

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Ranjit Singh Nut Narrative

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Ranjit Singh Nut was born on October 21, 1938 in the Village Rajoana located in District Ludhiana (near Halwara), Punjab, India. Ranjit Singh was 20 years old when he came to Canada on August, 1969 and he has therefore been in Canada for approximately 45 years. Mr. Nut's sister sponsored him to come to Canada and he came alone because his parents' sponsorship application was done separately. When he was in India, he had no idea what he would do upon migrating to Canada or what to expect in Canada. He did agricultural work in India before he came here. He was only 11-12 years old when he started working in the farm because his father did not work much. Then his sister invited him to come to Canada and sent the sponsorship papers for him. Those days, everyone wanted to come to Canada according to Mr. Nut. Before him as well, Mr. Nut's cousin was also here along with his daughters (Paternal Aunt's son). He was joined by his wife three years later.

Mr. Nut did not work for the first year he arrived in Canada because there was not much work available. Eventually however, he started working in a mill called the Timberland Mill located in Surrey. Mr. Nut would work at the mill for three years after which he would go work at the Thomas Mill in Port Coquitlam. Here, Mr. Nut worked for 19 years. After 18 years of him working there, the mill shut down and so he was forced to leave the job although he did receive his compensation.

The Timberland Mill was both a lumber mill and a plywood mill. Mr. Nut worked on the lumber side only. He only worked for three years in Timberland mill and then for 18 years in Thomas mill. Both the mills were union mills. At first he started with the green chain work, and even did clean-up work, but later he worked on the chipper. He left the Timberland mill because it was farther from home, in Surrey and he came closer to home when he started working in Thomas Mill. They laid him off and for some time he worked in a junk yard in Chilliwack. Then he worked there for a few years where he was picking up the copper. When the Thomas Mill re-started, they called him back and after that he worked there for 19 years. The junkyard work was not a union job and they paid in cash.

Mr. Nut is a Canadian Citizen now and has been one for some time as in those days, people used to get citizenship within five years of migration. At the time, the citizenship application fee was only \$5.00 to stamp the citizenship paper. But according to Mr. Nut, even \$5.00 was a lot of money those days, as that was difficult to earn. Mr. Nut did not apply anywhere else but worked in these two mills only. There many Indian men working in the Timberland mill as men came from Surrey and Mission to work there and they used to do car pool together. There were few Caucasian workers at the Thomas mill, but they were mostly Indian workers. On the green chain and even inside, mostly Indian people worked. Mr. Nut lived with his sister until his wife came to Canada. They did not live in a cookhouse, but everyone was living in their own homes. Mr. Nut was married after five

years he came here and then he sponsored his wife. Mr. Nut married his wife on May 4, 1974 at the Abbotsford Heritage Gurdwara.

According to Mr. Nut, when most people came from India those days, they would work in the mill. There were not that many farms then. Mission had very few homes with Indians living in them; for example, Mr. Nut recalls the Braich house, a few Chinese owned houses and nothing else. Now it is quite crowded there, but back then it was all empty space. Even in the town, there were only few men. So for anyone coming from India, the mills were the first place to work in. Finding work in the mills was also usually done through references.

When Mr. Nut was living in India and he had heard from his relatives who were already in Canada, that life in Canada was great, and it looked beautiful in the photographs. But the real life experiences would tell you only after coming here. He had to work hard. He did not feel much—good or bad but at the same time he did not feel the need to go back to India. And when he began to work, he did not find it hard afterwards. He was earning approximately \$300.00 every two weeks. He was earning \$2.50 hourly pay when he started and it was raised to \$5.00 later. When he came from India, he had a good feeling about Canada. He was able to live comfortably here and also he could send money to India. In India, his financial condition was tight since his father did not work. After coming here, his financial condition became better and here, he had no other choice but work.

Mr. Nut and his family used to do their grocery shopping from a store in Mission, but Punjabi groceries were always purchased from downtown, Vancouver. They used to eat roti and all Punjabi food. Some friends would car pool and go and buy groceries from Vancouver. He did not buy his own car until the rest of his family arrived to Canada because he did not have enough money. It used to be very cold in those days and the mills used to stall for six months when it snowed badly. Everything would freeze in that cold. Mr. Nut recalls that one man, whose mill was in Mission, was able to drive his car over the frozen river because it was so cold.

There were no language problems between people of European origin and Punjabis because the conversation was direct and to the point. Over time as well, Mr. Nut learned English. During his two days off in the week he used to relax, and sometimes used to go for a movie with friends in Abbotsford's Towne Cinema. On the weekends, they also went to the Sikh Temple in Abbotsford, the Heritage one.

Working in the mill was considered as a good job and his owner liked his work. It was considered as a respectable job among the relatives and in the community. Even when he was to be married, his job was considered as a well earning job because it was seen as a stable income job.

Today, both of Mr. Nut's children are married and doing well in their life. One younger son is unmarried and he is also working in the railways. He is very happy about his life. Today, Mr. Nut is happily retired and has been on pension as of 2010.