

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Harbimble Singh Banga

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Harbimble Singh Banga was born on December 3rd, 1932 in Queens' borough, New Westminster, BC, Canada. Harbimble Singh was married in 1949 by arranged marriage in India, and his wife was left behind in India after Harbimble returned to Canada.

Harbimble Singh worked at the Western Forest Industries in Honeymoon Bay from 1954-1958. Shortly after leaving the Island he found work at the Herman Saw Mill part time while he was also farming. Harbimble Singh recalls that his family owned a farm in Mission between 1952 and 1959 at which time they sold it and the family went to India.

Harbimble Singh worked on another farm (even before owning their own) for Harry Daltpur, on Angus Campbell Road. When Harry got sick, he leased the farm to Harbimble Singh, in 1952 or 1953. However, at the same time, Ken Neil, the owner of a farm in Mission wanted the Banga family to take over his farm and settle in Mission. So the family moved their cows from their farm from Angus Campbell road to Mission and they went and stayed with him (Ken Neil). At the same time, Harbimble Singh also worked part-time for Mrs. Singh (Mohinder Kaur Thandi) on Whatcom Road but his father had to hire a man with the help of his brother Jeet Singh Banga to help milk the cows in Mission as it was hard work to manage the affairs alone. While Harbimble Singh was working part-time for Mrs. Singh his father told him that he couldn't handle the Mission farm alone, so Harbimble Singh went back to Mission and helped his father and upgraded the farm. He purchased a tractor with a loader in it, purchased a cooling tank for storing the milk cans and put up the hay for storage.

In terms of his contributions to working in the mills, Harbimble Singh worked mostly on the green chain both in Wonnock, and at Herman Sawmill. He described it as heavy work when there were no rollers and the workers had to use every muscle and much strength to pull the logs off and pile them. At Western Forest Industries in Honeymoon Bay, he also did various types of jobs including as a trimmer, where he trimmed the saw and tailed it, and he was also the head rig for a short time period when he replaced a worker (Daljit Ahluwalia) who was hurt. Harbimble Singh wanted to try new jobs and once when they were looking for someone who could do a new job of head rig, he tried it. According to Harbimble Singh, when the lumber came off the trim-saws from the chains, or the belts and fell, it was sorted and then put on the chainsaws again, and there were two men who worked on the chain saw who cut the bad ends off on their end and they then passed them on to another person on the main trimmer, who did the sizing of the lumber. This person in turn, then the material and if it was bad in the middle, he pulled it out and cut it there and then sent it back.

Harbimble Singh found his first job at the mill with the help of his elder brother who was already working in that mill at Honeymoon Bay. He didn't even have to apply for the job because he was already selected for the job even before leaving his home in Mission. He had already held some part-time summer jobs, for example, he hauled pea vines, and loaded the peas. Harbimble Singh also did trucking for some time when there was not much work to do in the farms and this brought him extra earnings. He used to do some local trucking in Mission to pick-up and take a load of vegetables to the cannery in Mission, and very occasionally, to Vancouver to main Street. It just so happened that one of his friends, Sucha Singh Thandi, had lost his licence due to some reason and he wanted support and Harbimble Singh decided to help him, so he hauled and drove for him for some time and ordered a truck for himself from Vancouver. Harbimble Singh owned a trucking business in 1961 when he had left the mill job entirely. But he said that he was always welcome to go back to the mill because they always needed skilled people who could work as saw trimmers. There were not that many people those days who could do skilled jobs. Moreover, it was hard work and he remembers that his wrist got swollen because of flipping the boards which were so long (which were about 30-40 ft. long).

Harbimble Singh remembers some the Indian men who worked with him in the mill, including his brother Banjeet, Sarb and Daljit Singh Alumwala, etc. He remembers that there were mostly Indian men working on the chains. The only person of European origin who worked at the mill he remembers was a grader who marked lumber. Western Fraser Industries was not owned by Indians but the Herman Saw Mill was owned by an Indian, the Braich family.

When asked about any challenges faced as worker, he only says that you had to get used to it, pulling lumber off the chains and without any flaws in your work whatever work was given to you. He meant that there had to be quality assurance and one had to get used to the work. According to Harbimble Singh, the ability to earn good money was one of the biggest achievements of working in the mills. He left the mill job and joined trucking on his elder brother's advice which shows how much respect he had for his elder brother.

Harbimble Singh still remembers his life working in the mills and the work culture he abided by. He lived in his own house in Mission while working locally in Herman Saw Mill but while working in Vancouver Island, he lived in the sawmill camps. In the company built bunk houses, there were Indian camps and Chinese camps separately, segregated by ethnicity. He remembers that there were all kinds of guys whom he doesn't remember now so well due to his age.