

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Malkit Singh Sidhu Narrative
Interview Date: January 28th, 2015

Malkit Singh Sidhu was born on November 13th, 1926 at his maternal parents Village, Khosa Pando Ke, District Moga (then it was District Faridkot). He came to Canada in 1959 when his brother sent the sponsorship papers to him under the quota system. He was 26 years old at the time, married and working in India with his family as a farmer. His brother had come earlier by ship in 1952, but Malkit Singh came by plane. The rest of his family came ten years after Malkit Singh when the immigration laws opened up. People were living single as bachelors in the early years in Canada. His brother was single too when he first came, but then he was married in 1963. After immigration opened up, sponsorship was sent for all his brothers and sisters and parents.

Malkit Singh found his first job by going to work in the mill that his relatives owned in Mission. He does not remember the name of the mill but it was owned by prominent community member Inder Singh Gill. Inder Singh was his relative and he was the one who had sent the sponsorship for his brother in the first instance. There was a time when Malkit Singh did not work for almost a year. It was hard to find work and he heard that there was a mill near Jasper, so he went there and worked there for three years from 1962 to 1965. Following that he went to work in Squamish, where he worked for five years, followed by him working in Pitt Meadows for 22 to 23 years. In 1991, he retired at 65 years old of age.

In all the mills that he worked at Malkit Singh's task was to pull lumber on the green chain. As a newcomer to Canada, he found the work difficult in the beginning; however, later things became better as he learned to adjust. Malkit Singh recalls with pleasure when the Fraser River used to freeze and they would drive cars over it. It was very cold in those days and they would wear many layers of clothes and two pairs of gloves at a time because they used to work outside. Their throats would be dry and those were not such pleasant memories. Then when the men would come home, they would all get together and cook dinner and work hard to stay warm. There were four to five people living in one home. All those men lived alone because their families (women of the family) lived back home in India. According to Malkit Singh, there were only two Indian women living in Mission at that time.

Malkit Singh talked about the economy at that time when he said that with \$5.00, they could fill the whole tank of car with gas as it was the price then. Then he talked about social events at the Abbotsford Heritage Gurdwara in Abbotsford which is now more than 100 years old. He talked about celebrating "Jor Mela" once a year. They used to go to Abbotsford to get flour or sugar to make something in the Gurdwara. One Giani Ji (temple care taker/priest) would cook in that Gurdwara and would also cook in the cookhouse for

the mill workers. Malkit Singh still remembers the hard work they all undertook in such a cold weather and in such an inhospitable climate.

The men used to go to Vancouver to get their groceries from Hilton in downtown Vancouver where today the PNE takes place. They would sit in one car and all of them would go together, carpooling even to go to work. In those days, nobody checked if men were wearing the seatbelt in the car, because there was not much traffic on the roads. Men would just go to work and come home. It was hard work to earn one dollar.

Malkit Singh mentioned that there were all different kinds of people worked in the mills. There were Europeans, Japanese and Indians working together. The Indians and Europeans used to eat separately as their foods were so different and they had nothing in common. For socialization and outings, they would sometimes go to Victoria and the fare was only \$2.00 on the ferry. They used to go by car or by bus if needed, as the ferry would leave early in the morning. They visited many places like Lake Cowichan near Victoria.

Once his wife and children joined him, they involved themselves in farming. They had always lived in a joint family in India.

Malkit Singh worked at a unionized mill in Jasper. He worked in some non-union mills as well and he did not find any difference in union and non-union mill. The mill at Jasper was owned by men of European origin, but mostly Punjabi men worked for them. Malkit Singh lived in a cookhouse in Jasper where they used to give a \$5.00 fee for their food. The cook used to make food for only five working days, but on the weekends, they had to eat outside or they had to cook themselves because they had the groceries there. Malkit Singh did not find it difficult to cook, even now he cooks sometimes.

When Malkit Singh first came to Canada, ten people came to pick him up from the Vancouver Airport. He remembers bringing a jar of mango pickle from his village which they all ate together. The men used to send messages to India with whosoever was going to India to take to their villages. Many people would come to pick a new migrant up from the Vancouver airport. There would be at least three to four cars full of people. In addition, when anyone came from India, lots of village people and relatives living here would invite the newcomer for dinner and lunches. It used to be a community getting together and the opportunity to give a warm welcome to that new person to Canada.