

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Joginder Singh Bassi Narrative

Interview Date: January 8th, 2015

Joginder Singh Bassi was born in the Village Bundala which is located in the District of Jalandhar, Punjab, India. He first arrived in Canada in the year 1959, having arrived by himself but through the sponsorship of his cousin who was living in Victoria at the time. During the time of his departure from India and arrival by plane to Victoria, Joginder Singh left behind his wife and two children in India. During their separation, Joginder Singh's wife would continue to write letters to him until in 1967, she was eventually able to join Joginder Singh eight years after he first arrived in Canada.

After arriving in Victoria, Joginder Singh looked for farm work for one to two years. He then moved to Tahsis to begin working in a wood and saw mill. Joginder Singh's main task during his standard eight hour shift was to trim the wood planks that would come down the chain line. It was difficult and heavy work and one had to be very careful not to lose a limb or a digit on their fingers.

Joginder Singh lived in a bunkhouse owned by the sawmill owners and built for the almost 400 Punjabi men working at the mill. The company itself paid the wages for the two Punjabi men as cooks in the cook house. These men were hired specifically to cook food for each of the 400 men. However, instead of Indian food, the cooks only made western style of foods, and so when Joginder Singh visited home in Victoria, he would ask for roti as he craved the Indian food of his youth. Out of all the men who worked alongside Joginder Singh in the mill, only a handful of them had their families living with them in homes, the rest were living as bachelors essentially while their families were back in India and they could not afford to bring them to Canada just yet, not until they had made enough money to take care of them. This was a common trait amongst Punjabi men and the society was mostly made of men who lived without immediate families, but rather, with each other.

After working at Tahsis, Joginder Singh then moved back to Victoria and worked on a farm before finding work again at a local sawmill called Fletcher Challenge. Joginder Singh would continue to work in the position as a belt puller for the next twenty years until the mill shut down due to an economic downturn. Joginder Singh was satisfied with having received a compensation package at the time of this mill's shutting down as men who worked in unionized mills received a full package after the age of 55 in the form of a pension. When Joginder Singh first began working in mills in the 1960's, he was earning \$2.00 an hour; however, by the time he reached retirement in 1989 he was earning approximately \$15 to \$16 per hour.

Today, at 82 years old, Joginder Singh reflects on his first day of working in a mill on the green chain. Although he found the work extremely difficult, over time, the work became manageable as the overall benefits were worth it.