

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Sukhwinder (Sukh) Cheema Narration
Interview Date: January 26, 2015

Sukhwinder 'Sukh' Singh Cheema was born on February 2, 1966 in Malerkotla, District Sangrur, Punjab, India. He migrated to Canada with his mother and sister in 1969 and even though he was only three years old at the time, he recalls that the month was either January or February (the winter months), because of the snow on the ground. Before Sukh arrived, his father and Taya Ji (Uncle) had already been living in Canada and thus it was his father who sponsored the rest of the family to come. According to Sukh, his father couldn't sponsor the rest of the family to come from India until he had earned enough money. Sukh would become a Canadian citizen three years after his arrival in 1972. As Sukh grew up, he attend the local schools and wouldn't begin working in sawmills until he was 16 years old.

The first mill that Sukh worked in was the Watkins Shake and Shingle Mill located in Whonnock. According to Sukh, the majority of the mills were in Whonnock with the exception of a few which were located in Mission. Sukh also recalls that there were approximately only six to either other Punjabi families who lived in Mission at that time and they were the only Punjabi family on their street. Because he was only 16 years old at the time and in grade 11 attending Mission Secondary School, Sukh would only work on a part-time and on-call basis when he was needed. Sukh recalls nostalgically the times he experienced in his first position. Because all the coworkers were friends of his father, they all treated Sukh with great care and affection. On Fridays even, they would treat Sukh to a beer, jokingly telling him that they wouldn't tell his dad! Or, on other days such as pay days, the men would all get together to cook goat meat on a hot plate. To this day those friendships forged in the mill have remained, some thirty years later.

Later on when his Uncle bought a small, family-run mill located in Mission, Sukh continued to work there every weekend. However, his Uncle's mill's was not unionized; therefore, he only earned \$8.00 an hour. Sukh recalls that most Punjabi men preferred to work for Caucasian owned mills because those were the mills that were unionized. Even Sukh's father attempted to help some mills become unionized in Whonnock; however, the owners resented such efforts. From 1982-1986 when he was in his teens, Sukh ended up working on-call at five different mills: Scott Cedar Products, Meeker Cedar, Watkins Mill, Whonnock Shake and Shingle and his Uncle's mill. Because Sukh was so adept at a range of tasks, he was regularly called on in these mills. He preferred working in mills as opposed to a fast food restaurant like McDonald's because he could earn a wage of \$14.00 an hour. Even with the fair amount of income he was earning, Sukh always gave his earnings to his father, claiming that this was the sort of system all Indian families were used to. In turn, his father was always there to provide him anything he needed. Sukh is also quick to note that he was lucky in being able to work in sawmills because many other teenagers wanted such jobs, but you could only get a job if you knew a relative already working in or owning a mill. Sukh abled to find balance between his work and school by being engaged in sports. He

played basketball for fifteen years and it was something that his parents encouraged both for him and his siblings. As such, even his younger brother played soccer and his younger sister would also play basketball.

Some of the tasks that Sukh took on when he first started working in mills included as a Block Piler. In this position, Sukh was required one to make the shakes and shingles used for roof tops. Other jobs he held included packing, which would require him placing shingles down a chute, which would then sit in a big bin and then he would pack them into massive bundles that would then need to be bound by large chain linkages. According to Sukh, the hierarchies in the mills were fairly stagnant and established. For example, if the mill was owned by people of European origin, then all the supervisory roles would go to Caucasians. However, if there was a mill owned by a Punjabi, then there was a chance that higher up positions could go to others. In terms of the range of positions, from block piling, chain pulling, etc., these were spread over broadly between both Punjabis and non-Punjabis because of the high wages it entailed.

In terms of demographics, Sukh never recalled Chinese or Japanese working in the mills in Mission; however, he argues that the demographics would have been different elsewhere such as in Vancouver. Within the sawmills in the 1980's however, and even today, Sukh recognizes the racial divide as being apparent during lunch times when the people of European origin workers would eat in a separate area than the Punjabi workers. Most of the time the Punjabi men would have their lunches together in the mill while the Caucasian workers would eat their lunches in the canteen. The work changed in the mills in the 1990's, once many of the older mills shut down. This was because Sukh found work much easier in the new mills that had opened up in New Westminster. In between the jobs, Sukh also attend two Universities: the University of the Fraser Valley and BCIT, where he studied information technology. In total, Sukh worked in mills for four years beginning in his teens: from 1982 until 1986. Following his education, Sukh began working as a sales representative for an aluminum company. He recalls the shock he had when he received such a large cheque for doing such 'easy' work. After having worked in the mills, he almost felt as though he hadn't actually earned those wages as a sales rep. However, over time he began to realize the value of other skills outside of the mills.

Reflecting back on his experiences working in the mill, Sukh describes the incredible physical demands of the job, and how often times by the time his first break would arrive, his black apron would be soaking in sweat. In addition, the mill environment was very dusty with saw dust and other materials constantly in the air. In the times that Sukh had worked in the mills, he remembers that no one was concerned about the dust and masks were never worn. One friend of his, a man named Darshan, had to fight for a WCB claim as a result of respiratory problems he received from working in the mills. Although that case in particular took seven years to be settled, the man did end up receiving recompense.