

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Mohinder Singh Gidda Narrative

Interview Date: November 30th, 2014

Mohinder Singh Gidda was born on June 13th, 1949, in village Pathlawar, District Jalandhar (now in District Nawan Shehar) Punjab, India. He lived in village Sujjon, Punjab before he immigrated to Canada where he studied until grade ten. After finishing his grade ten in 1966, Mohinder Singh then did his Industrial training at a Technical School in Phagwara, called the Industrial Training Institute, or ITI College for his Industrial training. During his time in College, Mohinder Singh attained his trades of Radios and TV's after two years Industrial Training and one year apprenticeship in the Village Paldi in District Hoshiarpur, India. During this time of schooling, Mohinder Singh also did roof work until 1969 whereupon he opened his own shop in Nawan Shehar, called the "International Radio and TV." In his shop, Mohinder Singh would repair old radios and sell new radios as well. He did this shop work for one year until February 1970 after which he immigrated to Canada.

Mr. Gidda came to Canada as a visitor on March 3rd, 1970 after landing at the Vancouver Airport. At that time, his cousin Tarlok Singh Gidda was already living in Canada. It was Tarlok Singh Gidda who originally filed the papers to sponsor Mohinder Singh; however, it was later discovered that Tarlok Singh could not sponsor him because he was his cousin and not the real brother. During this time, before 1968 there used to be blood relation category of sponsorship. Later on, when Pierre Trudeau became the Prime Minister of Canada, he changed Immigration rules with respect to sponsoring blood relatives. As such, after a few months, Mr. Mohinder Gidda applied for his Landed Immigrant status because of his training in Radio and TV work. At that time the Permanent Resident Status was called Landed Immigrant Status (there was different terminology in the 1970's). Mohinder Singh was actually short a couple of points to be accepted as a Landed Immigrant, but he appealed his case. While his appeal result was pending, Mohinder Singh married someone who had lived in England for 10-11 years and had then subsequently immigrated to Canada. In 1972, The Canadian Immigration Minister Bryce Mackasey gave the landed status to anyone coming to Canada, whether through education or any other category. Through this then, Mohinder Singh received his landed status.

During his arrival in Canada, Mohinder Singh's Radio shop was still running and taken care of by his father and brother. His father was a brick layer and his brother was a student during the time. Soon after Mohinder Singh married in 1972, he and his wife purchased a home. He wanted to continue in his Radio and TV trade, but due to his family responsibilities among other things, he could not pursue it in Canada, and there was no support for him to continue his studies in Canada.

Mr. Gidda's first job in Canada was at the Snowcrest Cannery where he worked for one month in Abbotsford. Here, he used to work eight hours a day in this cannery and twelve

hours a day in a farm in Surrey/Cloverdale area on 168th street. Then, he was working almost 20 hours a day. In 1971, Mohinder Singh moved to Terrace to find work. He still remembers his experience of that day travelling to Terrace. He got off the bus at 3 O'clock in the morning only to find that there were no coffee shops, no taxis or anything much else available. He had on one pair of shoes and a pair of snow ones over them and a suitcase in his hand. He walked between the bushes for 5 miles at 3am in the month of November, when there was so much frost. Somebody gave him directions and he found the place. There was a new saw mill there and they interviewed him only to tell him that if he had arrived one week earlier he would have gotten the job. Because there were no busses available for a number of hours, Mohinder Singh then had to hitch-hike to Prince George. While he was travelling back to Prince George and through Williams Lake and other places, he tried to find work at all these different places on his way back, but he was not successful. He guessed that he was a newcomer and he did not have any experience working in the saw mills.

When he could not find any work in Prince George and Terrace, he then went to Louis Creek in 1971, which was next to Kamloops. There was a small saw mill called Louis Creek Saw Mill. Mr. Gidda knew somebody there, so with his reference he got the job there. The salary was \$2.65 per hour at that time. It was a good salary as compared to the cannery where he had been earning \$1.75 per hour. Before going to Louis Creek, he worked at McKenzie at PGE Railway only for one day. He worked there for one day only because the supervisor, who was a Native Aboriginal man, was a racist. He was racist to South Asians (Indians). At that time, there was mixed demographics of people who were working in the Railways. According to Mohinder Singh, the racism was more towards Indians (South Asians) in the form of constant critiques and insults. During his one day at the railway, he earned \$1.25 or \$1.75 per hour.

Soon after this, Mr. Gidda along with his friend, Tarsem Banwait, went to Louis Creek where they did general labour tasks including: piling up the load in the yard when the load dropped and then on green chain pulling lumber; pulling lumber and separating them according to size and putting them together in different loads according to sizes and packaging of those loads. He did different types of jobs there and worked in that mill for six months. There were mostly French people and Indian people working in that mill. The work environment was okay but living arrangements were not good there. The accommodation building where they lived did not have any frames, no doors, and water would only be kept in a bucket, which would just turn into ice. Overall the accommodations were not very welcoming. For example, there was some area in the bushes made temporary with wood for washroom, as seen these days in the farms sometimes. There was also no drinking water and so the men were forced to drink the water which would come from the mountains. There was also nothing for bathing.

According to Mr. Gidda there were double standards for receiving access to certain facilities. Only people of European origin would get the nice bunk houses with heating and all the facilities. Indians on the other hand got one room cabins only which included

no heating, no doors, no water and nothing in that room. Other European men had nice heat, bunkrooms and showers there, but not a single Indian man received the same access. Mr. Gidda was uncomfortable with that discrimination and found it particularly difficult during -41 degree temperature. He recalls how the Punjabi men used to wrap around the electric heater blankets in that cold. During these times, Mr. Gidda was only 20 years old and eventually, he had to leave the job because it was very cold there and he developed tonsillitis. The temperature was around -41degrees. He came back from Louis Creek and they were living in Matsqui at that time on Harris Road along with his cousin.

