

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Jinder Singh Heer Narrative
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Jinder Singh Heer was born on October 5th, 1949 in the village of Dudhiar, District Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada in 1970 when he was 21 years old. Jinder Singh first came as a tourist to Canada, as his sister was already living in here.

Jinder Singh came to Canada on his own without being sponsored, and he applied for immigration afterwards when he had begun living in Canada. Even before Jinder Singh's migration to Canada, there was already a deep history of transnational migrations within his family. For example, Jinder Singh's grandfather migrated from India to Kenya, Africa in 1898. Soon after Jinder Singh's grandfather was joined by his brother in 1902, Jinder Singh's uncle in 1921, and finally Jinder Singh's father in 1936. They had migrated to Kenya with the same intention as people migrated to Canada-which was to seek employment and economic opportunity.

When he first arrived to Canada, Jinder Singh discovered he liked the country a great deal and thus, soon after, applied for his permanent immigration status based on the point system. He received some points because of his elder sister who was already settled in Canada and who would support him in times of need. His sister continues to reside in Duncan, BC, which was where Jinder Singh first resided upon his arrival to Canada.

Jinder Singh did not continue his education after arriving in Canada because he had started working in the mill within a year of his migration. During the first many months of his migration however, Jinder Singh was able to do a lot of sightseeing across Canada.

Jinder Singh's first job was at a mill called the Slegg Brothers Company located in Duncan, which is a very large company and still in operation today. In 1974, he moved to Vancouver to work at a different sawmill in the lower mainland because the mill in Duncan had stalled. Thus, he worked in Vancouver for some time and soon after went to England where he was married in 1974 at the age of 24 years.

Jinder Singh obtained work in Vancouver through his connections because some people who worked at that mill knew him very well. The Superintendent and the Manager there had moved from Slegg, and so it was them who had called Jinder Singh to come and join them in Vancouver. After his marriage, Jinder Singh came back to Victoria and started working in Plumber Way Saw Mill. Over time, even that mill stalled, so the men who worked there took it over and started their own mill called Plywood Co-op. This new mill became a joint co-op mill. Approximately 100 people worked together where they ran the co-op mill for ten years. All went well for those ten years; however, this mill also stalled because they could not afford to buy raw logs which were very costly at the time. After

this, Jinder Singh then drove a cab. He had helped to run the co-op mill from 1984 to 1994 and from 1994 onwards he has been driving the cab.

Jinder Singh started working in the lumber industry initially because his brother-in-law (sister's husband) was working at the mill and he told him about the work and its many advantages. This first job was a saw mill where lumber was mostly cut. He first started on the green chain but he also did a range of work including trimming.

When Jinder Singh came to Canada there were approximately 300 Indian families in Victoria, but there was a good ethnic mix of workers working in the mills. Indians were mostly working in the mills and according to Jinder Singh, there was not any difference in the work culture because everyone respected each other and worked well together. When he first migrated to Canada, Jinder Singh recalls that he did not feel any cultural shock because he felt it was much better to be living in Canada than in India.

When Jinder Singh was a share-holder in the co-op mill, he remembers thinking about the difference between being an employee and a share-holder in a co-op. There was more money in the co-op as they used to receive a salary wage and they were also earning a profit share every month and a bonus at the end of the year. They used to earn good profits every month ranging from \$900.00 to \$1500.00 a month. It was certainly worth their time and investment to create a co-op mill. The major difference between the co-op mills versus the previous mill was that the former was non-unionized. In the previous mill, they had been unionized under the International Woodworkers Association (IWA). Jinder Singh he felt there was certainly a difference between working in a unionized mill versus not. Overall, Jinder Singh did not face any difficulties while working in the mills although wages were fairly low. For example, he recalls his starting wage being at \$3.25 in 1970. Jinder Singh did not live in the sawmill bunk houses as they had been lifted and had stopped being used by the 1970's.

According to Jinder Singh, they used to eat regular simple Punjabi foods such as roti (leavened flatbread) and daal (lentil curry) in those days. There was one Indian grocery store in Victoria and some people even used to go travel to Vancouver to buy their groceries as there were more stores there.

Jinder Singh married his wife in 1974 and she came to Canada in 1976, having emigrated from England. His wife was only a year old when she had first migrated to England with her parents from the Village Boparai Kalan, near Jalandhar.

Jinder Singh had never done any physical labor in India before coming to Canada, although he had worked with the dairy cows in his village and helped his father with the family farming. When he came to Canada, he did not find the mill work hard because he was young at that time and had an abundance of stamina and energy. His parents also came to visit him in Canada in November 1979, but they did not like it here and returned within two months because they felt it was too cold in those months.

Jinder Singh lived in an apartment until 1984 and he bought his first home for \$80,000. When he had first come in 1970, he recalls the homes costing in the \$17,000 range. Jinder Singh lived a good life in Canada as he was young and adventurous. He enjoyed his leisurely time by playing soccer. He played in tournaments as part of a team which were held in Victoria in celebration of Vaisakhi. According to Jinder Singh whereas tournaments are running constantly today, in those days they were held only on Vaisakhi. The tournaments were held for sports such as: soccer, weight lifting, kabaddi, volleyball and many other sports. These tournaments had been occurring in Victoria since 1950 and Jinder Singh participated in them for 25 to 30 years. He started and ran the first Indian Soccer team and ran the tournaments for 25-30 years in Victoria for the same Indian team. Teams used to participate from all over the Island including: Port Alberni, Nanaimo and Duncan. All the players knew each other as it became a sort of fraternity.

Jinder Singh was quite involved in community events. He recalls that Vaisakhi used to be celebrated in Vancouver and Paldi. The August soccer tournaments would also happen there and Paldi would hold their own tournaments. Vancouver would host just one tournament for Bhai Mewa Singh, but Paldi would host their own. Other communities also held sports tournaments; for example Quesnel, Williams Lake and Kamloops, but these would start much later.

Jinder Singh is also particularly proud that he used to host soccer players from India when they would come to play in Canada. Some of these soccer players have even settled in Canada. Jinder Singh received his Canadian citizenship in 1974. Those days, a person just held up his hand up to say the oath as nothing more was required. According to Jinder Singh, people would just fill out the form request for citizenship as there was no test required.