

Jagtar Singh Mann Interview

Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

SB: Hello Uncle Ji what is your full name?

JM: My name is Jagtar Singh Mann.

SB: What is your date of birth?

JM: May 15. 1954.

SB: Ok and where were you born?

JM: Kot Gangu Rai, India.

SBains: Where is that?

JM: In Ludhiana.

SB: Uncle Ji, when did you immigrate to Canada?

JM: In the 1980

SB: How did you come [here]?

JM: I got married and came in '78. I wanted to get married on 1 rupee.

SBains: In India?

JM: In India. I wanted to get married on 1 rupee by court marriage. After my education. All my relatives thought that a proper wedding should happen. I said I want to get married with 1 rupee. My nana was my matchmaker, he spoke with the family and my dad went and confirmed the marriage. I was educated at Guru Nanak Engineering College. Here in Duncan, there are the nicest people that I never feel like leaving, it's clean, no pollution, no drugs, both whites and apney [Punjabis], it's the best place to live.

SB: Okay, so go on, you got married and came to Canada. Where?

JM: I came to Canada in 1980 and came to Duncan first. I also worked in Abbotsford. I worked a month and half at a shake, shingle mill, and then returned to Duncan. I also worked at a shake shingle mill here, and also helped to build houses. Since I had an engineering background I also wanted to do that here in Canada. In 1988 I worked in some smaller mills. I also made houses, and worked at the FPR mills, including the Doman mills. He was a very nice man. And then I retired at the age of 55.

SB: What was the name of the mill?

JM: Western Forest Products [WFP] at Lake Cowichan Bay. And then I received my pension. Now I am 61 years old. I am most happy doing the save for the Gurdwara. We keep the kitchen, washrooms clean. I am the president of this Gurdwara.

SB: Tell me about your experiences working in the mills?

JM: I did a range of jobs including grading, sorter feeder, and Tail gate, automatic packing, stacking, I did it all.

SB: What was the spirits like working in a mill?

JM: It was great, they're all nice men. There was one problem with the WFP issue with the turban. I was told I had to wear a steel helmet. I was told that I would be written up by the foreman, Bob Dossman. I handed the helmet and said that I will not work and am going home. He said that there's no one else to do it and I said it's not my responsibility now, it's your responsibility. At Lake Cowichan we had built a house to sell and I went and sat there....because I had a great interest and enjoyment in doing kirtan. So I told my wife that evening that I am no longer going back to work and that I am going to send an email to everyone: the PM, MP and Human Rights. In 15 minutes, I wrote the email about refusing to wear the hard hat at work. And then after that we went to court. This happened in 2007. I was told to not go back to work and in that time I continued to receive pay. The whole process took about six months total. All of those people who wear kirpans [are baptized] are afraid to fight. But that's the worst that can happen? We need to fight and take it to human rights. This history of fighting for human rights is in my family. At the battle of chamkaur, my great, great grandfather's (Baba Dula Singh) fought in that and was martyred. People can talk the talk, but it's much more difficult to take action. It's very hard to fight for ones rights. I fought for this right for all turbaned Sikh men to wear their turban at work. And then I was successful and so I returned back to work. I received a year's worth of severance pay.

I: Has this case been recorded anywhere?

JM: Oh yes, it's been kept and recorded in the union records- in the IWF. In the Cowichan Bay Sawmill records. Anyway, the case has been settled and now it's very clear that in a mills, no Sikh man is required to remove his turban.

I: And so you never returned back to Western Forest Products?

JM: Well I did, I went to work for about a week and then said I wanted two years off. They said they couldn't do that and I told them that I wanted to get to 55 years old somehow, no matter what, and that regardless, I didn't want to go back to work. And so they provided me the time off and severance pay for a year and I was done.

I: And so now you're fully retired? What a nice story.

JM: Yes, fully retired. I have three children. Even my children said they wanted to get married the same way I did, through the court system. They didn't want to do all the standard giving and taking, etc.

I: Are all of your children married?

JM: Yes, all married. And one of my children, the eldest, even has three daughters of their own as well. Two of them married in India, and the other was married here. My son works in Abbotsford, and my daughter works for ICBC in Langley.

I: Well then next time you're in Abbotsford, come visit us.