

Saw mill Worker Stories

Sukhwinder Singh Bolla Narrative

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Sukhwinder Singh Bolla was born on May 4th, 1964 in Chakdana village, located in District Navan Sheher, Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on January 2nd, 1984 under the family class basis. He came alone sponsored by his family who was here already at the time and today he is a Canadian Citizen. To take the citizenship of Canada oath people could do their application after three years. Thus, Sukhwinder applied for his after three and a half years. After that they got a call for test and if they passed their test they became citizens.

Before immigrating to Canada, Sukhwinder Singh worked as farmer in the agricultural industry for five to six years in India. After coming to Canada, he worked in various saw mills. The first mill he worked was in Mission and called the Mission Shake and Shingle. He worked there for approximately fifteen months from 1985. He worked in other mills as well. For example, in 1987, he started working in the Fraser Cedar Shake and Shingle for about one year, which was located in Maple Ridge. When he came from India he used to go to a farm for work. And after work, he learned how to pack the shakes. He used to go as a helper with somebody in a Mill and learnt the skill from him. After that, he slowly got a job there. As he was going daily to learn and work as a helper, the mill owner at Mission Shake and Shingle understood that this man has learned and knows the work now and he gave him the job.

Sukhwinder Singh recalls that he started his first job as a packer of shake and shingle. After sometime he felt he should move forward and learned to do the cube work. That was a different job, which was hard but it had higher wages. Slowly, as people were leaving, he started working with cubes. As such, first he was a Shingle packer and Shake packer and then after getting a promotion, he became a "Cube Man." There were many people of European origin workers in the mill. For example, Sukhwinder Singh remembers Dave and Mike, the foreman. He worked in other mills too, so there was a difference. After the 1990's Sukhwinder Singh moved into the trucking business in 1991. The name of the mill in Abbotsford where Sukhwinder Singh had worked was the Blue River Shake and Shingle. It was here he did cube work and then he became Cubes man

In 1985, it was considered more socially acceptable to work in a mill as opposed to working in a farm. When people used to say "he works at a Mill" that used to be his name and he was considered to be a great man and he is financially better off. Indeed, during that time, Sukhwinder Singh recalls that farmers were only earning a wage of \$3.50 per hour. For example, after he had first arrived in Canada, the next day, on January 9th, he worked for the whole day at the farm to pick up sprouts and he was given only 7 dollars or 8 dollars for working 16 hours of picking sprouts. Only one day, he made 16 dollars and

that was his biggest day! And after that he started going at nights to learn the packing of shakes in the Mill. He did graveyard shifts where sometimes he started at 1am at night and went until 7am. Those days, they didn't even used to let anyone go to learn in the mills. Even those days, he went to learn. He used to work at the farm during the day time and at night, a man used to pick him up (a friend, whom he still appreciates and remember until date). He didn't have a license to drive a car nor anything much else yet this friend provided all the necessary moral and practical support. He worked there and learned and then he got a job there to pack.

All together he worked for six years in the mills. In those days, it was hard work but overall it was okay according to the wages. According to Sukhwinder Singh, Caucasian workers and other Caucasians were discriminatory against Indians. For example, if there was ever an opportunity for an Indian to gain a better position, the people of European origin would demand that no 'Hindu' get the better job. Only when there was no other option were Indians considered for better positions. Only because of that Sukhwinder Singh slowly got a chance. In the whole industry, there were only 7-8 Cuber men at the time. Back then, very few Indians were given the opportunity to be a Cuber man. Most of the times out of 12 men working on the machines who cut the cubes, all of them would be Caucasian and nobody else would be seen working there, but them. They would give only part time 1-2 hours or a maximum three hours of work on the machines to Indians and only if they urgently needed help.

There were advantages of working in the mills because there were often unionized and unions had set wage rates. When Sukhwinder Singh went to work, he knew that he was guaranteed to get wages for his 8 hours' work. Those days he used to get \$147.00 minimum wages and they were piece workers. Back then, they used to get \$2.65 per square and they had to cut 5 bundles or tie them down. For that, they used to \$2.65 per square. For the minimum, even if they didn't get 35 or 40 squares, they were guaranteed to get \$147.00, which was considered a good amount in the 1980's. Otherwise, in other mills that didn't have unions, there was only piece work and they were paid the rate of \$2.00 or \$2.50, and whatever they would give was final. According to Sukhwinder Singh, that's why people were running after unionized jobs.

In 1991, around summer time, Sukhwinder Singh quit the Green River Shake and Cedar Mill Job in Mission. The mill had been a very popular and big mill. When he was working in the mill, the economy was okay according to Sukhwinder. Everything was cheap, the grocery was cheap, living was cheap, and the wages were also according to that.