

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Gurdev Singh Sidhu Narrative
Interview Date: January 22, 2015

Gurdev Singh Sidhu was born on November 15, 1938 in the village of Pakharwadh-Kishangarh, Punjab, India. In India, Gurdev had received his education up to grade seven; however, due to his father being older, he took on the responsibilities of managing their farms beginning when he was only 15 or 16 years old. He arrived in Canada at the age of 32 in the year 1969 on a visitor's visa basis as he was sponsored by his sister and her brother who were already living in Abbotsford, BC. Gurdev had left behind his wife, three daughters and one son when he left for Canada.

When Gurdev Singh first arrived in Canada, he was shocked to see how much Canada reminded him of his own home in India because Canada was just as dirty and dusty as India. In addition, Gurdev felt taken aback amidst all the trees and forestry he saw in BC, and he regretted having left India initially. Although Gurdev felt lonely by the small population of Punjabis in Abbotsford when he arrived, he was happy to see that there existed a Gurdwara in Abbotsford where Punjabis congregated.

Upon arrival, Gurdev Singh first moved to DeFehr Street around the Abbotsford/Aldergrove area to join his sister and his brother in law who owned a ten acre potato and raspberry farm. Gurdev Singh recalls that there were four or five other farms in Abbotsford owned by Punjabi families at the time, including owners: Jagir Singh Bath, Mukhtiar Nijjar, Sarwan Alamwala, another Alamwala family and the fifth one being the Gill farm. Despite this, it was Gurdev's belief that during this time, farming was not as lucrative a business as mill work was. For example, while he worked on his brother in law's farm, he was earning \$1 or \$2 dollars a day whereas in the first mill he would work at, Gurdev Singh was receiving \$7.00 per hour and on average he made about \$250.00 per week.

Within three months of arriving as a visitor, Gurdev Singh received his work permit and after four or five months of residing in Canada, Gurdev received his full or 'free' immigration status. In 1970 Gurdev Singh began by working at a mill called Northwood Company in Prince George. He knew the owners and he thought they were nice people because they had worked at Gurdev Singh's brother-in-law's farm. He even recalls how the owners were so kind to him that they would bring him a cup of coffee and a large piece of moose meat during his coffee break. Gurdev Singh began by working on the green chain as a puller where he would be pulling a range of lumber sizes including: 2x4, 2x8, 4x10, etc. He had a pleasant time working at this mill especially because his foreman and immediate supervisor, who were both of European origin, treated him very well and were very nice to him. In addition, Gurdev Singh recalls with humour how everyone called him 'skinny' for fun because he was so lean and thin but he was also able to put good output with his tasks.

While working at the Northwood Company, Gurdev Singh lived with six other men in a three story home where all the men chipped in \$100.00 each for the rent and \$30.00 a month in total for a month's worth of their groceries. Each of the men also took turns with all of the household duties including the cooking, etc. - tasks that they had never done in India. He says, "All 6 of us used to work in the mill and then in the house we used to work together, one person used to make dahl, sabzi and one person would make roti and someone will do other things like that, we all used to work together in the house. There were 2 shifts. Some had one shift and the other had the other shift, but we used to cook Roti together. One person used to make Rotis. And once there was one person who used to make good rotis - soft, soft phulkas which we all liked, I used to make good meat and vegetable dishes, and both of us ended up doing more work in the kitchen, Jinder and me. So one day I told him jokingly that you make the rotis thick and leave them half cooked and don't make good rotis, because the other guys are liking your rots a lot and they are eating and eating! And we used to cook sag with broccoli and goat meat added to that and we used to cook a big pot of meat. And with that we used to make corn rotis and we all used to eat together".

Also shared amongst all the men was one car, which they would use to take them to and from work. Gurdev Singh still recalls the other men he lived with: Daljit, Kuljit, Gurbaksh, Jinder and Baba Dharm Singh. During times of leisure, Gurdev and his friends would host a range of musical artists to perform, or they would visit areas the province such as: Vancouver, Victoria, Abbotsford, etc. Gurdev Singh worked at the mill for five years continuously.

After a year of working in Prince George, Gurdev Singh returned to India and faced the decision of whether he would return to Canada or stay in India, as he had a wife and three daughters living in his ancestral village. Because of this difficult decision, Gurdev Singh would end up going back and forth between Canada and India four or five times over a course of five years before he decided that on the fifth time he would apply for the rest of his family to join him.

By the time Gurdev Singh's family arrived in BC, he had accumulated \$40,000 in savings and so he was able to purchase a home on Pandora Avenue in Abbotsford where today, the new hospital is located. A son was born to Gurdev Singh and wife after moving to BC, and his family was now made of up three daughters and a son. After five years of working in Prince George, Gurdev Singh began working at a mill in Langley, although it was for a short period. He then worked for another six months at a mill in Pitt Meadows where the work was very heavy, but that mill shut down. Eventually, due to a chronic asthma problem that Gurdev Singh began to suffer from as a result of the cedar dust, he needed to look for other work.

So, in 1975 Gurdev Singh went to work on the Gill's farm which was a large farm that employed approximately 300 to 400 people. Gurdev Singh began making just as good a wage (approximately \$1500 to \$1600 per month) comparable to what he was making working in the mill. Gurdev Singh enjoyed his time on the farm, including his supervisory role which he took seriously and with efficiency. Gurdev Singh worked on the farm for the next fourteen to fifteen

years, retiring at the age of 64. Following his official retirement, Gurdev Singh continued to work in property development, buying, selling, properties etc.

To this day, Gurdev Singh has refused to take Canadian Citizenship and opted for his Permanent Residency because of the property he still manages and owns in India. Overall, he has fond memories of his days working in the mills; for example, he notes that he spoke respectfully to people of all ethnicities (i.e. Japanese, Chinese, Europeans, etc.), and they would speak in kind to him.