

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Kulwant Cheema Narrative

Interview Date: January 20th, 2015

Kulwant Singh Cheema was born on September 5, 1942 in the village of Mehal Kalan of the Barnala district in Punjab, India. He worked on the farms of Mehal Kalan before being sponsored by his brother to immigrate to Canada in 1966. Kulwant Cheema was 24 years old and had a wife and two children when he left Mehal Kalan. His daughter was three years old at the time, while his son was only two months old. Kulwant Cheema left India alone because the sponsorship letter only gave him permission to enter Canada and he couldn't afford to bring his family along with him. When he arrived in Canada he immediately started working in the saw mills. After three years' time however, he had saved up enough money from working in the saw mills to bring his wife and children to join him in Canada.

Kulwant Cheema arrived at the Vancouver airport in 1966 after a long flight without eating any food. His plane landed outside on the tarmac and he remembers climbing down the stairs of the airplane and seeing a small airport. No one had come to pick him up at the airport so he sought the help of a fellow Indo-Canadian man who was working at the airport. The airport worker asked him whose house he wanted to go to. When Kulwant Cheema said he wanted to go to Mota Singh Grewal's house, the airport worker grabbing his luggage to load in to a vehicle and shepherded Kulwant Cheema to a separate vehicle. Kulwant Cheema was certain that he had been robbed of his luggage. When he arrived at the house of the airport worker, he asked if some *roti* could be prepared. He ate *roti* and *sabji* and thought to himself that although his luggage may have possibly been stolen, at least he now had a full stomach! Luckily, Kulwant Cheema was dropped off at his uncle's dairy farm in Mission along with all his luggage. Kulwant Cheema's brother was living in Merritt, BC and came to pick him up from Mission after three days. Upon arriving in Merritt, Kulwant Cheema received a job offer to work in the mill before night fall.

Kulwant Cheema first started working at KP sawmill in Merritt, BC. He worked on the green chain pulling lumber and made \$2.50 per hour (\$20 for an 8 hour shift). This was considered a very good wage at the time. Occasionally the foreman of the mill would call the Cheema residence when overtime shifts were available and Kulwant Cheema would always go. He would make \$30 in 8 hours during overtime shifts. After 1 year and 9 months, Kulwant Cheema left the KP sawmill when a 9 month strike to increase wages for sawmill workers had just begun in the mill. Upon hearing of the strike, Kulwant Cheema's uncle asked him and his brother to return to Mission. Soon, Kulwant Cheema was working in a Squamish sawmill while his brother found work in a Mission sawmill. He worked at the Squamish sawmill for 6 months. Kulwant Cheema and his brother purchased a house in Mission with their savings for \$32,000.

In Squamish, Kulwant Cheema lived with 18 other men in a three bedroom house owned by a fellow Indian man. They paid \$20 a month rent in order to live there. The men lined up small beds

on the bedroom floors and there was just enough space to walk in between them to navigate in and out of the bedrooms. Kulwant Cheema remembers that there was always a line up outside the bathroom to use the toilet. Most of the men only stayed in the house during the work week and would go to stay with relatives on the weekends. Only about five of the men living in the Squamish house had vehicles, so the rest of the men would pay fares to take a ride home on the weekend. The men would pay \$1 to get a ride to Vancouver from Squamish and \$3 to get a ride to Mission.

Kulwant Cheema and the 18 men he was living with had to make their own food in Squamish. Kulwant Cheema didn't know how to make *roti*, so he was tasked with making the *atta* for the *roti*. The men had a system in place for meal times: once the *atta* was made, 3 men would make the *roti*, 1 man would serve the *roti* on plates and one would serve the *daal*. All of the men were responsible for washing their own dishes and cutlery. Kulwant Cheema and the men would eat *roti*, *Sabzi*, *tari*, and chicken on a regular basis. Most men took *roti* with them to the saw mill in lunch kits. They purchased *daal* and other Indian food from a specialty Indian food store in Vancouver that all Indians purchased their Indian food supplies from. The store was located on Hastings in 1967. Later, Kulwant Cheema would purchase groceries in bulk with his extended family from the same store. They would spend \$20-\$25 each week on groceries. He would purchase 10 cartons of whipped cream with his brother and they would put raw eggs in to the whipped cream and drink it at night when they returned from the saw mill.

After six months, Kulwant Cheema left the Squamish mill to work in Whonnock Mill in Mission, BC. Two shifts had started there and he got one of them. He worked at the Whonnock Mill for 20 years alongside his elder brother. In addition to the work in the mills, Kulwant Cheema also purchased a farm. He would work at both the mill and the farm when crop was in season and would typically sleep only 4-5 hours every night because of this. Kulwant Cheema's wife worked in the cannery. It was not abnormal for them to work 12-14 hours a day.

In all of the mills he worked in, Kulwant Cheema noticed a mix of Indian and people of European origin saw mill workers with very few Japanese and Chinese workers. Overall, the men worked together harmoniously. In the shingle mills, the men did piece work. They had a minimum target they needed to meet each shift and made \$15/hour if they met the target and were paid extra if they exceeded the target. Indian men would sometimes skip lunch and coffee breaks when they were on pace to beat the target. They would sometimes make an extra \$40 per shift for exceeding the target. Kulwant Cheema left mill work in 2007 after retiring.