

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Piara Singh Dhillon Narrative

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Piara Singh Dhillon was born on 13th July, 1948, in Village Buttar located in District Moga (then it was District Ferozepur), Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on May 29th, 1969 when he was 21 years old. He immigrated to Canada based on the quota system when his aunt (father's sister) sponsored him. Then the quota system was based on the education of a person in India, and whosoever got the letter through that quota would be guaranteed immigration. Mr. Dhillon's aunt could sponsor him that time under family sponsorship. Prior to coming to Canada, Mr. Dhillon did four years of farming.

Mr. Dhillon decided to immigrate to Canada because he had a desire to see Canada and hopefully earn some income and savings. In 1974 he was married and stayed in India for four months and then brought his wife back with him. When someone used to apply for a visa for their spouse, it used to take very little time to get the letter. Thus, when his wife arrived to join him, they soon started a family and then things started working out here smoothly for him. He lived with his bhua (father's sister) until his wife joined him in Canada. Moe Gill (current Abbotsford City Councillor) was his bhua's son, so his first cousin. It was through them that he was sponsored to come to Canada. By 1980, things were running smoothly for Mr. Dhillon and thus he would not return to India for fifteen years when he returned after marrying. But in his heart, he did not like to stay here permanently and always longed to go back. When he did go back to India in 1981 and he saw the living conditions there, he made up his mind to settle in Canada indefinitely.

In 1969, Mr. Dhillon worked in a mill called the Prince Rupert Forest Products located in Prince Rupert. Mr. Dhillon only worked at the mill for a year after which he joined the Ham and Cedar Mill otherwise called the BC Forest Products located in Maple Ridge. He received the job in the mill by simply filling an application. They would need young energetic people and so they would hire anyone whom they thought fit the bill. Mr. Dhillon started his first job on the green chain and then after two years he started getting other jobs. Mr. Dhillon explained that on the green chain the pieces would come through the machine of various sizes, for example, 4X10, 4X8, 4X6, and 4X4. These pieces were sized and they were unloaded and someone was needed to pick them up.

All different nationalities of people worked with Mr. Dhillon in the mill in Prince Rupert. There were Indians, people of European origin, Chinese and all different nationalities. There was no difference in behaviour among any nationality. They all lived together in a cook house as most of them were single men and no one had brought their families to Canada. All 25 to 30 people would

live together and there used to be a designated cook who used to prepare their meals. The cookhouse, which was arranged by the mill, was a two storied house, and in every room there lived two people, with approximately 14 people on each floor. An elderly man was hired to cook the meals, who in turn was paid \$20.00 per month from every mill worker. In fact, the cook used to earn more money than the mill workers (per month); however, his work was seven days a week and mill workers used to work five days a week. That cook would get up at 4am and make breakfast and chai for the morning shift men and in the evening he used to cook food for the other shift boys. But regardless, whether anyone wanted to eat or not, Indian chai and food used to be ready in the morning when people woke up. The kitchen counters were wider than normal and the men used to have wide plates for meat, fish and everything in one plate. The cook used to serve the food and no one had any complaints. Everyone would in turn wash their own dishes and the general cleaning of the kitchen and other areas was rotated every week. For example, every week three men were rotated on the duties to clean the kitchen floors, clean the sanitary areas, toilets etc. Everyone used to get their duty shift by rotation. Occasionally they used to call professional cleaners for cleaning the toilets, but the kitchen was done by the men themselves.

Mr. Dhillon mentioned that there were separate cook houses for Punjabis, Chinese and other nationalities in the big mills. Earlier times, before his era in the 1970's, there used to be common cook houses, but during his they were separate cook houses based on race. He mentioned that there were some very big mills which were running before his time, for example Fraser Mill. For that mill, there were cooks for the big cook houses. Mr. Dhillon also mentioned that they used to use firewood to keep the cook house warm. They used to get Punjabi food in the cookhouse because the cook was also Punjabi. They ate roti (Indian bread), curry, daal (lentil soup) and meat on alternate days. Ham and Cedar Mill did not have a cook house, because it was before their time. At that time, few men used to pool money and buy a house. He had bought his own house. Sometimes people used to help others to keep someone in their house. Before 1969, it was very common that 200 to 300 men were working at the mills, and mostly they did not have their families living with them. There were very few men who had their families living with them.

Mr. Dhillon moved from Prince Rupert Mill to Ham and Cedar Mill because the mill in Prince Rupert halted its production. There was also another mill in Mission hiring there but they kept only family men and no single men. This was because the belief was that family men would stay longer in their jobs and mill owners felt single men were not reliable. Therefore, Mr. Dhillon moved to Mission and applied for work in another mill in Mission called the Ham and Cedar Mill. In this mill he also worked on green chain.

