

Saw Mill Worker Stories

Tarlokh Singh (Terry) Gidda Narrative

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Mr. Tarlokh Singh Gidda was born in 1938 in Village Sujjon, District Jalandhar [modern day District Nawan Shehar), Punjab, India. He immigrated to Canada on 2nd September, 1968 when he was thirty years old. Mr. Gidda was sponsored by his wife Harbhajan as they had been engaged in India and Harbhajan in turn was first sponsored by her brothers in 1967. Once she successfully sponsored Mr. Gidda, he arrived and they were married in 1968.

Even though Mr. Gidda was a health inspector and a teacher in Punjab, India, when he came to Canada, most Indian people were working in the mills, so he also began working in the mill as his first job in Canada. The first mill that Mr. Gidda worked at, called the Cattermole Timber Mill, was located in McKenzie, BC. Mr. Gidda was able to find the work through the word of mouth by other Punjabi men who were also working there. Mr. Gidda stayed on the job for eight months working on the green chain pulling lumber and then he attended UBC in the summer for six weeks in order to improve his English speaking. Mr. Gidda continued to work at the mill and go to school and eventually, he attained his teaching certificate to teach in middle school. When Mr. Gidda appeared in front of the local school district Superintendent to challenge the accreditations he had attained from India he was told that his speaking and communication skills were not up to par for teaching in Canada. Mr. Gidda felt that they would not hire foreign teachers. There were only a few foreign trained teachers here. When he went for training in UBC, he met two teachers who were there from India. One was Mr. Kapoor and the other person was a very senior retired military general, who was retired from a prestigious position. These two people were also attending the summer session in UBC. So he took real estate course and became a realtor.

In addition to working the mills, and upgrading his education, Mr. Gidda did many other jobs as well. For example, he worked for a short time in a cement factory which used to make temporary roofs. After this he received a job in Fraser Mills (New Westminster) through his brother-in-law, who was already working there. During this time he worked in New Westminster, he was once called for a substitute teacher position within the Mission School District. As such, Mr. Gidda also began working as a substitute teacher from 1969 onwards. When he did substitute teacher job, he used to get \$23.00 per day, which was not enough and he thought of doing something else.

In 1970-71, while he was working in Fraser Mills, where he continued to work for a year, he also started taking a real estate course. After completing the course in 1972, he then quit his job from the mill and became a realtor in April 1972.

Mr. Gidda would continue to work in real estate until 1995. Later, when he learned that one of the previous owners was selling the office three partners including Mr. Gidda came

together to purchase the office in 1998. Over time as one partner left and the other partner passed away, Mr. Gidda was left to manage the office alone as the sole owner until 2008. Eventually, he would sell the office in 2008. Later, Mr. Gidda became City Councilor from 2005 to 2011 in Mission and became very busy in City work though he continued to retain his real estate license.

Recalling his short, two year lived experience working in the Mills, Mr. Gidda remembers how the work was very hard for Mr. Gidda especially in the McKenzie area where it was very cold in winter time. According to Mr. Gidda, "The temperature actually went down to as low as -60 degrees, we had Indo-Canadian Cookhouses where all Punjabis/Sikhs lived, while "White" people had their own cookhouses. When the temperature went so low, the pipes would freeze and the water system was all blocked. They used to bring water by trucks and for bath they used to go about a mile away. According to Mr. Gidda, European origin men's cookhouses were better equipped and facilities were better to take baths etc. He would go on to explain how the Indian people had to go to outhouses to use the washrooms because the pipes in their cookhouses were frozen. They had to dress really heavy because of the cold; it was really a tough time. The living improved with the improvement of temperature where they received the water.

According to Mr. Gidda, Indians and people of European origin had their separate cookhouses because their food was different. In Indian cookhouse, the cook was Baba Nand Singh Ji (Bimb Banga's father). The men used to pay him a salary for his service to cook the food. It was like a larger house where people slept and ate. The European origin people had their separate cook house far away from Indians where they ate their own food. Mr. Gidda lived in the cookhouse in Fraser Mills because his family was in Mission at the time. He was married as mentioned earlier to his wife Harbhajan who was living in Mission. Other people living in the cookhouse were all single men. There were not many facilities in the town as Mr. Gidda recalls that there was one store where the people would buy the grocery. They used to go and buy the groceries once a week whatever the cook would tell them to bring. The grocery store used to be in the town and the mill in McKenzie used to be little bit outside the town. For Indian groceries in particular, people used to go to Prince George or to Vancouver. Even in Vancouver, there was only one Indian grocery store, called Famous Foods.

