

## **Saw Mill Worker Stories**

### **Sohan Singh Labh Narrative**

**Interview Date: February 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015**

Sohan Singh Labh was born in the year 1931 in Victoria. His father had come to Canada in 1906 and his mother had immigrated to Canada in 1922. At that time the men were not allowed to bring their wives for a number of years, so she was one of the first women to come to Canada. His sister was born in 1926 and she was the first South Asian girl born in Victoria. Mr. Labh's sister passed away in 1945.

Mr. Labh started working in a mill full time in 1956. Before that, he started working when he was studying in high school and during his two months summer vacation, he used to work in the mills. Thus, he started working when he was 15 years old part-time during his school breaks. He graduated from high school in 1949 after which he worked for a year and in 1950 he went to India to get married though he would only stay for a year. Mr. Labh first worked for a trucking company in Victoria that was owned by a South Asian for approximately five years and in 1956, he began working in BC Forest Products, which was the main saw mill in Victoria. He worked there until 1989, the year it closed down. After that he took early retirement at the age of 58. That is the only mill where he worked for 33 years and prior to that he drove a truck for five years before starting his mill job. There was a pension plan, though he lost a little bit of pension due to early retirement. If he would have worked until 60 years age he would have received his full pension. In addition, Mr. Labh could have worked in Vancouver or up in the Island for few more years but his wife was quite ill at that time, so he opted for the early retirement. She passed away in 1999.

When Mr. Labh was young, he played a lot of sports and he even started the soccer team called "Punjab United." Although it was a South Asian Football Club in 1952, they had some people of European origin players also in the team because there were not enough people from South Asia. As such, Mr. Labh is the founder of first Punjabi soccer team in Victoria. Later there was a book written on the Soccer team in Victoria and there were write-ups about Indian soccer players in that book. The reason it was called Punjab United Team because there were some Punjabi boys in that team who were born in Canada, so it was called "United." There was a separate First Nations Soccer Team as well because there were many Aboriginal people living in Duncan at that time, but they were not that involved in sports. The year they were competing, that time there were German, Dutch and Scottish teams as well. Most South Asian people on the Island lived in Paldi rather than Duncan, which was 3-4 miles from Duncan. In 1958 while he was playing many of these sports, Mr. Labh contemplated cutting his hair off as he thought it would be more practical. Although he did, his younger brother kept his long hair all his life (he passed away three

years ago); in addition, he never shaved. Over time however, many people started cutting their hair. Now, according to Mr. Labh, people have started keeping turbans again, especially in Vancouver, but not so much in Victoria.

In Paldi, there was a big Saw Mill whose owner [Mayo Singh Doman] came from the Village Paldi in Punjab, India. The town was actually registered under the name Paldi and there was a post office, and school in Paldi BC. For a number of years, it went on fine, the mill was working, but the mill finally closed down resulting in many people being forced to move out of Paldi. Today, Duncan is the bigger town. There used to be a Sikh temple right at the Saw Mill and that temple is still there, and now there is just a temple but not the mill. In addition, all the housing is torn down, the mill is gone and now there is a larger Sikh Temple in Duncan, BC. Many families have moved in and around Duncan closer to the Town. There are Sikh Temples in Nanaimo, Port Alberni, etc. There was one old Temple in Victoria which was torn down with a newer one built at a later time.

Most South Asians lived in Vancouver and Victoria. Although Mayo Singh's mill was mostly run by South Asians, there were also Japanese and Chinese workers there. Victoria was the main city on the Island but not everyone could get jobs there. Some people who migrated later also went to work in Duncan and London, BC. In Port Alberni, there were only families at that time, and now there must be 100-200 families of Indian origin and there are few Temples. When Mr. Labh's father first came to Canada in 1906, there was no Sikh Temple, but they rented a bible house (a Church) to do their Temple activities. With the exception of this story, Mr. Labh doesn't know much about his father's experience as one of the earliest settlers in Canada because his father passed away from a supposed heart attack when Mr. Labh was only six years old. Indeed, it was difficult for his mother as she never remarried and there were four children to take care of. His sister was nine years old at the time of his father's death and his brother was three and his youngest sister was two years old. It could be assumed that his father worked in a mill for some time and later he had a small trucking business. His mother kept it going and hired people to drive the truck. When he and sister were in both teenagers (around 15-16 years old) even she drove a truck for some time. This, as can be imagined in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, was very unique. While attending school, even Mr. Labh drove a truck, as did his younger brother. Unfortunately, none of his siblings are alive now as he is the only one surviving from his immediate family. His father was one of the first South Asians to pass away in Victoria and he recalls that there exists a picture belonging to his brother showing how they piled the wood in order to prepare for the cremation as there were no crematoriums at the time. Mr. Labh himself was not there to attend his father's cremation because he was too young. Even a photographer from a local newspaper took a picture of the cremation as such a site was perhaps unique. Mr. Labh's mother also passed away fairly young age too in the year 1957.

