

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Gurmel Singh Narang Narrative

Interview Date: November 22, 2014

Gurmel Singh Narang was born on May 15th, 1949 in Village Dhudike, District Moga, Punjab, India. He came to Canada as a visitor in 1971, applying for his landed immigration status under the skilled worker category (also called entry by point basis). He explained that during those days, people could apply for immigration while in Canada and they had to have 50 points if they wanted to stay in Canada. So he received his immigration in Canada on a point basis and subsequently became a Canadian Citizen.

Before deciding to leave home for Canada, Gurmel Singh lived in his village where he was a college student studying for his Bachelor of Arts degree in the local college. Soon after immigrating to Canada, Gurmel Singh started working in the Nicola Valley Sawmill in Merritt, BC. He acquired his first job with the help of his friends and through the kind recommendation of his paternal aunt (*Bhuaji*) who knew someone who worked in the mill. At the time of his arrival in early '70s, he remembers that it was not easy to find work in the Fraser Valley as there used be a lot of discrimination against the Indian community. Some men used to travel to Hope to work in the mills, as local work was impossible to find. At first, he tried to find work in the local area, but when he did not, he even look as far afield as Port Alberni, Vancouver, New Westminster and Yubou, but as he remembers, "lots of our Indian men already worked in the mills at that time". But Gurmel Singh persevered, even working at a farm while waiting for a job to materialize from all his efforts.

The first job Gurmel Singh acquired was at a plywood mill. In the Veneer plant, where plywood was made, he started working on the green chain, but soon he learned how to operate the forklift and the lathe machine. Never having experienced this kind of work, he was keen to learn and the opportunity came as he worked at different jobs at the Nicola Valley Sawmill. The mill has recently started a new career plant to make plywood. Veneer was the raw material used to make plywood, and then the raw material was shipped to a plywood mill.

As time went along, Gurmel Singh worked in a number of mills in BC. From 1971 to 72, he worked in Nicola Valley before getting married in 1973. In 1974 he went to visit someone in Port Alberni and there he applied for a job in another sawmill named Port Alberni Pacific Division Mill, (also called APD). He felt lucky to have been hired and as usual, he started on the green chain (one of the most difficult jobs in the mill), but slowly within the first year, he got a grading ticket to work grading lumber. Port Alberni became home until 1978 for approximately 4 years, before getting transferred to Vancouver to McMillan White Pine Mill in Vancouver on Marine Drive. His parents had immigrated and joined him in 1977, one year previous to moving to Vancouver.

In 1983 Gurmel Singh was laid off from White Pine Mill and he looked for work close by at Asa Singh Johal's mill and worked there until 2001. In 2001, after thirty years of working in the

forestry industry in BC, he retired from working in the mills because he developed arthritis. He suggests that he got arthritis due to working in the mills, especially since lumber grading work was heavy and difficult on the joints.

Gurmel Singh remembers when he first started working in the mill, every type of job and work detail seemed difficult, but after some time most people got used to the heavy and hard work load. When the salary went up, workers would be given even more work load to add to their jobs. Sometimes, the foreman used to give extra work to Gurmel Singh because he was the only lumber grader working at the mill. When he left one of the jobs there, one person couldn't handle the work what he used to do, so his work was given to two graders, evidence of the amount of work he used to take on.

Mr. Narang bought a farm in Abbotsford in partnership with his brother in 1978, when he moved from Port Alberni. His brother looked after the farm and Mr. Gurmel Narang did both, that is working in the mill and looking after the farm also.

Mr. Narang has good memories of his mill work experience as he said, "we were making good money". It started from \$1.25 an hour and then rose to \$3.45 an hour in Merritt. And he was very proud of making good money, when there was lots of overtime and he was young, only 22 – 23 years old, he could handle lots of hard work. He says, he really worked hard as he worked 3 shifts one time, then came home and slept.

Mr. Narang said he worked with all different communities. There were men from First Nations Native populations, French Canadians-Caucasians, and there were Indian people working in the mills. According to Mr. Narang, there were only 8 Indian men and rest was from other nationalities including First Nations Natives. In total 20 men worked in that mill as start base. There were two shifts of 10 men each.

Mr. Narang talks very proudly about community building and helping each other at mill jobs those days. If someone wanted to learn some new jobs, others used to give him an opportunity and chance to learn new specialized job work, for example, if someone wanted to learn grading, Mr. Narang took his job work which was not much liked by others, as painting job, which was also called stencil work. Some people didn't like painting job as paint used to stick on other things, but he did it to give his friend chance to learn grading. He painted the loads and in-return that man helped him to learn grading. In the Indian community, men were helpful to teach the juniors learn grading, but not to their seniors. They didn't want to be bumped out. There was a trend that Union men got more training. Mr. Narang was junior to everyone, so he got training quickly. He got training for both plainers, as there were two plainers, one big automatic and one small plainer. The foreman trained him for both of them. Then he worked as a grader from 1976 to 2001. He either worked on the plainer or as a grader; he didn't do any other mill work. They called it final grade when lumber goes out.

Mr. Narang has different kinds of memories of his era of working in the mills. He also remembers that French Canadian –Caucasian men were sometimes jealous. He talked about even the recent

news that some Canadians were protesting sitting in the tents to stop immigration so that local Canadians can find jobs. Even back then this feeling prevailed in the Canadian population. They were against immigration. When they opened immigration, that time there were not many people to work those days. These French-Canadian men were always looking for trouble. On the weekends, they would say, "Come fight with us". They used to trouble the Indian men on their way to go to mills. They used to cause harassment to Indian men outside the mills but in the mills there was no harassment, because foremen would know if fights start there. They used to trouble the Indian men on the streets when walking for work. There were no cars to go to work, Indian men only walked.

HE mentioned it was not physical harassment, but they would abuse by saying, "You are Indian or you are Pakistani, go back to Pakistan or go back to India" as they do sometimes now a days too! IT used to happen a lot in small towns but lesser in big towns. Indian population was very little those days, so the boys used to get together. He admits that sometimes they used to get together, 2 to 4 boys and beat them physically if they wouldn't stop. Police didn't even listen and care for these fights. If they called police, they wouldn't come. So according to Mr. Narang, when they started physically beating the Caucasian boys for not to tolerate abuse and harassment, then they stopped it. He laughed and said, "They were afraid of sticks, Gorey are more afraid of sticks, as they already knew how to hit with fists".

Mr. Narang had some good experiences too. He made lots of friends while working in the mills. He still remembers that the person who gave him work who was an Indian, advised him that no one should give trouble to each other. He was a foreman and his name was Lal Singh Mal who was a contractor at the mill. Mr. Mal also worked as supervisor for long time and he used to bring all men to work in that mill. He said, quite a few men from his family worked in that mill. The mill's name was Nicola Valley Saw Mill in Merritt.