

Saw Mill worker Stories

Rashpal Singh Bassi Narration

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

Rashpal Singh Bassi was born on September 30, 1938 in the Village Sath Chuk which was located in pre-Partition India. The family was forced to relocate from Sath Chuk to Village Daddowal during Partition. Rashpal Singh was only 14 years old when he, accompanied by his 11 year old younger sister were forced to migrate to Canada in 1952 because of the devastations of the Partition of India in Pakistan and India in 1947. Tragically, during this period, both of Rashpal Singh's parents passed away.

Rashpal Singh was sponsored by his bhua (Aunt) Bibi Partap Kaur and phuphar ji (Uncle) Hardit Singh, who were living in Victoria at the time. They were a very wealthy family, one of the wealthiest South Asians living in BC aside from the Mayo and Kapoor Family. This was because the family also owned two mills. When Rashpal Singh and his younger sister first arrived in Seattle from the flight, they were picked up by the bhua in their family car. When Rashpal Singh first arrived he attend Douglas school in Victoria before he started working in his Uncle's mill called Pumber Bay Sawmill. Rashpal Singh's position was to deliver saw dust near Bay Smith. He would recall how a basement would be filled with saw dust because it was such a major source for the furnaces. The saw dust was very important as it was also used for cooking and for heating a house. Women would come to this basement filled with sawdust and fill their large canisters with the material. After three or four months of delivering, Rashpal Singh then went on to stenciling each log, which today, has become automatic. In that time, Rashpal Singh would take in each piece of log that is a 1x2 or a 1x4, stamp it, and then move on. Following the stenciling position Rashpal Singh then became a planer field, which was a difficult job because he had to face the outdoor elements of rain, snow, etc. In addition, he worked this hard position at the young age of 15. Despite its hardships, Rashpal Singh recalls the good wages he was earning. Rashpal Singh would often work double shifts every day, for an entire week so that he could earn enough wages to send monies back home to India where his brother continued to reside. While Rashpal Singh worked, his younger sister attended school.

Rashpal Singh recounts with laughter how as soon as he disembarked from the plane to Canada in 1952, he was immediately told that he was now betrothed! Indeed, Rashpal Singh's engagement took place right there and then at the airport as he was told by his elders. The arranged marriage occurred through Rashpal Singh's wife's nana [mother's father] who also happened to be a friend of Rashpal Singh's Uncle. And so the alliance was between friends. And so, three years after his arrival to Victoria and subsequent engagement to his fiancé, Rashpal Singh's fiancé came and joined him and the two were officially married at the Victoria Gurdwara on January 8, 1960. Rashpal Singh worked at the Pumber Bay Sawmill from 1952 until 1955 or 1956 when the mill shut down. Rashpal Singh then went to work at another mill, owned by a man named Mr. Cameron who also happened to be a friend of Hardit Singh's. Rashpal Singh continued

to work at Mr. Cameron's mill until his retirement in 1995. Rashpal Singh moved up in rank and positions within this company, beginning with working as a cleaner, to ending up working in the shipping department where he held the responsibility of 60 million dollar sales. One significant sale included an order of shipment that was being sent to Pakistan for the building of the Youb Khan Memorial Hospital in Karachi, named after the President of Pakistan. This last mill Rashpal Singh worked at sold very high quality lumber according to Rashpal Singh, as it didn't contain any knots in it, etc., and was ideal for making beds, chairs, tables, etc. Rashpal Singh's starting wage at this sawmill was .95 cents an hour, which were the standard contract wages. Once he joined the union however, he ended up earning \$1.45 an hour. Even then, times were difficult for Rashpal Singh as his brother was also living with him now and so he needed to be able to sustain them both. Times were particularly tense when the union went on strike for three months in 1959 and they were only earning 5 cents an hour as a result. Luckily, the strike ended and resulted in a wage increase to become \$3.00 per hour. Rashpal Singh also recalls the bunkhouse all the single men lived in which were located on Garbee Road but have since been torn down and replaced with hotels. Rashpal Singh used to tell his wife the hardships of single life and having to fend and cook for himself. For example, the men had to hire a cook who would work 24 hours a day and 7 days a week cooking meals and rotis all times of the day. There were two brothers hired, according to Rashpal Singh, and they would make chicken, rotis, any meals that the men asked for. However, these two cooks, according to Rashpal Singh also earned very high wages, charging \$12.00 an hour for this work. Often times, the cooks would have to ease the tensions between the mill working men if there wasn't enough food as man would create a scene.

Today, Rashpal Singh has one daughter and two granddaughters living in Prince George. Rashpal Singh's sister now lives in Esquimalt and sadly his brother and both Aunt and Uncle have passed away. To this day, Rashpal Singh still considers Village Daddowal his home Village in Punjab.