Mr. Gidda remembered his first days in Canada when he came to Canada, after living a very easy life in India. He was the son of a farmer, and he worked in the farm only during his summer vacations only during his school years, but after he became health inspector and a teacher, he had an easy life. Therefore, it was very difficult in the beginning years to work in the mill, though he became used to it over time. He felt it was much easier when he worked at the Fraser Mills on green chain where he learned that once the piece of lumber was placed on the green chain, the rollers on the chain would help the piece of wood to move the wood and then it was not so hard. It was a planer mill at McKenzie. They used to put 8 ft. pieces of wood and that machine was very fast on the green chain and the wood pieces were coming like there was no space in between. In addition,

because much of the chain pulling was not automatically done in the past as it is now, work was doubly difficult. Both mills that Mr. Gidda worked in, in McKenzie and Fraser Mills were European origin owned and unionized mills. Mr. Gidda recalls that Bhai Mewa Singh was cremated in the premises where the Fraser Mills was located in New Westminster.

The demographics of the people working in that mill were mixed because it was a very large mill. There was a green chain and Yard Sizer for example where Mr. Gidda worked, and it had a planer. Mr. Gidda did a variety of jobs in the mill; for example, sometimes he worked as a trimmer, other times he worked on a green chain like pulling lumber. He had also passed his tally exam to work as a Tally, but he did not get that job, and the man who used to work for that job was called Tally Man. Mr. Gidda was also qualified to work as a lumber grader, as he wrote the exam and passed it. During this time he had already entered the real estate profession. After Mr. Gidda passed the exam and got the ticket for grader, which is the top ticket for grading he felt he had a good back up just in case the real estate job didn't work out.

Overall, Mr. Gidda had a good relationship with the foreman as he has good memories of working in Fraser Mills overall. Despite his treatment being fairly well, Mr. Gidda recalls how other Punjabi workers' treatment was not that great. For example, the people of European origin showed some favoritism to some different people working there. He explained that there was some discrimination by European origin people, but not only that; he observed discrimination by their own people –Indians with Indians, though he worked there only for small time. Mr. Gidda remembered a story that there used to be a person who hardly did any work but he used to get paid.

Mr. Gidda did not see more of a language problem while working in the mills because there were mostly younger people aged 17 to 18 years though some people were older than him. The Indians had to deal with Indian workers and Indian foreman during the shift, so there was no language barrier for Indian workers. All the Indian workers used to get together and enjoy a drink together as the atmosphere amongst the Indians was of collaboration, friendship and assisting one another.

In response to the economic structure in the early '70s when Mr. Gidda came to Canada, he said that he lived in Mission BC with his wife and children. The whole Indo-Canadian Community had only two cars in Mission. At that time, Mission did not have traffic lights and it was very easy to get a driver's license as there was no traffic and no lights. Mr. Gidda shared some history of weddings, community invitations and other celebrations in the Indian community in early '70 to '80s. He mentioned that all the Indian community celebrations used to happen in the gurdwara because the Indian population was small. For whatever celebration, whether it was weddings, auspicious celebrations, prayers or birthdays; the invitations were done by a hand cyclostyle machine. There was a machine in the Abbotsford Heritage Gurdwara and they would get the letters printed from there. They had a list of people and a plate kind of thing, on which they would write the address

on that plate and print the letters. They used to mail the letters to every member of the Indian community, no matter if he was a relative or a friend. Everyone who lived in the community was invited to the celebration. The cooking of food and sweets were done in the gurdwara as there were no Indian restaurants. And whatever it was in the Langar for example lentils or vegetables (Sabzi) were prepared was helped by Bhai Nand Singh Ji also after his retirement. When he retired from the cookhouse in the mills, he was a well-known cook in the gurdwara. He used to cook for big functions like an Akhand Paath prayer, and used to do "Sewa" in the Darbar and also he would make daal in the large pots. So everything used to run smoothly based on peoples' will.

The small Indian community used to visit a small gurdwara, the Heritage Sikh Temple, which never used to be full. Mr. Gidda was the secretary of that temple for four years from 1972 to 1976. The list of people in Abbotsford, Mission and Chilliwack together was less than one page during these decades. Now there are 25,000 people in Abbotsford alone. Most of these families lived in Mission, and very less families lived in Abbotsford at that time, maybe 2 to 3 families only. Mr. Gidda got his Canadian Citizenship in 1975. At that time, there was a condition of 5 years to live in Canada to apply for Canadian Citizenship.

Mr. Gidda has lived a good life in Canada and done a lot of community work. When he became a realtor, he had time for community work including being the director of Mission Community Services for 15 years. He has been on the scholarship committee for Mission Foundation for 7 years; has been on the Lions Club of Mission for more than 25 years, and has been the secretary and the President of Mission Sikh Temple for the past 20 years. Finally, he has also sat on the Mission security and the parole board.