

Saw Mill Worker Stories
Surjit Singh Tatla Narrative
Interview Date: January 15th, 2015

Surjit Singh Tatla was born on May 25, 1944 in Village Kaonke Kalan, Ludhiana, Punjab, India. In India, Mr. Tatla worked on the Railways on the steam engines for three to four years before leaving for Canada. He also studied until grade ten in India. He planned to come to Canada as he had seen many other men leaving India to find work. He came to Canada in 1970 at the age of twenty five as a visitor because his maternal uncle (mother's brother) was living here. He then applied for immigration while he was already in Canada. Soon after he arrived, Mr. Tatla began working in a mill where he would continue for another four years. Before receiving his immigration he had a work permit only because it took time to receive immigration status. Four years after having arrived in Canada, Mr. Tatla was married in 1974.

According to Mr. Tatla, when he first arrived he was surprised to see that there was not much work available. Most of the work available was in the mills or in trucking. Mr. Tatla was also a relative of Nash Gill and the Darshan Gill family of Village Dhudike. Nash Gill's father, prominent local pioneer, Indar Singh Gill, also owned a mill in Mission. Indar Singh Gill was Mr. Tatla's Uncle (Masar Ji) who was married to his maternal aunt.

Mr. Tatla received his first job through the reference of his family. Nash Gill, who is a lawyer in Abbotsford now, was studying and also working in the saw mill part time on the weekends. Mr. Tatla would go with Nash to the mill and do some work alongside him. When Nash stepped away from work, Mr. Tatla received an opportunity to work in his position and in his place. Thus, that's how he received his first job in Mission in a Saw Mill. He started working after four to five months after coming to Canada. As he said, it was hard to find a job those days, but having connections certainly helped. Mr. Tatla worked in that mill for four years. He also worked at the Camano Lumber Sales, near Maple Ridge where only Indian men. This was a small, Japanese-owned mill where 25 to 30 people worked. He worked there for four years and then the mill caught on fire in 1974. After that, he went to Ham and Cedar and worked there until his retirement in 2009.

Mr. Tatla mentioned that it was heavy work those days working in the mills. It's fairly recent, within the last ten years that the work in the mills has become easy because automatic machines system have come in place. There used to be a chain, called green chain, and at least fifteen men would be pulling lumber using the chain. After the mill burned down they then tore down the old mill and made a new one and in the new mill there was plenty of easy work. Mr. Tatla worked only in two mills over his life-the Camano and Ham and Cedar. The demographics of mill workers were mixed, as Indian and people of European origin worked together. Out of a total 30-40 men, there were 8 to 10 Indian men, 5-7 Japanese and the rest were people of European origin.

Mr. Tatla has lived in Mission his entire life in Canada. Initially, upon arrival, he lived with his maternal uncle (mama Ji). He began working in Camano in 1970 where he worked on the green chain and then later on the trimmer and ager. He then moved to Ham and Cedar Company, which is currently known as Interfor Corporation. Before that, it was called Fletcher Challenge, and prior to that it used to be BC Forest. At Ham and Cedar, which was owned by people of European origin, Mr. Tatla began at the green chain, then into trimming and after that he worked as a sawyer. By that time, the new mill was made where all work was done automatically by simply pressing buttons. The wood was selected to be sent for cutting by pressing different numbers. Because of this new technology, there was less labour required.

