

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Malkiat Singh Dhaliwal Narrative
Interview Date: January 28th, 2015

Malkiat Singh Dhaliwal was born on September 20th, 1958 in the village of Bhamipura, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada in December 1981, when he was 23 years old, along with his parents under the family sponsorship class, all having been sponsored by his brother. Before immigrating to Canada, he was doing farming along with his father, and he never attended school. The family first came to Duncan but did not find any work for the first five to six months. He found clean-up work in Maple Ridge for the first year, year and half before he began working in the lumber industry in July, 1983. His first job was at the Fraser Cedar Mill in Maple Ridge, what is now called Maple Ridge Red Cedar Shake and Shingle mill.

Three shifts were running at Fraser Cedar Mill with more than 100 men working there. In those days, it was mostly Indian people working in that mill with the exception of two to three people of European origin.

Malkiat Singh's parents went back to India after only nine months because his father's elder brother was ill in India. After a few years, his parents also passed away. His mother only stayed for a few years in Canada as it did not suit her health and she returned to India after four years. Both his parents passed away within a few years of each other in India. Her doctor in Canada had said that it would be better for her to live in India.

Malkiat Singh was married to his wife in 1986 at the Khalsa Diwan Society, Abbotsford Gurdwara. He lived with his brother until 1989 before moving out when he and his wife bought their own home. Malkiat Singh is still working at Fraser Cedar and has been there for the last 32 years. Initially, his friend helped him obtain the first job by taking him to the mill to introduce him to the manager. His first job was as a packer where he would pack shingles and shakes. After a while he learned the work of blocking and did that for 32 years, and for many years he undertook the job of cubing. Then he developed a problem in his hip due to the heavy work he was doing and his doctor suggested that he not lift heavy weights. He told his foreman, but his owner told him not to leave the job, and rather that he learn the work of a foreman. Since then he has been working as a foreman for approximately 25 years.

Malkiat Singh recalls that in the beginning when he started working at the mill, he felt it was really difficult when he was doing the blocks. First he was doing packing but the blocking was tough. Over time, Malkiat Singh grew to enjoy his job and never felt the need to look for any other work.

Before immigrating to Canada, Malkiat Singh did not know where he would work upon arrival in Canada. He had some idea when he used to talk to his brother on the phone

while living in India - his brother used to tell him that they would pull lumber and pieces of wood and would share some stories of the work at the mill. His brother was working in the lumber mill but Malkiat Singh ended up working at a Shake and Shingle mill. The pieces that go on the roof of a home come from the kind of mill he worked at, but the long pieces like 2 X 4 or 2 X 10 were made at his brother's mill.

Malkiat Singh enjoyed working but at the same time he remembers that it was heavy and laborious work. The blocks of wood were really heavy, weighing between 10-15 kg to 20-30kg, with some even weighing up to 50 kg. Malkiat Singh worked in a mill which was non-unionize although he received all the benefits. According to Malkiat Singh, the first choice of employment was always the mill and the second was the farms because working in the farms did not have any benefits and they earned more money in the mills. His first salary in the mill started at \$4.50 per hour when the government maximum was \$4 to \$5. When he started working on blocks, he was earning \$7.00 per hour, and then slowly it started increasing substantially.

Malkiat Singh first came to Duncan BC when he immigrated to Canada because his brother was living there and working at Honeymoon Bay. In 1982, the whole family moved to Mission because his brother's mill closed down and there was no work there. They came to Mission and rented a basement, where they stayed for 8-12 months. Then they bought their own house in Mission and sold the one in Duncan. His sister-in-law (brother's wife) used to cook food for the whole family and she also worked seasonally in the farms for two to three months. There were not many Indian grocery stores in Abbotsford or Mission, and people used to go to Vancouver to purchase their groceries. People used to go every two weeks to buy Indian groceries, and they used to get milk and butter etc. locally. Sometimes they would go once a month for grocery shopping and he used to go to Vancouver even for his hair-cuts as there was not many hair cut salons in Mission.

When Malkiat Singh came to live in Mission, there were approximately forty Indian families he knew of and there was one Sikh Temple in Abbotsford. They all would go to that Temple to pray and meet each other. There were few parties and celebrations and even the celebration of special events such as Diwali or Lohri was not a grand event. On New Year's Eve however, everyone used to go to the Gurdwara for a get-together.

Malkiat Singh remembered when he first came to Canada, he was struck most by the weather, as it used to snow heavily those days. When he came to Canada, it was the first time he had ever seen snow fall- he felt it really cold and did not go outside.

Living in Canada was good in the old days, but now it has changed. According to Malkiat Singh, the economy was good in those days, there were less issues of poverty and the pay was good. Malkiat Singh still works in the mill. His mill had caught fire on December 25th, 2014 and he is hoping to go back to work in March, 2015. Currently he is collecting unemployment insurance. He will take retirement when he turns 65 years old. Overall, Malkiat Singh has good memories of working in the lumber industry. Everyone stayed in

good harmony with each while working in the mill. It was just like living in the village or going to a temple; the mill had no difference for anyone. They worked together like brothers. All workers in his mill were Indians, but some men of European origin worked in the office. There was no difference whether Indians or Europeans, everyone treated each other with respect. In fact, according to Malkiat, having the men of European origin help him learn English created an experience of bonding and friendship.