

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Surinder Singh Narrative
Interview Date: December 4th, 2014

Surinder Singh was born on 3rd May, 1963 in Village Sanghwaal, District Jalandhar, Punjab, India. He lived and studied in his Village until he immigrated to Canada. While in India he also attended University until finishing his B.A. degree with a major in Economics and Geography. He had just finished writing his final exams before immigrating to Canada.

Mr. Surinder Singh entered Canada through Halifax by the Amelie Ship in 1987. He began his journey leaving from India in 1985. He then came through Germany, Holland and then to Halifax. He had good knowledge about world geography, so he knew how to read maps and how to reach different places in the world. He wanted to travel Europe, and after finishing his Bachelor's degree, he expressed to his father that he would like to go and visit Germany, and he left India for travelling and he visited Germany and Holland where he also worked for a short while. He stayed in Germany for one year and then moved to Holland just for travelling. For Surinder Singh, Germany was very different country to adjust to because of the weather and life-style. He explained that in India he used to wear different types of shoes, as normal dress shoes, but due to the severe cold in Germany he recalls having to wear very heavy clothing. He remembers that it was the month of December and it was Christmas time, and Mr. Singh found it very different from India, very cold. He then heard about a ship going to Halifax and that anyone interested could board. And so Surinder Singh took the ship and came to Canada. The ticket to board the ship was sold for approximately \$2000.00. Then in 1987, from Germany, he left in a ship again along with 174 passengers to Canada. He travelled alone without his family on this trip, as a young boy of 23 years old.

In Holland, he was involved in building the Sikh Temple in Amsterdam. Prior to this, the Sikhs living in Abbotsford were renting a house for the Sikh Temple. There were seven other men who were building the temple who had lived together there and doing the "Seva" (selfless volunteer work) and living in the temple at the same time.

Mr. Singh travelled from Holland to Halifax in the ship for 23 days on a continuous journey. The ship started from Holland and it was docked at Yarmouth, Charlesville and they were sent off from there. When they arrived and walked out of the ship, the Canadian army came and arrested Mr. Singh and all the 174 other passengers with him because it was an illegal entry to Canada. They stayed in the Halifax jail for 15 days. During this time they barely received food to eat in the prison, sometimes only being provided with one meal a day. Even while journeying to Canada aboard the ship they were hungry because it was a small cargo ship and they only received enough rations to last seven or eight days. Mr. Singh still has memories aboard the ship. He remembers that there were four crew members, one captain and the chief and 174 passengers and all men except one woman.

When they were released from the jail, they were interviewed for investigations to assess if they were a danger to Canada? It was in 1987, and that time period in particular was when the situations in Punjab were not good, and they were all Punjabi men, so the Canadian government was especially alert and strict. After a full investigation, they were released on filling bonds if all those men were good people. After filling the bonds, the army told the Canadian government to release them and that they could stay in Canada. All the Gurdwaras of Canada and Societies came together to support these 174 passengers. These societies pressured the government and said that they will keep these men in their homes, and insisted the government to release them. The government released this group. A few of the men went to Toronto and others came to Vancouver.

During this ordeal, the Punjabi community stood by the passenger's side. According to Mr. Singh, earlier, one ship had come from Sri Lanka and the Canadian Government had put those passengers in 5 star hotels. But when this group came, many Canadians had strongly protested to send them back. The Canadian-Sikh community however stood up and raised their voice that they will not let these people go back. Thus, their bonds had been filled by the local Sikh community the 174 passengers were released. The bond meant that for every person to be released, the local Sikh Community paid \$500.00 so that these men do not run away and leave the country. It was a security bond. Many within the Sikh community of BC and within Canada came together to support them. In Toronto, there was Sikh Student Federation and World Sikh Organization that together called out an appeal and paid the bonds without even seeing these men. The families had filled the bonds irrespective of the amount. It was \$3000.00 per person. Mr. Singh and his accompanied men stayed in a Vancouver Gurdwara. Slowly, these men convinced the government that they could work and requested for a work permit. Over time they were issued a work permit and they began working. They then landed in Halifax in 1987 and received their work permits in 1988.

Mr. Singh did many types of jobs when he received his work permit in 1988. His first job was tree planting which was in the mountains where the forest trees were cut down. At the time the Canadian government was saying that whatever had been cut needed to be re-planted for future growth, so wherever it was needed, Mr. Singh planted new plants in Clear Water. This job was introduced to him by a contractor (thekedar) in Port Alberni, named Bhangu. Mr. Singh and his accompanying men had a contract with him so they all found work through him. Bhangu lived in Port Alberni but the job was all over BC including: Clear Water, Kamloops or anywhere it was needed across BC. Mr. Singh worked on that job for one year as it was quite a hard work. This tree planting job was a temporary job for Mr. Singh, as he awaited for alternate work at other places.

