

Nash Gill

Interviewer- this is Rishi and I'll be interviewing Nash Gill for the Canadian Sikh Heritage project. Nash could you tell me when did your family come to Canada?

Nash- well my father Indar Singh Gill, first came to Canada in 1930. And, I believe it was in December of 1930 that he came here with his brother Joginder Singh Gill and his cousins, his cousin that was who living in Montreal now.

Interviewer- and what would you, why did they come to Canada? What made them come to Canada?

Nash- well, and he also came with his cousins Darbara Singh Shergill, my father was about 17 years of age at that time and his younger brother who also came with him, Joginder Singh Gill, was 13 years of age at that time. And the reason why they came to Canada was that when they were doing farming back in India, there was a very little cultivation and very little irrigation and they were not able to economically you know do well so decided that you know that they either go to at that time, go to Singapore, Malaya, or go to East Africa. So they were thinking about going to those places, however, what had happened is there uncle, who was their thaiya Naranjan Singh Gill, he had already immigrated to Canada, and he was asked if he would sponsor them to come to Canada, and what he did was he sent 5 sponsorship permits from Canada, back to our village Dhudike and he said that they, they can immigrate to Canada on these permits. And at that time it was that my dad decided that we'll go to Canada. And, when they decided to go, one permit did not get used because of one of my dad's cousins backed out, he said that will cost too much money to go, and therefore, there was only the four of them that travelled. So, like I said, you know, Indar my father, Indar Singh Gill, you know they left, they left the village and then they travelled by, they travelled by horse cart to, to Ludhiana and then they took the train from Ludhiana to Calcutta, where they were to board the ship and they train fare is recorded in my father's memoirs that the air- the train fare from Ludhiana to Calcutta at that time was 14 rupees each. And then, they at Calcutta they were to take the steam ship of the Jardine Company of Hong Kong, from Calcutta to Hong Kong, the fare was 44 rupees. And then travelling from Hong Kong, they travelled to Victoria, Vancouver by way of the steam ship and it was the steam ship of the Canadian Pacific Company and it was called the Empress of Japan and the fare for that was \$90 US. And travelling to Calcutta to Hong Kong took about 17-18 days and then from Hong Kong to Vancouver it took approximately 2.5 months. And that's months, not weeks. What happened is that my father remembers very vividly the date of they did leave, they left Dhudike in the early morning hours, however that night some of the his farm there, family farm needed irrigation and he was working in the farm irrigating by hand till 4 o'clock in the morning. So basically he left working and then when he came to Canada, his intentions were to work. Some of the recollections that I remember that he told me, that he carried a metal trunk in which he had his clothes and some of the food cuz they had to carry their food with them too because they had to cook on the steam ship. And they carried a, you know, their flour that they would make rotis and then they carried some Indian butter, and he says he carried about 10 pounds of that.

Interviewer- and do you have that trunk?

Nash- yes we've got that little trunk and we've got it, you know, we've got it in safe keeping. And, it's one of the earlier prize possessions from, I also recall that he says that he purchased the trunk from Moga for 3 rupees. But, and then he also recalled that the day that they left, you know, from Calcutta it

was, Diwali day. He recalled going down the Hoogly River and the scenery of both sides of the river as it goes out into the, I believe the Bay of Bengal, and then he also recalled that they, when they arrived in Hong Kong, they, the steam ship that they were gonna come had already left and so they had missed that ship and they had to stay in Hong Kong for a period of two weeks before the Empress of Japan would be arriving to take them. And when they stayed in Hong Kong, they stayed at the gurudwara, the Sikh gurudwara located in Hong Kong. And, that gurudwara is also still there. And, so they stayed there, you know, without any costs to them at the gurudwara til they boarded the Empress of Japan. When he recalled coming, arriving in Vancouver, he arrived on December the 12 1930 at about 6pm when he entered Vancouver harbor. And he entered the harbor and he recalls the down town Vancouver at that time and he says, the Vancouver sky line at that time, the tallest building was the marine building that had just been built in 1930. And if you see the sky line now, obviously the marine building is dwarfed by many of the high rises. The other thing that he recalled when entering the harbor was the Woodward's store and it had a great big W sign on top of it and it was rotating. And anyways, there was many, his uncle was there to receive him and some family friends, and then they stayed at Vancouver at the gurudwara for two days. And then, then they from there that they he went to Vancouver island to, to work however I don't believe that during the year of 1931 that any of the saw mills were working due to the world wide depression and that there was no work to be had so rather than being unemployed they decided to go to Kamloops to pick tomatoes and also harvest potatoes for a, for a person by the name of Sher Singh Aluwallia and they stayed there for three months in Kamloops and during that summer in three month period of picking tomatoes and harvesting potatoes he made a total of \$54 CAD. However, he returned back to Vancouver Island, then he got a job at Great Central Lake Sawmill where he was being paid approx 10 cents an hour. He only worked for four days per week, six hours per day, however, things were getting back to normal and then there was more employment. However in, he sent money back to, he sent money back to India for his family he had left his father and mother back in India, my dad was also married at the age of 17 when he, before he left India, and my mother was residing back in India with his mom and dad. And also his grandfather, his grandfather which would be my father's grandfather, his name was Pratap Singh Gill, he was also alive so the first money he sent back to India, he told his grandfather that you go and buy yourself a horse, so he bought a horse for 60 rupees and obviously it was the respectful thing to do that before you give anything, you give it to the elders first. So then in next year in July of 1932 he started working for the Kapoor Lumber Company which was a sawmill owned by Babul Singh Kapoor, also East Indian and he, his mill was in Sooke Lake and Sooke Lake is close to Victoria. And he started working there and they lived in the bunk house on the saw mill premises and they worked 6 days a week and then he was being paid approx 15 cents an hour. And they would go to Victoria to buy some supplies every 6 months and when they went to Victoria obviously you didn't go by truck or car, you walked and if Victoria was you know 15-20 or 25 miles away, well the way you got there was you started walking and eventually you would arrive there. And then he also recalls that the, you know, during the first 15 years of his arrival in Canada there was very, there were, they did not see any weddings in the Indian community, it was, there was a labor class, they were all working, they were making money and they were sending the money back to India to assist and support their families back in India. And then they kept on working, and then what happened is second world war started in 1939 and then from 1939 until 1945 until the second world war ended there were no ships, no transportation going back to India and as everyone knows the history of the war that the any ships that

