbell River, pulling the lumber from the chains and piling it into the loads – it was back breaking and difficult work. He was a Green Chain Puller in TASI Saw Mill also and he worked as a log trimmer as well.

Gurbakhsh then came back to Port Alberni because he had a home there. At that time the TASI mill had resumed running the shift which was closed in the planer mill. The superintendent Mr. Howard Smith was a really nice person who helped Gurbakhsh Singh quite a lot. When that planer mill started running their second shift, all the Punjabi men who were unemployed at that time went to seek work there, and Mr. Smith hired Gurbakhsh Singh and sent him to the planer unit to work. Mr. Smith gave him work because he knew his background and how hard working he was. That's how it worked those days, the mills needed hard working men. Gurbakhsh Singh worked in the Plywood Division until 1965.

Gurbakhsh Singh always worked in sawmills almost from the beginning in both Campbell River and Tazis. Since the very beginning in 1949 when he started his first job as a green chain puller in BSNW and even when it merged in to H & R, he worked on the green chain. He had also worked as a jump roller, a person who separates the good and the bad lumber – a job that required one to grade the lumber. At Longshore Mill in Port Alberni he worked as a spare board man and in Alberni Plywood Plant Weyerhaeuser, he was a dry feeder.

Gurbakhsh Singh still has fond old memories of his career in sawmills, calling them “Worker's memories” (*Mazdoor* memories). He remembers that he lived in a cookhouse and in a bunk house, with many other men while working at various mills. He remembers one cook's name - Bhai Gurbachan Singh, an elderly man who would get up in the morning and cook for the men who used to go to their work shifts. Gurbakhsh Singh used to go and see what kind of work people did in the mills after finishing his meals when he didn't have work and lived in the cook house. He used to watch how people pulled lumber, and somebody would tell them how to differentiate between different types of woods, for example Cedar, Hemlock and Fir, something they knew nothing of as Punjabi men. He used to observe the work critically and learn from what he had observed, and he kept his eyes and ears open if there was any better work opportunity.

Gurbakhsh Singh remembers a story of a man named Bhag Singh from Doaba village, who had a daughter living in America whom he needed to go and visit at Christmas time. The cook Gurbachan Singh took Gurbakhsh Singh to the personnel manager and advocated for him by saying that he needed to cook for at least for 30 people to make the right kind of income. As one person was leaving, perhaps he could hire Gurbakhsh Narang to keep the numbers steady in his cook house. The personnel manager hired Gurbakhsh Singh in place of Mr. Bhag Singh and put him on the green chain. When Bhag Singh came back after a month, Gurbakhsh Singh was laid off, but he was very polite and said thank you to Gurbakhsh before he took over his position. However, an hour later the manager found out that another man was sick and called Gurbakhsh Singh back for the night shift and put him on the green chain again. Gurbakhsh Singh worked very hard continuously from then onwards. There were approximately 30 Indian men who worked at

that mill and all of them were hard working men, living with each other as part of a bachelor society in the cook house and bunk house. Women and children were not allowed to come to Canada in the early 1900's and even those that were in Canada lived elsewhere with other families as the sawmills were hardly a place for them

The bunk houses at the mill were made up of many small rooms, but no separate kitchens - all the men had to share their meals by paying a cook to cook for them. Rent was deducted from the pay check, but the cost was only \$3.50 per month. People of European origin had two separate bunk houses and similarly there two separate houses were for those of Chinese heritage. All these men were working in the same saw mill, and everyone supported each other and were mostly kind to each other. Gurbakhsh Singh did not see any fighting or discriminating practices with each other in the mills wherever he worked. Gurbakhsh Singh said overall the working conditions were great except in Williams Lake. Of course there were incidences, but they were far and in between. On one occasion, a Punjabi man working at the mill was jealous of new men joining the ranks and very arrogantly said, "You can't work here" and he showed Gurbakhsh Singh a big knife. After seeing the knife, Gurbakhsh Singh untied his shoe laces of the safety shoes he was wearing and he took off his shoe and pointed it at the man and told him that if he uses his knife, he would have to hit him back with the steel toes of his shoes. The man backed off and the men went on with their work, mending fences along the way.