Mr. Singh lived at various places after coming to BC in 1987. First he lived in Vancouver in 1987, then he came to Abbotsford in 1988 and then he went to live in Surrey in 1989, stayed there for one year and then came back to Abbotsford again in 1990, since then he is living in Abbotsford.

Mr. Singh was constantly looking for work in the mills, and finally in 1989 he heard the good news that he had received a job in one. In 1989, there was one newly started mill in BC called Fort Langley Cedar which was owned by Punjabis. In that mill, there were more Punjabi people working than Caucasians although he worked closely with both. He worked in that mill for ten years until 1999 where he was a packer of shakes and cubes and also worked on a forklift.

Mr. Singh remembers that it was very hard work to be picking the big blocks of wood which would come upstream in the river. This wood used to be very dirty which came from the river and he did not like it. Then he started packing the cubes which came down and the pieces of wood which go on the roofs. Mr. Singh was quite fast at that work when he started the shake packing. His experience working in that mill was not as good as he got working in Caucasian owned mills because the Caucasians paid more for the work. In that mill, for example, he used to get \$1.00 or \$1.50 per square. That meant, if he tied 5 bundles, he earned about \$1.50 for that. He used to earn according to piece work and in an average his earning ranged between \$80 to more than a \$100.00 but in exceptional cases when the mill broke down, it was only up to \$20.00 per day. Mr. Singh worked in that mill for 10 years.

In 1999, the mill ran into trouble because of some personal conflicts between two partners one of which was Ranjit Singh Sidhu and his partner from Mission. At the time Mr. Singh was also doing construction work on the side as part time work. He worked in the mill during the nights and during the days he was doing dry-wall, plumbing and roofing work in the construction business. He was quite agile and adaptable to a range of jobs. When construction workers used to go for work, he used to go with them. For two years from 1990 to 1992, he was learning as a helper, then slowly he started doing part-time while doing full time in the mill at nights. In 2000, Mr. Singh opened his own construction company named "Ravi and Simi Home Renovations." Since 2000, Mr. Singh has not gone back to the mills.

Mr. Singh did not get his immigration status till 1991. In 1992, he received his immigration status, which is now called Permanent Immigrant Status, those days it was called "Immigration" to Canada. It was on point basis while living in Canada, and in 1995, he got his Canadian Citizenship. Those days, people could apply for immigration while living in Canada and they would simply stamp it and would say that you are officially allowed to stay in Canada. Earlier, when he was on work permit, he could only stay in Canada if he had work, but after getting immigration, he was officially allowed to stay in Canada. He was already working when got his immigration status, so he did not have any issue of looking for work. He had to write a test to become Canadian Citizen.

Mr. Singh did not have any family members when he first arrived in Canada. Thus in 1994, he sponsored his mother, father, sister and brother who were all living in India. Mr. Surinder Singh was married in 1992 in Toronto. His wife came to BC in 1992 and since then, he and his wife have been living in Abbotsford. Mr. Singh's marriage was an

arranged marriage which was arranged by his paternal Aunt and Uncle. It happened when he went to visit them in Toronto and he was unmarried at that time. The aunt and uncle arranged his marriage. Because his parents were not in Canada at the time of his marriage, so the only relative who attended his marriage was his aunt and uncle.

For one year from 1999 to 2000 when Mr. Singh was working in the Fort Langley Cedar Mill at night, he worked in some other mills too and during the day he was doing home renovation work part-time. The particular mill was in Mission, though he does not remember the name of it. He managed to work in two mills in Mission because both the mills were close-by and the people working in both mills were quite acquainted with each other. Both the mills (Mission and Fort Langley) always needed shake packers. The work was to manually feed the wood into the machine, which would split the wood into two pieces and then pack these shakes pieces by hand. It required fast work but no matter how fast you were, the machine kept on working fast. If the wood filled up, some people did not like it and left the job. Only those who were good and fast packers were in high demand. Therefore they could go anywhere to work once they knew that there was a job opening.

Mr. Singh in the Mission mill for a four or five months only while the rest of his work was in the Fort Langley Cedar continuously. He also worked part-time in Walden and Mission Shake and Shingle in Mission. Wherever there was need for a Packer, he worked. He worked at Walden for six months part-time which was actually a unionized mill. In whatever Caucasian owned mills he worked, he did not work steadily, because there was a rule if anyone worked for more than thirty days, they would automatically become part of the union, and so the owners used to lay off the workers before that time period, and would thus keep the workers only on probation. On the other hand, in a unionized mill if someone worked for eight hours he was paid fairly for that time. This standardized payment was based on union rates. According to Mr. Singh, in Indian owned mills, which were not unionized, the pay was less and secondly, if the mill stopped any day, the owner would simply tell everyone to go home and they were not got paid; however, in unionized mills they would pay a minimum of four hours wages if they went to work. In Walden, there were more Caucasian men working than Indian workers.