were on the seas, the Japanese and German submarines were sinking them and therefore very few, there was no people that were travelling back to India. So basically, my dad since he arrived in Canada he did not go back to India until 1947 so he stayed here for a period of 17 years. There was correspondence between him and, correspondence and by letter he would you know communicate with my mother but then basically they were separated for a total period of 17 years. And however if Second World War had not started and obviously he would have gone back to India then tried to make attempts to bring his mother to Canada. However after the war, what happened is restrictions with respect to immigration to Canada, got a weakened and then what happened is persons of East-Indian origin and Chinese origin were allowed to bring their families to Canada. So in 1947, I believe he told me that 150 people per year were allowed to come from India, so when he was over in India in 1947, and the partition of India was taking place between India and Pakistan and then after, after the partition in May 1948, I was born back in the village of Dhudike. And then in 1949, after preparing the immigration documentation he, my father brought back myself and my mother and we travelled by steam ship via Honolulu, Hawaii and we were to dock in San Francisco from where we travelled on the Great Northern Train to enter Canada in White Rock on Nov 25 1949. And one of the things that he, my father did tell me is that when we travelled back and we landed in Honolulu the, one of the first things that he did was he bought my mother a dress, a western dress then got he want her to assimilate into Canadian culture. And so when she landed, she landed wearing a dress, a coat and high heels and so from there where we went to reside was in Mission. And that's in the Fraser Valley, and he was at that time, no longer employed in the saw mills but he had started a trucking business and delivering fuel, wood and sawdust, wooden sawdust to the Fraser Valley. It was at time that my sisters were also born and they were born in Mission. The oldest one is well Malkiet Kaur and she's married now, she's Malkiet Kaur Brar. And, my younger daughter, sister her name is Baljit and she's also married, and she also resides in Abbotsford, her name is Baljit Kaur Khangura. And, after that my father was a delivering wood and sawdust to provide fuel to people to burn in their houses, in their stoves. He as, and he carried the fuel business under the Indar Fuel Company and it operated until 1958. And, he had a number of wood and sawdust trucks and he would pick up the raw material from the saw mill owned by Albert McMahon who was a prominent business man in Mission and his sawmill as located in east of mission at Suicide Creek. And when the natural gas came into the Fraser Valley and everybody starting using natural gas obviously there was a decline in the fuel business so in 1959 he purchased an old sawmill located in Mission on the Fraser River and that saw mill was destroyed in the end of 1959 and then in 1960 he commenced construction of a new modern up to date sawmill on the same site called Fraser Valley sawmills. And that sawmill produced 60 000 board feet of lumber per shift. And that lumber was being exported to the United States, to Japan, and to Great Britain. The sawmill employed approx. 40 employees and at that time he had also in the 1950's because of the immigration laws that changed, he has sponsored over from India his brother-in-law, being his sister's husband, he sponsored over two of my mother's brothers, he has sponsored over about 3-4 of his cousins from the village, they were all employed in the saw mill and that's how they all got employment. However, in Oct 09 1964, there was a fire at the sawmill and it was destroyed by fire. The sawmill was never rebuilt on the same site, due to the, due to the mission bridge. The new mission bridge was being built and the road approaches did not allow for a sawmill to be built on that site. So, later, he built a shake and shingle mill in fort Langley called Langley Forest Industries Ltd. And that mill is still operating to the present time, producing shakes and shingles.

