

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Gurdial Singh Talhan Narrative

Interview Date: November 12th, 2014

Gurdial Singh Talhan was born on December 8th, 1954 in the village of Talhan, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on March 1977 under family class and now he has become a Canadian citizen. Before coming to Canada, he was a student, and after school hours he used to work in the farm.

Soon after Gurdial Singh arrived in Canada in 1977, he started working at a lumber mill as it was easy to find work in small towns. He says, "It was lumber mills that offered job and there were no other real choices. Whichever man came to BC at that time, went to find work at the Mill". His father also worked at a mill and when a new shift started at that mill, after two weeks of arriving in Canada, Gurdial Singh also found work at the same mill. He didn't need to look for any other work, because soon after 10 days in Canada, he was on the job and he knew he had to work and the word was available.

Gurdial Singh felt everything was very strange when he was new in Canada because it was totally different from life in India. He had never really worked in these kinds of jobs and the work in Canada was very different. But he didn't feel any cultural shock after coming from India, because he had family here and they buffered him from the effects of living in a very different country.

At the mill he first started as a sorter, but after 6 months he worked as a planer. There were different types of jobs in the mill, for example trimmer, stamper, grader, and the planer of lumber etc. but he worked to pile the lumber on the green chains, as a planer.

Gurdial Singh recalls earlier memories when he first started working in the mill. At first he thought all the people who worked in the mills were of Indian origin, especially when more than 80% of the workers were Indian men, even though the mill was owned by a man of European origin. This was especially true in small towns in the North, where with only a few exceptions – like up to 5% of the workers were Japanese and Chinese, mostly all the hard working jobs, for example, working on the chains, piling lumber were done by the Indians. A very few men of European origin did other jobs, such as working on the forklift, office work or foreman. Gurdial Singh feels that even now it is still the same in many mills, that mostly hard working Indian people are working and only 5% of the workers are from other populations. There is some change in the shake and shingle industry.

Gurdial Singh remembered that it was hard to work outdoors in the open both during cold and hot weather and in the wind; especially where there were no walls to the structures that he worked within. In Quesnel, there was extreme weather up to -50 degree with a wind chill making

it over - 60 degrees. But, he added "there was no problem of unemployment those days, firstly people didn't leave work because it was union work. Secondly, people only left work if they were moving somewhere else or if they found easier work in other mills. Generally men were healthy and full of stamina those days". In very rare situations people left their job according to Gurdial Singh as it was advantageous to work in mills because they were unionized. "In those days, it was a big deal to get work in a unionized mill" says Gurdial Singh Talhan.

In the 70's, especially in Quesnel many of the residents worked in the mills, even the youth after school hours and after graduating. In the 70's and 80's, Gurdial Singh said, "People didn't want to go away from home, families lived together and stayed near the home and worked there only". He added, "At that time, people were just starting to get established". Gurdial Singh mentioned the trend in 70's and 80's was that people were still coming from India, lots of families were settling in as new immigrants with the liberalization of immigration policies in Canada.

Gurdial Singh recounts that after coming to Canada, Indian young men would go to school for 3-4 years and after graduation, they would also started working in the mills. It was a big deal to work in unionized mills those days as non-traditional jobs had not opened up in a big way to new immigrants. All the men were happy to find gainful employment in their pursuit of survival in a new country. In small towns, the expenses weren't that great and the pay was small too but people were satisfied with their lot. As compared to today, there was no rush or burden of payments here and payment there and people lived fairly sparse and simple lives. What people used to earn those days as their total pay, is equivalent to the bills payment of only for 3-4 things of these days, for example, for TV, Cable, phone, internet bills etc. He said, "Honestly, to tell you, the house payment back then was \$212.00 dollars per month, and now the internet and everything is over \$200.00".

Gurdial Singh suggests that the mindset of Indian people has changed over the years, or he wonders if people's priorities have changed from then to now. He thinks that now everything is about how much luxury can one afford, back then it was about necessity and survival. Almost everyone lived in the same way and the means at their disposal were at the same level. There was only one level of status because everyone worked at the mills or in the farms. Whether people were educated or not, everyone had the same income and everyone had about the same way of living. There wasn't a lot of showing off, as he says "who would you show off to, when everyone was the same?"

When asked about the role of his work in the mills towards becoming a contributing citizen of Canada, Gurdial Singh expressed very strongly sentiments about commitment and ownership about the place you live in. He says today it is called roles and responsibilities of the average citizen. He said, "As far as citizenship is concerned, wherever you decide to live, you have to qualify yourself to become a citizen, a good citizen. I think people have to make a personal

decision to be a good citizen. This is a self-commitment to live here and to be a good citizen. I don't think mills or anything else, or any outside things can help with that, it has to come from within."