The demographics of workers varied from mill to mill, regardless of it being Caucasian or Indian owned. In one Caucasian owned mill, there were more Caucasians than Indians and in the other it was the reverse, that is, there were less Caucasians than Indians. There was a large difference between shake and shingle workers whereas the Shingles are ones that are cut by the saws. Caucasian men also did packing jobs because they were the easy jobs; however Shake working was much harder work because people had to work at a fast pace as explained above. Thus, Caucasian men did not do much of that work, they wanted easy jobs. The social treatment in the mills was not bad by the Caucasian men, but in contrast, the Indians to Indians treatment were different. If the Indians knew that this fellow needs work, they would treat that man differently, they would use him a little, but if they knew that the man is settled in life, then their treatment was different. But the

treatment between Caucasians and Indian was friendly. In Caucasian owned mills, there was some invisible discrimination, which could be felt, for example, they would give easy jobs to Caucasians, and harder jobs to Indians. The cheap and dirty work was given to Indians and cleaner work was given to Caucasians. It happened even in union mills.

Mr. Singh also tried construction work at Canada Scaffold for five to six months when he developed some health issues with Cedar. The Scaffold is made and put all around the house during construction. There was a company in Michel Island which supplied that Scaffold wherever big construction companies worked, for example for large buildings. Mr. Singh moved to this job because he started having some breathing problems with Cedar and the mills. As a result he started wearing the mask also, but according to Mr. Singh, when the mask was used it also caused breathing problem. Mr. Singh worked part-time in Canada Scaffold from 1992 to 1996. He remembers that people used to get jobs with reference from one another. If one friend worked in one company, he introduced the other friend and the chain went on. In 2000, he left the mill work and started doing full time construction work as he had opened his own construction company. He left the mill job because he started earning more money in his own construction work and he was feeling very satisfied working for his own company.

Mr. Singh recalls that working in the mills was worth it because of the good pay although it did have its challenging moments. For example, working in the mills was very hard work and there were less facilities. He worked in freezing cold temperature while working outside and the working conditions were tough. They had to work outside only because the machines which used to cut the wood were outside. His mill was on the river side and it used to be more chilly breezes of wind in the winters. The cutting, packing and pulling was done all outside.

Mr. Singh talked about economy of Canada in those years. Things were cheap those days. According to Mr. Singh, one could fill their grocery cart in \$100.00 which is now three times more expensive and come to around \$300.00. The house rents were also less. The earnings were less as compared to today but still mill jobs were higher paid than any other jobs. In the farms, people used to work more hours but earned less money. He also worked to pick berries for 15-16 hours a day but he barely made \$40.00 to \$50.00 per day. But in the mills, if the lumber was available, he used to make \$40-50 in four hours. In the mills however, he made more money as compared to working in the farms.

He worked in the mills only until 2000, and he left the mill work because he started his own company. More than anything else, Mr. Singh has bright memories of the history of his arrival in Canada. He possesses some historical pictures of his arrival time when the whole group of 174 men touched their feet on the roads of Halifax after getting down from the ship. He still remembers how hungry they all were when they got off the ship and police arrested them. They were kept on the road side as it was not easy to detain so many of them (174 men). They were sitting in the front yard of one Caucasian house which was in the farm area. They were so hungry that they told that man to arrange some food

for them. Whatever that man had in his house, he brought it out and gave it to them, but it was not enough. He called around and collected more food for them. Then the government of Halifax provided some food, a local school arranged some food for them and a school bus came and took them to some places.

Later, after reaching in Vancouver, all these men arranged a Prayer (Akhand Paath) in Vancouver Gurdwara on Ross Road and invited that Caucasian man, who fed them in Halifax, to attend the prayer. All these men paid for his ticket. That man had some land there in Halifax which he gave his land to make a park. Mr. Singh has some pictures of the park when he was there as well as the Halifax Museum which is preserved as memory. Their stories are written in The Halifax museum which will be worth exploring. The story and quite a few things related to their life, of all 174 men, are preserved in that in Halifax Museum. Mr. Singh never went back to India till 1996. For 11 years, he never visited his house back in India. Mr. Singh would be happy to provide some picture of his historical journey to Canada, his stay in Halifax and the life experiences gathered during that journey.