Going to high school those days was rare for Punjabi migrants; however Mr. Labh and his siblings were the only four Punjabi children in the high school and to this day they still celebrate their reunion. Mr. Labh graduated in 1949 and he just recently celebrated his 60<sup>th</sup> class reunion. Mr. Labh did not face any sort of discrimination even though both he and his brother wore turbans. This was because according to Mr. Labh everyone got along with one another nicely. According to Mr. Labh, the problems began in the 1950s when more immigrants started coming and he then began hearing of problems in Vancouver and Quesnel, though things remained fairly stable in Victoria.

After graduating from high school, Mr. Labh continued to work in trucking because that was his father's business. He then married at an early age in order to help his family even though he was planning to attend University. His wife was also from India too and soon after she arrived, she also became a Canadian citizen because of her marriage to Canadian born Mr. Labh. In those days, the rule was fairly simple where if you married a Canadian Citizen you would automatically become one as well. His wife's family also immigrated to Canada over time and today all are settled here now. As such, Mr. Labh has his first child, a daughter by the time he was 21 years old. They all lived in the same house for quite some time, however they had to move when his second child was born. He then moved from the trucking business to the mill job (BC Forest) because that was the easiest place to get a job in those days. According to Mr. Labh as well, the pay was very beneficial. To begin with, South Asian workers were paid 10 cents per hour while people of European origin workers were paid 15 cents per hour; however, when more immigrants from India came in late 1940's and joined the unionized mills, everyone received equal pay. The non-union mill workers of course, had a much harder time. According to Mr. Labh, there was still some discrimination in that mill where for example, some higher up positions such as grading and inspector's jobs were not given to South Asians, even when they had their grading tickets and training. The foreman used to pick the people of European origin to do those jobs even though the South Asian workers were senior to some of the junior people of European origin. Those small mills only had 10-12 people working. The bigger mills in Victoria had almost 1000 people working there those days which were then later reduced to 200 people in the end before it was shut down due to automatic machines being invented. Earlier, they used to pile the lumber by hand, and now it is done through automated machinery. Mr. Labh had built his seniority at BC Forest Products, but even one day or even half day more seniority would matter in promotions and moving to other jobs in the mill. That were the union rules of seniority.

Mr. Labh worked a range of positions in the mill. He operated the electric crane, he worked on the trim saw operator and sometimes during the day, he would do more than just one job. However, regardless of what job he did, his rate of pay remained the same. Therefore, even if he tried to do some jobs of higher pay rate, just for the sake of learning, he would earn the same rate of pay. Although Mr. Labh notes that he enjoyed doing a range of different jobs in the mills

as his days would go by much faster. In addition, because Mr. Labh was well versed in both English and Punjabi, he was often called before the Union to work as an interpreter. Overall, Mr. Labh thought it was a well-paying job and so he did not look for any other work after he joined the mill and continued to work for 33 years straight without ever being laid off. This was also in part because BC Forest was a big mill and so there were no laying off issues.

Mr. Labh and his wife used to eat Indian food during their early life in BC and they would purchase Indian groceries. He vaguely recalls stories of when his father first came and couldn't speak English, thus they would look at the picture of the fish on the fish can and point at it if they wanted fish or tuna. They would also buy their groceries by pointing at what they needed.

Mr. Labh has a rich and diverse family history. He is a father, grand-father and a great-grand-father today and still very fit, both physically and mentally. Indeed, he still continues to play floor hockey on a seniors' league. His children have married into a diversity of cultures – English, Italian and Punjabi, and his grand-children are well educated and well placed in their professional life. He feels satisfied and proud of his family and proud to be living in Victoria, Canada. In addition, Mr. Labh still loves his roots in India and his ancestral village as he even took his son and grandchildren for a visit there.