Whereas the Ham and Cedar was unionized, Camano not a union mill. However, the Camano mill was well paying, paying 10 cents more than other mills. However, Unionized mills had plenty advantages as well, including pension plan benefits, etc. Mr. Tatla also talked about advantages of working in the union mill. In a union mill, the seniority gets built with the job, and the wages increase accordingly. And also, in a union, if any employee has a problem, then the union will solve it. For example, if someone worked in a private mill and they had to go to India or anywhere for vacation for two to three weeks, it would be the owner's choice whether to give holiday leave or not. In a unionized mill however, a worker was granted at least five to six weeks of holidays every year. The company would let the person go away for three months for example. In unionized mills, the promotions system was also much better than other mills. Within the mill, if some other job came up and if someone applied, he could get it on the basis of seniority. Mr. Tatla received training to all the jobs he did, including: green chain, the trimmer and the sawyer. They trained for 5-6 weeks for every job and when they saw that the person could do that job, and then they gave that job to him. His supervisors were mostly of European origin and there were 2-3 Indians supervisors too. He retired from the Camano mill after he was 65 years old, though the company allowed him to work for two more years if he preferred. Mr. Tatla opted to retire when he received his pension. He worked for 35 years total in the mills.

Mr. Tatla has mixed experience in his 35 years of his work in the mills. According to him, in the past 25 years especially, work has become easy because things are not automated. At that time as well there was mixed demographics including both Indian and European origin workers. At first there were three shifts running at the mill including a night shift. There were at least 500 to 600 men working in that mill, but when the company started using automatic machines, they reduced the number of men working. Currently, that mill is still running but there are very few men working, reduced to only 60 to 80 people.

Mr. Tatla's work experience in the mill was good. They all worked together and got along well. There were only a few men who did not care for much for Indians. When they got to know that Indian men also had seniority, then they settled down on their own. The first mill was also good where people worked together in harmony. In addition, they did not feel any issues of language because there were many Indians working in that mill. Some

supervisors were also Indian, and because of them, they did not face any difficulty. The only difficult time Mr. Tatla remembers was due to the cold weather, because it was difficult to commute in snow. Sometimes if it would snow at night, it was hard to get the car out. But otherwise, there was not much difference to adjust in Canadian life.

Mr. Tatla recalls the living conditions those days in the 1970's as there were very few Indian families living in Mission and Abbotsford. According to Mr. Tatla, there were only 5 to 7 families. There were no Indian homes in town and in fact, there were more Indian families in Mission than in Abbotsford, because there were 3-4 mills in Mission and in nearby places. Mr. Tatla recalled the community connections between the Indian community and with others which were very friendly, where everyone acquainted themselves with each other and were living very lovingly. There were very few families in 1970, but slowly it started building up. The small Abbotsford Temple, (now the National Historic Site of Canada, Gur Sikh Temple) used to have many people come together on Sundays. The people would see each other and come together once a week or every two weeks. Of the 25 to 30 men would come to that Temple. Thus, the Gurdwaras were a socializing place for the Indian community.

Mr. Tatla shared stories about food and where they used to buy Indian groceries. They also regularly ate the Indian bread, called Roti, along with daal. There was an Italian grocery store in Vancouver Downtown, where Indians used to car-pool to and get groceries from. This was because there was hardly one car in all the ten Indian homes in Mission. In that one car, four to five men would hop in and go and get groceries for two to three months' worth. Later, more Indian Ethnic grocery stores started opening in Vancouver Downtown. A Muslim man opened his own grocery store on 2nd and Main Street in Vancouver in 1972. After that, the stores slowly started increasing. And later, some Indian grocery stores opened in Abbotsford also. With this, businesses kept on growing. In Canadian stores, they could buy rice and milk, but still they had to go to Vancouver to get Indian flour and lentils. Then Safeway, slowly started keeping some Indian grocery. Since Mr. Tatla was living with his maternal uncle, Manga Singh (mama Ji) he used to pay for his groceries and food share in the house, which worked out well for rent and for other things as well. When he got married, he moved out to his own house.

In 2009, Mr. Tatla retired from the mill as a number 3 or 4 controller. This was when on one side, the logs would feed into the machine, as there were 3-4 machines. He would decide which lumber would go to into which machine, etc. Mr. Tatla became a Canadian Citizen in 1979 or 1980. At that time, the law was that in order to become a Citizen, one had to stay in Canada for 3 years. Earlier it used to be a five year condition. Mr. Tatla feels good after coming to Canada and working in the mills as he felt that the mill covered for everything including all health expenses.