Gurbakhsh Singh mostly worked in unionized mills including: Great Central Lake, Tazis, Wonnock, and Port Alberni. There were many advantages of working on the unionized mills.

Gurbakhsh shared his own story how he accidentally got caught between two logs at a mill in Williams Lake. A "kent" (what it was called in the mill) is a 12X12 or 16X16, really big and heavy wood which has to be cleared of all extra pieces of wood on it. A small piece of wood was sticking out of the kent as it came down the line. The wood piece was about 6 inches long and when Gurbakhsh Singh was about to throw the kent off the line, the small piece got caught in his legs. It was very a frightening moment for Gurbakhsh Singh as he felt the weight of the kent pull him forward between the other logs and he barely stopped himself from falling between them. For a moment he put his tool aside, took his hard hat off his head and stood there, feeling his heart thumping and his brain racing. T

The foreman, seeing how frightened Gurbakhsh Singh was, put him to work on Tail-ager. Tail-ager work required the men to work with the saws, where one man is working on it to toss away the bad wood and keep the good wood. It was comparatively easy work and Gurbakhsh Singh liked it. But what happened with him after two days was that two brothers were assigned to his job because they had given the foreman a bottle of alcohol. Gurbakhsh Singh was shifted to a more difficult job again because he did not give any bribes. That incident frustrated Gurbakhsh Singh so much that he said that he was never going to work there again. Williams Lake was also the place where there was much unrest at night. The Indian boys would come in truck load and initiate the fights with one another where they used to stay, not much to do but time on their hands drove them to fighting with each other.

However, Gurbakhsh Singh has some good memories of working in the saw mills as well. He recounted how three generations of families sometimes worked in the same mill, from grandfather to grand-son. The Punjabi people generally worked in the saw mills those days as work was easy to find, mill owners liked their work ethic and it did not require a lot of formal skills and training. It was after the 1970's when more immigrants started coming to Canada and there were greater improvements in the work culture due to policies of Multiculturalism that Punjabi people started working in the mines and at other jobs. There were improvements in working conditions at different jobs, health conditions were improving also and living in general was getting easier and people prospered and families started to take part in community living. Purchasing properties was not very expensive in those days and Gurbakhsh Singh bought his first house in Port Alberni for \$3500. The house was made up of 2 bedrooms, a kitchen and full basement.

Gurbakhsh Singh shared his story how he lost his hearing while working in the saw mill. He said he was working on the lay-up line where two men were on each side with eight men in total working on the line. On one lay-up line there was a supervisor working and his helper, and when that lay-up of wood came towards him on the line, he had to press the button and his saw would cut 8-1/4 and 4-1/4 ft. pieces. When these pieces were cut, these heavy sheets of wood would start to pile up in groups of 25-30 sheets. Gurbakhsh Singh was kept busy, running around here and there to press the button first, watch the saw, watch the wood pile, and then run the forklift to pick up the sheets. The noise of the saw and the sheets of wood falling down affected his ears and made him lose his hearing.

Gurbakhsh Singh's perception about life in Canada and his immigration journey from India was very clearly focused on making money, especially when back home in India his family was facing economic stress. His goal was to make some money and send it back home to India as soon as possible to help their situation. When he was hired for the first time in Great Central Lake, he was ignorant about the kind of work that was required to run sawmills, but after he learned the work, he was lucky that strong young men were needed in the mills and finding work was not so difficult. Gurbakhsh Singh worked 16 hours shifts – both the day and night shifts and he worked hard at his job. He remembers that in order to make the journey to Canada he had taken some loans, which he had to pay off, first and foremost. He still had the receipts in his possession from 1950 showing the amounts of money he sent back home to India to his mother and father.

Overall, Gurbakhsh Singh recalls with satisfaction that he has had a good life in Canada.