

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Jagtar Singh Mann Narrative

Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

Jagtar Singh Mann was born on May 15, 1954 at Kot Gangu Rai which is located in District Ludhiana, Punjab, India. He arrived in Canada in 1980, only two years after he married his wife in 1978. Jagtar Singh attended the Guru Nanak Engineering College in Punjab, India and had a background in engineering. Jagtar Singh shares a very unique story about his entire wedding experience, explaining how he refused a grand scale wedding, but rather, opted for a wedding that would cost only 1 rupee. He made such a thing possible because he would only have a court marriage done.

Following Jagtar Singh's court marriage in 1978, he then migrated to Duncan, Canada. For a short time, approximately a month and a half, Jagtar worked in Abbotsford in a shake and shingle mill. He then returned to Duncan to continue similar type work and also working as a house builder as per his engineering background. In 1988 Jagtar Singh continued to work at other, smaller mills around the Island including FPR mills, and the Doman owned mill called the Western Forest Products (WFP) located at Lake Cowichan Bay. He then retired at the age of 55.

During his work at the mills in BC, Jagtar Singh engaged in a range of jobs including: grading, sorter feeding, tail gating, automatic packing, stacking, etc. According to Jagtar Singh, the men who worked in the mill were all nice men, and he never had any negative experiences with the exception of the unsettling experience related to the issue of his turban. Fairly recently, in 2007, Jagtar Singh was ordered by his foreman, Bob Dossman to remove his turban and wear a hard hat. Jagtar Singh made a simple gesture of handing Mr. Dossman the hard hat and refusing to work, despite the protests he received that no one else could do the work. When Jagtar Singh returned to his home at Lake Cowichan, he first sat and did some kirtan and then updated his wife on what had happened at work. Jagtar Singh then sent an email to the Prime Minister, the local Members of Parliament and to Human Rights advocates, highlighting his story of being forced to remove his turban. What ensued was a six month long legal process, after which the case eventually settled. During this time, Jagtar Singh did not work at the mill, though he continued to receive his severance pay. The records of this entire episode have been kept at the International Woodworkers of America (IWA) Union. Soon after the case settled, Jagtar Singh told his employers that he now wanted to receive time off in order to reach his retirement age of 55, and this request was granted.

According to Jagtar Singh, during his dispute to be allowed to wear his turban at work, he never feared any negative repercussions. This was because his family had its own history of fighting for human rights from the time of his great, great-grandfather. Although he admits it is very difficult to fight for ones rights, Jagtar is immensely proud that he was able to change the rules at mills in terms of allowing Sikh men to be able to wear their turbans.

To this day, still at 61 years of age, Jagtar Singh is happy being a sevadaar (selfless server) for the historic Paldi Gurdwara. Jagtar Singh helps with the daily maintenance and up keeping of the Gurdwara. He is also very proud that all three of his children were married the same way as he was-through the legal system only and without the normal pomp and ceremony.