

Saw Mill Worker stories
Surinder Singh Sandhu Narrative
Interview date: February 8th, 2015

Surinder Singh Sandhu was born on March 15th, 1942, in Village Rurka, Punjab, India. He was 25 years old when he came to Canada although before that he stayed in England for four years to visit and travel. He applied for his visitor application from England in order to come to Canada in 1967. He came to Canada on June 21st, 1967 and soon after, six months later, he was married in Canada. His maternal side of the family was here and it was them who found the girl for his marriage. Mr. Sandhu liked to stay in Canada because he found it better than England. The climate and the atmosphere in general was cleaner than England, which, due to industrialization, the air had become polluted. He also liked Canada because he could make more money here and he could buy whatever he wanted.

Mr. Sandhu studied until grade ten while in India and after that he did not pursue more education. He did not do farming work in India in part because his father had passed away when he was only six months old. He first worked in England for four years because he arrived on Permanent Resident Status there. He worked in a factory called Sterling Matter. When he emigrated from England he landed in Toronto and then from Toronto he came to Victoria. He started work the very next day when he came to Canada, even though he was just a visitor for six months. This was because Canadian laws were fairly lax then. His first job then was in the Plumper Bay Sawmill in Victoria on the green chain. He found the work very hard for the first few days but he was used to doing hard work in England too. He worked in that saw mill for 18 years. In between he went to work in BC Forest Products also for six months because Plumper Bay Mill was stalled for some time, but he came back when the mill started again. The unionized mill was owned by his maternal grandfather, Piara Singh Deol, which was the reason why he got the job the next day after immigrating to Canada.

After working at the green chain for three years, Mr. Sandhu moved to developing work inside the mill including the Tail Saw. There were great amounts of sawdust in that job, and it was not a very secure job; however, he worked there for fifteen years. Then the mill stalled after that and he did not work for two-three years, though he later worked in a factory of wood stoves called Sherwood Industries. It was a factory, not a saw mill. He was used to do grinding work as he attained that experience from England. He worked there for around ten years and retired at the age of 65. Sherwood Industry was not a Union Company, but other companies he worked were. Mr. Sandhu did not feel any difference working in union and non-union company because he always gave his 110% no matter where he worked or what he did.

Mr. Sandhu's starting wage was \$2.81 per hour in Canada in 1967. That was the green chain rate those days. The minimum wage was five cents lower than that standard green

chain wage. Mr. Sandhu received 10-15 cents higher when he worked inside the mill on the tail saw. He enjoyed that job more because he could get overtime on the job.

There were mostly people of Indian origin working in Plumper Bay mill and there was one person of European origin and 4-5 Aboriginal people because the mill was located on a First Nations reserve. They had a reservation then that a certain percentage of Aboriginal people would be allowed to work in the mill. All Mill Wrights were people of European origin although he does not know the reason why it was like that. Mr. Sandhu worked on the barge for 7-8 years. Barge referred to when the big chips of wood would go into the chipper machine and become chips. The barge machine was in Bellingham. According to Mr. Sandhu, all people had good working and social relations with each other and there was no discrimination seen among the people. The supervisors were Indians and there was no discrimination in assigning jobs.

Mr. Sandhu used to eat Indian food at work and home. Nobody said anything at Plumper Bay but at BC Forest Products, some people of European origin used to make faces when Indian men ate their lunches with the smell of food. Mr. Sandhu preferred to eat vegetarian food, for example Roti and Sabzi, he was not big fan of meat.

Mr. Sandhu got his Canadian citizenship after three years of his marriage in the year 1970. In those days, the rule was Canadian Citizenship after three years of living in Canada. The process was fairly simple as one would just fill an application going to Victoria's Immigration office and the citizenship would come in the mail.

The social life was not very active those days for Mr. Sandhu. There was no television or radio and so he would go to the library on the weekends and get some books. The social life was peaceful in Victoria and even now, as compared to Vancouver, it is peaceful. There was a Gurdwara in Victoria where they celebrated Vaisakhi, Christmas and New Year. Those days, people stayed together in the community and with their relatives and weddings used to happen at the Gurdwara. Mr. Sandhu recalls when he got married it was simple Indian food at the wedding and only laddoos. Those days, working in the mill was considered respectable because wages were higher than working anywhere else.