

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Surjit Singh Samra Narration
Interview Date: February 9th, 2015

Surjit Singh Samra was born on October 29, 1925 in Village Paheerh located in District Ludhiana in Punjab, India. Surjit Singh first arrived in Canada on October 1st, 1954, having been sponsored by his wife and her family who were already living in Victoria. In India Surjit used to do farm work; however, soon upon his arrival to Canada he began by working at the Dahl-Johal Mill where his brother in law was also working. After arriving in Canada, it would be another twenty years before Surjit Singh would go back to India. Surjit Singh would work in this mill for three years and then moved to Honeymoon Bay to work at the Western Forest Products Company in 1957.

Surjit Singh's work entailed working on the green chain but also as a head saw. That is why to this day Surjit Singh has trouble hearing because the work involved great amounts of noise constantly. For three years Surjit Singh worked at the Western Forest Products mill which according to him, was a fairly diverse mill including both people of European origin and Punjabis. Surjit Singh's average wage was \$1.50 per hour. Like most other mills, this mill also contained nearby bunkhouses where the Punjabi men lived. The bunkhouses were heated by placing a large log in inside an even larger drum placed in the bunkhouse. And still because the bunkhouses had holes around it, the men covered themselves in the heaviest of blankets to try to keep in the warmth. Sometimes, if the wrong type of log was placed in the drum, the entire bunkhouse would fill with smoke. The bunkhouses also had a cook house where two Punjabi men - Dayal Singh and Hakam Singh- were hired to cook foods for the Punjabi workers. Part of the wages that Surjit Singh and the other workers earned would go towards the cooks in the cookhouses. The food would be served to the workers every morning at 3am (for example oatmeal or rice pudding) and then roti (flatbreads) again at 12pm. Two days a week the cooks made meat dishes for the Punjabi mill workers while other days the chefs made vegetarian curry dishes. Surjit Singh also lived in a bunkhouse even though he did have his family living in Victoria. On the weekends, Surjit Singh would take a bus in order to visit his wife and family. He remembers that during the winter months, the bus would go through five feet of snow. According to Surjit Singh, Honeymoon Bay had very few Punjabis living in the community, perhaps only two or four families at the time.

If a mill ever closed down, Surjit Singh and other Punjabi men around him would look for other part-time work. As such, Surjit Singh also helped to build houses during those times between the mill works. Also, many families would take the ferry from Vancouver Island to pick berries on farms in Vancouver the Fraser Valley, etc. Overall, Surjit Singh has no complaints about the experiences of discrimination at the mills; however he remembers moments where the people of European origin workers would taunt the Punjabis by forcefully removing their turbans. Surjit Singh claims that when the Punjabi population increased, the level of discrimination eventually decreased. Overall, the mill work was very valuable to Punjabis according to Surjit Singh because it was very financially stabilizing and fulfilling. Surjit Singh also reflects on some of the changes in

the community, saying that in the past, the Punjabi families were very supportive of each other, always willing to help one another in times of need. Surjit Singh sees this as having changed in modern times, when people are no longer in need of such types of help.