

In the 1970s, pesticides, mechanization, and increasing numbers of immigrant workers began to highlight the need for safety standards on B.C. farms.

Video honours those who shaped B.C.'s agriculture industry

By Susan Kerschbaumer

“We thought we were safe,” says Bill Zylmans, remembering his experiences growing up on his family farm.

“Farmers were doing everything in their right mind to do things right. My father, when he first started spraying, would mix chemicals, with lack of better knowledge, just with his bare hands in a five-gallon bucket. And those were just common practices that no one thought anything different of back then.”

Thankfully, things have changed on B.C. farms. And in honour of farmers like Zylmans, and the many workers who fought for progress, WorkSafeBC, in partnership with the BC Labour Heritage Centre, created a video about the history of agricultural safety in the province. The video is the ninth in a series that tells the stories of the working men and women who helped shape B.C. industry.

Safety was a “non-starter”

Mixed farming was well established across B.C. by the 1950s. In the 1970s, the industry saw an influx of new

immigrant farmers and a whole new generation of employees. “But safety, and knowledge of what safety meant, was a non-starter,” says Zylmans. “There was no one really trying to explain the right or wrong. We didn’t know any of that stuff at that time.”

Raj Chouhan, now an MLA for Burnaby-Edmonds, took a job as a farmhand upon arriving in Canada in the early 1970s. “I found it very shocking,” remembers Chouhan. “It wasn’t a very pleasant experience for me going to work in Canada.”

Charan Gill, CEO of the Progressive Intercultural Community Services Society, had a similar experience.

“There was no fresh water for drinking. There were no toilets. And [workers were] washing their hands in the ditches full of pesticides.”

No protection for thousands

Despite the dangers, farmworkers were one of the last groups in B.C. to get health and safety regulatory protection.

For Chouhan, the issue was that farmers still viewed their operations as family enterprises that should be exempt from regulation. “They didn’t think it was a workplace,” says Chouhan. “They thought it was their personal property.”

Farmers were under the gun to stay out of the red, says Zylmans. Their focus was on making a living — on getting the fieldwork done “faster, quicker, better, so that the farmer could eventually have a black line at the end of his ledger.”

Meanwhile, the health and safety aspect was ignored and no protection was available for the thousands of B.C. farmworkers. “It was not a priority,” says Chouhan. “There was no compensation, no nothing.” It wasn’t until the 1990s that agricultural workers were finally recognized under the *Workers Compensation Act*.

Uniting to bring change

But the desire for change had long been brewing. Ken Novakowski, Chair of the BC Labour Heritage Centre, was a social studies teacher in the Fraser Valley in the late 1970s. Many of his students came from farm families, and classroom discussions often touched on the organizing that was happening among farmworkers at the time.

This organizing led to the establishment of the Farm Workers’ Organizing Committee in 1979; more than 2,000 workers signed up in the first year.

Chouhan, inspired by California’s United Farm Workers union, helped form the Canadian Farmworkers’ Union — the first in Canada. In 1991, under the new NDP government, farmworkers were brought under the protection of the *Employment Standards Act*. And in 1993, regulations were introduced, and AgSafe — an independent health and safety association (then called FARSHA) that provides site-specific training, programs, resources and advice to farmers throughout the province — was established.

Minimum cost, maximum safety

Ever since, WorkSafeBC has been actively inspecting agricultural operations and partnering with AgSafe to promote safety, in areas from animal handling to hydrogen sulphide management.

The benefits of collaboration, says Zylmans — a former FARSHA board member — are clear: “minimum cost to the farmers and maximum safety for the workers.”

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— Bill Zylmans, farmer, W&A Farms, and former FARSHA board member

There is, of course, still more to do. As farms become increasingly mechanized, machinery and equipment remain a significant cause of serious injuries (176 since 2009) and deaths (13 since 2009). And as farms become bigger employers, new needs arise. Increasing numbers of temporary foreign workers, for example, call for training and information in multiple languages.

Learning from the past

Meanwhile, WorkSafeBC and the BC Labour Heritage Centre hope that the video will help new generations of workers appreciate and learn from the past. “It’s a dangerous industry and accidents continue to happen,” says Novakowski.

“We’re standing on the shoulders of men and women who have worked to make this province a better place,” says Scott McCloy, director of Government, Community and Media Relations for WorkSafeBC. “We want people to understand where we came from so we can do better going forward.”

The video can be found at the BC Labour Heritage Centre website at www.labourheritagecentre.ca/historyhealthsafetybc. 



Before the 1990s, some viewed farming as a family enterprise that didn’t need regulation.