Mr. Dhillon worked at Ham and Cedar Mill as green chain puller for two years and then he started working on the new machines that were being introduced in the mills. He was trained by the

foreman. Within four to five years he learned to work on different machines. He worked on small and big ager machines such as the gang saw. There were different machines for specific inches of wood pieces, so that 24 to 32 pieces of wood could be cut at once. He also worked on a Sawyer machine or otherwise called a head saw which happened to be the biggest machines in the mills. In addition, there was more money to work on head sawyer than other 5-6 machines which he worked. According to Mr. Dhillon, working on the head sawyer was a headache, so he never worked permanently on that machine. There was too much pressure from the foreman to work on that machine. Some men could handle it but he could not handle the pressure. Mr. Dhillon preferred instead to work on other machines as he felt he had better control of them. Many other men who were afraid to work with cedar, Mr. Dhillon wasn't as he had 39 years' experience working with cedar. This was because during this time there was no blower system and all the mess from the wood dust would stay inside and there was a low ceiling which would cause great discomfort for the workers. The blower system wasn't introduced until 1986 and even then within the newer mills. This was the reason behind many mill workers ending up with breathing problems. Luckily Mr. Dhillon's health has stayed well throughout his career and according to him even only 20 to 30 percent of people developed breathing problems because of the saw dust after working in the mills.

Mr. Dhillon worked in mills for forty years of his life at both the Prince Rupert Mill and Ham and Cedar were lumber mills. He felt that overall there was no difference in treatment between Indians and non-Indians. Indeed, over his 40 years of work experience, Mr. Dhillon built his seniority well over time. As the seniority was built, his workload also became easier. Mr. Dhillon's first impression about his first job in the mill was good. It was all about money at the time and if there was work, there was money to it, and if there was no work, there was no money. It was very common that people used to work for one dollar to two dollars per hour. Mr. Dhillon however was earning \$2.25 per hour, which was considered to be good. According to Mr. Dhillon any person would be happy to be paid \$2.25 per hour then in addition to getting extended health benefits, health and dental coverage. All these benefits were because of the unionized jobs. Mr. Dhillon did not face any challenges while working in the mills. He was generally happy while working in the mills. He worked for 40 hours per week so he used to get paid for 80 hours bi-weekly, which was really good. He worked eight hours per day, 7am to 4.30pm, sometimes half an hour to one and half hour extra per day. If they started at 7am and worked till 4.30pm, it was considered 8 hours work, with lunch break.

Mr. Dhillon had bought his first home while he was working at the Ham and Cedar Mill, when he was 30 years old and he was unmarried. At that time they purchased the home on July 28th, 1974, the cost of the house was \$21,000. Mr. Dhillon remembers that there were no Punjabi stores in Mission and Abbotsford, and they used to have to go to Vancouver, Heritage Grocery store to get Indian grocery, such as dry lentils and everything for Indian cooking. Two families would car pool

together in a couple of vehicles every two or three months. There was nothing available in Safeway or any other mainstream grocery stores for Indian cooking although slowly they started adding Indian food items there. Before that time however, there was an Italian store on Hastings, Vancouver, where most of the Indian people used to go for grocery shopping. Groceries were very cheap those days. Women did not work according to Mr. Dhillon and the men used to be the “bread-winners” those days and the whole house used to run on one man’s income. When his wife came in the 1970’s, women had started working a little bit here and there, either in stores or canneries, etc. His wife worked in store in Maple Ridge, which was really good. She worked for 6-7 years only and then when that store shut down she did not work again. Later, his wife did seasonal work in the farms for 2 to 3 months every year in Abbotsford.

Mr. Dhillon always had a stable job at Ham and Cedar Mill, so he did not feel the need to change his job. He was paid well there, and the mill still works one shift every day. That mill is now over 100 years old mill as it has been running since 1909. When he started working in 1970, there were 1000 men working in that mill. There were 3 shifts working every 24 hours a day. After alterations, when they got automatic machines, they started reducing the man power and now only 120 men working there and only one shift per day. The only days he did not work was Christmas Day when he used to get a break; otherwise he had a definite stable job in that mill.

Mr. Dhillon retired in 2009 at the age of 61 years. Though he had four to five years left, he decided to take an early retirement with July 31st, 2009 being his last day of work in the mill. Mr. Dhillon has some early memories of mill life as a young bachelor and when he lived in a cookhouse. For example, every two weeks when they went to get their laundry cleaned they treated themselves with an ice-cream in the summer or some coffee in the winter. The relationship between Indians and people of European origin was friendly, there were no issues. When people worked together, then there were no differences.