

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Rajinder Singh Gill Narrative

Interview Date: November 20th, 2014

Rajinder Singh Gill was born on August 28th, 1950 in village Dhudike, District Faridkot located in Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada under the family class basis in 1964. His grandfather, Dharam Singh Gill had already been living in Canada 1928 and then his father Zora Singh came to Canada in 1959. Zora Singh returned back to India in 1963 and brought Rajinder Singh with him to Canada in 1964. He then received his Canadian citizenship in 1965 because if one's parents were Canadian Citizens, it was a much easier process.

Rajinder Singh was 14 years old when he immigrated to Canada. He went to school only for a short while when he came to Canada and then he stopped because he didn't enjoy it. Even in India, he didn't like to go to school and therefore didn't receive much education there. In Canada, he didn't like going to school because there were mostly Canadian kids in the school and there were only one or two Indian students or sometimes none. Instead then, Rajinder Singh began working here and there, eventually finding work in the mill.

Rajinder Singh was only 17 years old when he began working in the first mill in 1967. He worked at Topley Mill along with his Uncle in Prince George area near Burns Lake which was a town near Houston. In 1968, he found work at Mackenzie Mill and would work there for the next 4-5 years. Rajinder Singh was a very versatile young man at that time and he did many different types of jobs in that Mill. First he worked as Planer feed, the one in which the wood goes through it and it plains, as this is rough. He also worked as a trimmer; that is to trim the wood to a certain size, for example, 10ft, or 8 ft. or 12 ft. Then later, he worked as a carrier, the one who holds the lumber, and after that he worked on the forklift for three years. He got all the experiences of different types of jobs in that mill while working 2-3 months in each area, and then moved on to different type of jobs. He also worked as a forklift driver for a number of months. For number of years in between, Rajinder Singh was laid off a few times and worked on various labour jobs. He worked in a cannery also for some time.

In 1986, Rajinder Singh changed his work and came to work in Fort Langley at MacDonald Cedar where he continued to work for the next 17 years until 1997. After that the mill shut down and he went to work in Vancouver at the Canadian White Pine Mill on Marine Drive. After 1997 he worked in Canadian White Pine for 3-4 years. Rajinder Singh remembers that he worked in different kinds of Saw Mills and some Planer Mills too in his life. When asked about the ease of finding mill work, Rajinder Singh recalls that the demand was always high for mill workers so work was easy to find. Today on the other hand, Rajinder Singh argues that one can't find work because the mills have lessened and now with trucking, many people have found work elsewhere. Those

days, family and friends supported each other in looking for work. For example Rajinder Singh's uncle Mohinder Singh Gill helped him find his first job when he was a teen.

Rajinder Singh was very happy and satisfied working in the mills. Indeed, he has all the memories of that time very fresh even now as he remembers doing a variety of work in the mills, from loading boxes, trimming, putting stencils or stampers on the board etc. Being the youngest among the group of his co-workers, wherever there was need, they would put him to work anywhere. That was the work culture those days and even now, wherever they put you to work, you just do that work. Rajinder Singh has good memories working in the mills, everybody in the mill was affectionate and respectful to him, especially when he was a young boy when he was considered a darling of everyone's heart and he didn't mind doing a lot of work. He felt happy to work with all the older men in the mill, and he respected them as well.

According to Rajinder Singh however, there was no doubting that mill work was hard and it took time to learn a new job. He was nervous when was put on any new job in the beginning but he learnt it quickly and felt comfortable after doing it few times. The advantage of working in the mills was that he was making good money and it was a stable position. Indeed, by 1968, at only 18 years old, he was working, owned his car and enjoying his independent life.

Rajinder Singh reflects mostly positives about the work culture in the mills. He said that people were generally very nice those days. He believes that times have changed now. Back then, people treated the younger boys working in the mills like their own children. Today the times has changed according to Rajinder Singh as the sense of familiarity and community has collapsed. When asked about the diversity of people working in the Rajinder Singh recalls that there were not many Indians working in the mills then and that there was rather a mix; for example, Indians, people of European origin and also Aboriginal people. One form of discrimination that Rajinder Singh remembers was when the foremen or supervisors would place Europeans on the easy jobs rather than Indians on the same positions.

Rajinder Singh decided that he would take an early retirement as he had been since he was 15-16 years old. So he worked until he was 55 years old and then retired at the last mill he worked at, the White Pine Mill. In 2004-2005, he went on sick leave for six months and then retired, when the last mill also closed down. By the age of 55, Rajinder Singh retired happily and filled with good memories of being a mill worker and being a citizen of Canada. He describes his experience of coming to Canada was very beautiful when he was a child. Everything was beautiful in the surroundings, the beautiful cars, beautiful people, beautiful colours, everything was just very nice to him.