When he came back, then his cousin dropped him to Hammond in maple Ridge. At that time he had started living in Mission-Matsqui area. It was December 1971. His cousin was working in Fraser Mill at that time and he dropped him to Hammond on his way to work. He had already gone there (Hammond) twice to look for work, but they had rejected Mr. Gidda because he was wearing a turban those days. This time, he had a haircut, and then he went there again in January 1972. He gave his application for a job in January and they called him for an interview. He told them that he was a student, and he got the job. He told them that he only wanted to work for a little bit time to make some money and then he would go to school. Then they gave him the job. He could not afford to leave the job because he had responsibilities back home- he was a newlywed and he had bought a house. He worked in BC Forest Products in 1972. Mr. Gidda worked at BC Forests from 1972 until today now (2014). He had quit temporarily in May, 1974 because some of his cousins were working in Fraser Mill and he also started working in Fraser Mill because it was an easier commute to Fraser Mill as opposed to Maple Ridge. According to Mr. Gidda, 1974 was a particularly poor year for the lumber market and so after 3-4 months of him working there, they laid him off from Fraser Mills.

Following a short time on Unemployment, Mohinder Singh joined BC Forest Products in Hammond, where he worked on the green chain. Working on the green chain also meant that he would avoid the saw dust from the inside of the mills as per his medical instructions. Despite this, Mohinder Singh still ended up working inside the mill as a saw trimmer. In 1982 when BC Forest Product built its new mills, he then moved to the new mill. His new job included working at the drop gate in the new mill. The drop gate is where they sort the lumber and they have 3-4 gates. Different size of wood is put and different gates open up. Then people do the sorting of the wood there and it is also called wood sorting or lumber sorting. He worked in that mill for 20 years.

Mr. Gidda explained how the demographics of workers changed with the mill ownership changing at that time. In the beginning when it was Hammond Mill, there were only 15 to 20 Indians while the majority were people of European origin. Overtime, percentage of Indian workers started increasing. When he was hired in 1982, the name changed to BC Forests Division (BCFD) and after 1982; Fletcher Challenge (a New Zealand Company) took over Fraser Mill and Hammond. In 1988, Interfor Corporation came in and bought the company. But at that time he moved to a different job. Off and on, Mr. Gidda spent more

than 40 years working in the BC Forest Industries. Mohinder Singh preferred the job his whole life because of the benefits he received through his seniority.

Mr. Gidda's impressions about working in the mills were overall good. The wages were good and he used to alternate his day and night shifts. Mr. Gidda also recalls the advantages of working in the mill, including the full medical and extended benefits, MSP coverage, etc. In addition, the employer paid for the uniform, and gloves, hard hat etc., which was a part of the collective agreement. Earlier, they had to pay for their own gloves and uniforms. To this day, Mr. Gidda continues to work in the mill because the age of retirement is 65.

Mohinder Singh also reflects on the changes over time within the mill industry. For example, now, due to technology, there are only one or two men working on the green chain. The mill he works at has now been completely computerized. With the press of one button, the saws shift by themselves, whereas in the past, there were 500 men working to do the same task. Those days, there used to be two shifts and now there's only one shift. In addition the lumber used to be too heavy and it was very hard work in the mills. The lumber kept coming and one could not stop the chain for too long, and people just kept pulling and pulling the lumber, which was hard on the body. But during the time as well, most of the men were young.

Today, at 64 years of age, Mr. Gidda has more memories of his earlier times when he first worked in a mill which was Indo-Canadian owned. The owner was Moe Sahota, who used to live in Victoria. He used to be a part of the BC Cabinet as a Minister and MLA. He used to say that in the earlier times when Mr. Sahota came to Canada, at that time he and his father would not find jobs. Then he came to Vancouver Island as to settle in a different place, because there was so much racism in Victoria those days. According to Mr. Gidda, the discrimination is not going to end 100% because sometimes ignorance cannot be erased completely.

In addition, Mohinder Singh credits his success based on the earliest Punjabi migrants. Indeed, according to him, there only used to be only 2-3 Indian houses in Abbotsford and the small Sikh Temple would not even fill up with people. There used to be one lane to come and one lane to go on the South Fraser Way, and the Punjabi men would stand near the Nishan Sahib. Sometimes people used to park the cars under the Nishan Sahib, because a car would come in every half hour or so, as there were not that many cars. Mr. Gidda lived in Mission and there were only 2 to 3 cars possessed by the whole Indian community. People would car pool to go to the Vancouver or Abbotsford Temple or go get groceries. That's why according to Mohinder Singh, Indian people stayed together and were very helpful to each other those days, as compared to times today. Things have changed now.

Picture Reference: Mr. Gidda showed a picture where he was shaking hands with the IWA (International Workers of America) Union National leader, Mr. Jack Monroe, when he

came to visit their mill in 1985, when there was a union issue in the mill. Mr. Gidda was the only man who was defending IWA and there was a raid of the union happening by PBWC. They wanted to change the IWA. There were some people in the mill who were taking leadership role in the mill and they wanted to get rid of IWA and get some different union in the mill. So there was a problem in the mill in 1985. Mr. Gidda was quite involved in these union issues, and he used to go during his coffee breaks and lunch breaks to defend. Mr. Jack Monroe knew and some other people also told him that Mr. Gidda is defending the IWA. So he came to shake hand with him. Later the mill changed their union to IWC (International Woodworker of Canada).