

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Hakam Singh Dhaliwal Narrative

Interview Date: January 15th, 2015

Hakam Singh Dhaliwal was born on July 14th, 1949, in the village of Chananwal, District Barnala, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on February 18th, 1969 when he was 20 years old, coming with his sister and mother, under the family sponsorship immigration class from his father. Hakam Singh's father had come in 1952 under the family sponsorship sent by his uncle, Paul Singh Dhaliwal (Hakam Singh's grandfather's brother); since in those days uncles could sponsor their nephews. Hakam Singh's father had three children whom he left behind with his wife in India, as was common in those days. Hakam Singh's sister was born when his father visited India again in 1977. His father drove a truck in Canada as he owned his own fuel company, but initially he had worked in his uncle's company.

Hakam Singh was studying when he left India and immigrated to Canada, although he was about to graduate that year from grade 12. He left his studies and came to Canada as it seemed like the best thing to do at that time. The new country seemed okay to him when he came to Mission, BC, because he had members of his family here, but still he says it was a new country for him and it took some time to adjust to. He rested only for two weeks after his arrival and then he was sent to work. His first job was at a mill called Whonnock Shake and Shingle mill in Mission. It used to be in the bush (forest) at that time, and he was picking the wood off the forest ground. It was back breaking work that he did for almost six months and then he started driving a truck.

Hakam Singh drove a truck in his father's and uncle's (Paul Singh Dhaliwal) company until 1972. The family had a truck that they used to haul the lumber – the task required him to pick up the wood, throw it on the truck, take it away and then put it on the trailer. The only thing in his mind was to work and he knew he had to work. He used to be outdoors all the time when he used to pick up the lumber and haul it on the truck, so his family suggested that he should take the test for a truck driving license and also go into trucking. Hakam Singh received his license and began driving a truck - the same truck which he used to haul everyday with the wood. He drove it locally from Maple Ridge to New Westminster. This trucking company was under the family name, managed by the family and it was the acceptable way of doing things. Hakam Singh's father and uncle also drove the truck, and they shared in the profits, but he had to quit driving after a few years because he met with a major truck accident. This difficult event is what forced Hakam Singh to go back to working in the mill again. A few of his friends were already working there and in those days people were making lots of money in the shake and shingle industry, so he joined it and he realized that work at the mill paid him more than trucking.

In 1972, Hakam Singh started working in a shake mill named the S&W Shake and Shingle in Maple Ridge, working there until 1981, for almost 11 years. He worked at a few other mills also for short periods of time, but soon after that he started his own mill in partnership with Fraser Cedar, and worked there from 1982 onwards, for three to four years. Then he took his share out of Fraser Cedar, and started his own mill in 1985 with another partner, naming the mill 'Upstream Cedar Products.' Hakam Singh owned and worked in that mill for five years until 1990. Unfortunately, his mill caught fire in 1990 and after that he did not re-build it.

When Hakam Singh's mill burned down and he left the industry, he purchased a farm with his brother-in-law in California. They bought a 215 acre farm in 1981 or 1982 where they were growing peaches and plums. Hakam Singh was working steadily there and going there for a month at a time. There was no one to look after the farm there, so he had to manage it through long distance travel. They finally found a man to maintain the farm on a day to day basis and they would go only during the harvest season. They traveled either by car or by air. If they wanted to stay there for a week, then they would take the car. After three years they sold the farm because both Hakam Singh and his brother-in-law did not want to stay in the US and it was difficult to manage. They sold half of the property first and then sold the rest of it later. Hakam Singh then joined another mill and started working again in the lumber industry.

In 1990, Hakam Singh started working at Watkins Saw Mill, otherwise known in its official name as Shake and Shingle Premium Cedar Product. The owners had 3-4 companies and one of their companies was Premium Cedar Products, where Hakam Singh worked from 2014, and that is where he retired from.

Both S&W and Watkin Saw Mill were owned by men of European origin: Leonard Watkin and his son. Hakam Singh worked for them for 25 years. All the men, with whom he worked in the Watkins Mill, were already known to him. According to Hakam Singh, mostly people of European origin worked at the S&W Mill, but at the Fraser Cedar Mill, which was owned by an Indian man, most of the workers were Indians.

Hakam Singh felt it was a lot of headache and responsibility to own and run a mill and to own and run a farm. His transition from the mill owner and farmer to becoming a laborer once again did not bother him. Being an owner meant a great amount of responsibility. The only advantage of owning a mill according to Hakam Singh was that when someone owns the place, they earn good income for themselves. With lots of experience, someone can do the job one wants to do and be autonomous.

Hakam Singh had been married in 1971, after two and half years of his migration to Canada. He and his wife would raise their children in Canada. His father-in-law was living in Mission at the time of Hakam's marriage and she was his only daughter. His wife's father and his own father knew each other and the two fathers had arranged the marriage.

When Hakam Singh came to Canada, he was a very young 20 year old man. He recalls what a nice time he had in those days. There were approximately 10 Indian families living in Mission and everyone knew each other. There were only 3-4 Indian boys of his age and they got to know each other and friendly relationships came out of it. They enjoyed working together as well as the economy was good. One could always find work if they wanted to work. Since Hakam Singh's family was already here and settling into Canadian life, they had put him to work and he started working.

Hakam Singh retired as a quality control person from his last job, and he also drove the forklift. It was easy work and he feels that he could have worked for ten more years. However, his family advised him that after 45 years of working, it was time for his retirement. According to Hakam Singh, the workers demographics were 50/50 Indians and Europeans. There was no conflict between anyone while working there. Hakam Singh was a member of the board of directors at the union at S&W. Even men of European origin voted for him during the election because Hakam Singh worked well with all people.