

Saw mill Worker Stories

Jasbir Singh Bains Narrative

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

Jasbir Singh Bains was born on December 25, 1946 in the Village Nangal Kalan located in District Hoshiarpur. Jasbir first visited Canada in 1969, joining his cousin who was also planning on making a trip to Canada. According to Jasbir, the immigration process was much easier during the time of his official immigration to Canada. For example, a local friend of his cousin's, Mr. Hazara Singh owned a mill in Nanaimo, and they indicated that they required a man to help them. Within four months of his application, Jasbir Singh received a letter in the mail from immigration services asking for the interview. At the interview Jasbir was asked only two things: did anyone in his family have tuberculosis or did anyone in his family suffer from cancer? The answer to both questions were no, and thus, the interviewee immediately stamped Jasbir's passport for approval to immigrate to Canada.

According to Jasbir, such easy processes to immigration became much stricter in the later 1970's. When Jasbir first arrived in Duncan, he worked on a farm for a short time and then moved to Quesnel in July of 1969. After two years working at the Merrill and Wagner sawmill in Quesnel, Jasbir worked for prominent local South Asian, Asa Singh Johal and his owned Terminal Saw Mill. In 1973 Jasbir moved to Vancouver to do some shift work and also went to Calgary to work for the CP for two years. In 1975, Jasbir returned to the Island where he remained ever since. Jasbir recalled his earnings being approximately \$2.97 per hour. This was because even though all mills fell under the Union of the International Woodworkers of America (IWA), there still existed localized unions. And so, for some the rate was \$3.50, while at other mills, the standard rate was \$2.97.

According to Jasbir, while he worked at Williams Lake, all of the men, sometimes five or six at a time, lived in bunkhouses. In bunkhouse, all the men would collectively cook large amounts of daals (lentils) or meat dishes, etc., and that was how they sustained themselves. Luckily, Jasbir adds, "many more Punjabi men joined them in the earlier 1970's, and so this process was fairly easy". Jasbir himself never learned to make roti (flat bread), although he became quite adept at making the meat tarka (curry).

Jasbir recalls nostalgically his first impressions upon immigrating to Williams Lake, BC, Canada. Although he found little work at Williams Lake, he was still happy to discover that there were already two men from his Village also living there. Because he was so young at the time, Jasbir was simply happy to have migrated and moved to Canada in the first place. He notes with irony that if the men worked up to -35 degrees temperatures, they would be covered under the Worker's Compensation Board (WCB); however, if they worked in conditions any colder than that, they were no longer covered. Although most of his memories are present, Jasbir still remembers times when discrimination was rife, more so in Quesnel and Williams Lake, and less

so in Victoria. According to Jasbir, the new Punjabi immigrants were always afraid to get into trouble with the law because of the fear of deportation. Therefore, if a Caucasian person shouted at them, they would run away. These sorts of incidents changed, according to Jasbir, when the second and third generation Canadian born Punjabis forged friendships with the Caucasian children. When these Caucasian children saw how well they were treated by their Punjabi friends' parents, in their homes, etc., they too, demanded that their parents treat their Punjabi friends in kind.

Jasbir recalls one incident in particular which occurred in Youbou when he worked an afternoon shift. There used to be mailboxes where letters would be delivered into which were located a few miles away from Jasbir's home. One day there was a three year old Caucasian child who saw Jasbir and his friend and started yelling "Hindu!" "Hindu!" Jasbir and his friend simply started laughing as they realized that the child can only be taught such intolerant behaviour by his parents as he was so young. This is how it was.

In 1974 Jasbir was married where he and his wife settled permanently in Victoria. Because he had so many friends in Victoria he never felt the need to visit India or settle elsewhere.