

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Sukhdev Singh Dhaliwal Narrative

Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

Sukhdev Singh Dhaliwal was born on March 15, 1933 in the Village of Tuse located in District Ludhiana, Punjab, India. Through the sponsorship of his father, Amar Singh Dhaliwal, who was already in Canada before him, Sukhdev Singh then migrated to Canada in the year 1949 when he was only 16 years old. Amar Singh Dhaliwal in turn, had been first sponsored by his brother Bishan Singh (Sukhdev's Taya or Uncle).

Five years after he had arrived in Canada, when he was 21 years old, Sukhdev Singh became a Canadian citizen. When Sukhdev Singh first arrived in Canada he lived in Mission, BC where his father was residing at the time. Although during this time, Amar was working at a mill in Vancouver that was owned by his brother Bishan, he encouraged Sukhdev Singh to go to school first. And so Sukhdev Singh did attend school for a short time in Mission, having completed up to grade seven. Despite being able to pick up speaking English fairly quickly while in Mission, Sukhdev Singh felt anxious about the lack of Punjabi students in his school. Therefore, Sukhdev Singh then decided to look for work in Yubou because his father's friend, Jaspal Singh Brar also worked there and could help him. Initially, Amar stayed in Yubou with Sukhdev Singh for three months in order to help him get settled in, but he then returned to Mission and left Sukhdev Singh in Yubou to continue working. Sukhdev Singh lived in a bunkhouse in Yubou, sharing the space with about 70 other men. Because he was fairly young at the time, Sukhdev Singh's main task was to clean the lumber. Despite being so young at the time, Sukhdev Singh recalls times of leisure when he would join the other men in games of football. Sukhdev Singh recalls that there were only about 800 people living in Yubou at the time, though fairly diverse in terms of ethnicity, including a small number of Punjabis, Caucasians, Chinese, etc. After working in Yubou for three years, Sukhdev Singh then moved to Richmond to work at Fraser Mills, which Amar also had a share in, working in partnership with another man named Harjot Gill who was also from Mission. Unfortunately, Fraser Mills burned down and soon after, Sukhdev Singh went to work at his cousins (son of Bishan Singh) mill which was located in Vancouver. When Sukhdev Singh was disappointed to learn of the short wages at this job (he was earning \$1.08 per hour), he left the position after only a week. According to Sukhdev Singh, the \$1.08 per hour wage was approximately 5-7 cents lower than the norm and so he decided to move back to Yubou where he had first started working upon immigration. In Yubou, Sukhdev Singh was earning the standard wage of \$1.12 and eventually ended up earning \$2.00 per hour as his time there continued. Sukhdev Singh then continued to work in Yubou for five years after which he visited India at the age of 21 in order to be married.

When Sukhdev Singh visited India in order to be married at the age of 21, he remained there for one year. Shortly after his arrival back to Canada, Sukhdev Singh's wife and their now young baby son would also join Sukhdev Singh. Even when Sukhdev Singh's wife arrived to Canada, she also attended school for a short time as Sukhdev Singh realized the value in learning English. Sukhdev Singh also encouraged his wife to dress in western attire, i.e. dresses, skirts, pants, etc., so she would be more comfortable in Canada. Upon the arrival of Sukhdev Singh's small family, Amar purchased a house in Lake Cowichan for \$5000. The entire family (Amar, Sukhdev Singh, his wife and son) lived together for fifty years before Amar retired permanently and moved back to India. During this time, Sukhdev Singh continued to work in Yubou for

a short time, but then began working at Honeymoon Bay where he would remain for the next thirty years. At Honeymoon Bay, Sukhdev Singh was able to do a range of jobs including: grading, marking, plane shafting, etc. as he had attained his grading certificate. The mill at Honeymoon Bay was unionized, employing approximately 800 people. During a period of lay off time, Sukhdev Singh also tried logging work but found it very difficult and dirty as we he would get very wet, etc.

Sukhdev Singh understands and is aware of the discrimination that existed within the mill industry. He recalls how Punjabi men would never be offered anything outside of mill work and even in that case, the jobs were first offered to Caucasians and then the Punjabis. Even once the Punjabi men were hired within the mill systems, they were never considered for higher up or management positions including: Supervisor, Foreman, etc.

After 30 years at Honeymoon Bay, Sukhdev Singh then purchased his own business-a gas station at Lake Cowichan. By then, Sukhdev Singh's family had grown to include: his wife, three sons and two daughters, and so, the entire family lived in a home located above the business. Then, in 1975 Sukhdev Singh sold the gas station business and moved to Duncan where he resides today. Because of his successes overall, Sukhdev Singh would eventually sponsor all his siblings from India to migrate to Canada.