He was also involved in raspberry production and some land development during the 1980s. with respect to some social activities, and then I'll get to some religious aspects also, but with respect to the social activities, obviously there were very few people, east Indian people living in this area at that time during the 1950s. If I could say that my recollection is visiting all these families and everybody was close, if there was 20 families or 30 families, all the families knew each other. We would visit socially on the weekends, we would if anybody was travelling back to India, they would see them off at the airport. With respect to the religious aspect is, there were a number of Sikh gurudwaras in the lower mainland and in British Columbia. And in those days, each Sikh temple was under the Khalsa Diwan Society which was incorporated in Vancouver and all the Sikh gurudwaras were branch gurudwaras of that one society. And, wrt to the religious celebrations, each gurudwara would hold a religious function celebrating some aspect of Sikh religion throughout the year. My recollection is that the Abbotsford gurudwara was given the Sikh celebration for guru Nanak's birthday, gur purab, and that was basically held I believe in November of each year. The, gurudwara was located in Victoria, was given the celebration for vasaikhi. And, according the other gurudwaras were given other Sikh celebrations. Namely the one in Vancouver was given the celebration for the gur purab for guru gobind singh in January of every year. Anyways I do recall going to the old gurudwara in Abbotsford, obviously the Sikh temple that is built, the new Sikh temple that is built across the street now didn't exist during the 1950s. but, you know going to the old gurudwara, I do recall that obviously the road in front of it, South Fraser Way, was just two lanes and it had a gravel shoulder. They did have stairs going down to the South Fraser Way, I remember going to the gurudwara many times, I also remember the flag pole that they had and it was a wooden flagpole, and I believe the flag pole was some 70 ft high, it had a red light on top of it. I remember outside the landscaping there were fruit trees, there were some pear trees that were located on the west side of the gurudwara and I remember picking some of the pears and you know eating those in our younger days. The parking lot was located up where the gurudwara is right now and the parking lot was on the east side. And at that time, there wasn't need of a much larger parking lot due to the reason that there was very few people that owned motor vehicles, or owned any cars. I also recall, wrt to heating the gurudwara, they would have wooden sawdust. I remember going out into the yard and then chopping up firewood and then carrying it into the basement of the gurudwara and piling it up to be used for heating and used for the stoves that were for the cooking. Upstairs I also recall, there, you would go up and in the main hall in the darbar sahib, obviously the men would sit on the, on one side on the right side, as your facing the guru granth sahib and the ladies would sit on the left side. And in those days, during the 1950s, many of the, many and I would say not only many but I would say all of the east Indian ladies that attended would be wearing western dress, western dresses and skirts and then they would have a sheet that would, so when they sat down, they would have a sheet that they would cover themselves with. And that would be a sheet of cloth. However, then during the 1970s when many of these east Indian lades started wearing eastern dress, there was no need for that. But then, I recall some of the Sikh priest during that time, I cant recall the one that was in attendance and in during the 1950s, and I'm sure of the other community members will recall his name and perhaps he is even still living now, and he could be contacted, however, my recollection is that he was a priest at the old gurudwara and he would conduct the ceremonies and he lived there and he would do all the things that were required for the guru granth sahib in the morning by waking him up and taking him and placing him in the where the guru granth sahib is to be placed during the day. however, he also worked for my

father as a truck driver in delivering the wooden sawdust. So, and then I recall, it was either in December probably the month of December and in those days during the 1950s, the climate was much different than it is now and if it's snowing now and we say we going to get 1 cm of snow we think that's a lot of snow. In those days when it snowed, it snowed not cm but it snowed four feet. And so once morning, or I should say one evening he, this Sikh priest phones my father and says are we picking up any wooden sawdust tomorrow morning and he wanted to know if he is to you know get onto the truck or not. And my father said it depends, we have to wake up in the morning and see how the weather is and we'll take it from there. And he says well if I have to be on the truck I will be on the truck if not, I'll just sit here with the guru granth sahib and keep on reading it all day. But anyways those were some of recollections of the gurudwara. Obviously, the Khalsa diwan society of Abbotsford wasn't incorporated until a later time when all the gurudwaras became separate from the Khalsa diwan society of Vancouver. And, I believe the incorporation didn't take place until in the later years of the 1970s. and it was only then that the actual executive committees started forming and I would say before then there were no actual executive committees and there were just Sikh volunteers taking care of the gurudwaras. Just going there and nobody was the president, and nobody was the secretary, nobody was an executive council member, they would all just go there and do the sewa, do the work, do the maintenance, make the food, serve the food.

Interviewer- what kind of celebrations of your family took place there?

Nash- well like I said, there was you know probably a few, probably there was, you jorh melays would happen, there were religious celebration that would happen.

Interviewer- any births and marriages?

Nash- yes marriages, and I recall myself getting married at the old gurudwara and what had happened is I had travelled back to India in 1969 and I met my wife Rajinder Kaur, and then I sponsored her to come to Canada in 1972 and we were married at the old gurudwara on June 18 1972. And, we got our wedding album and photographs as to how the gurudwara looked at that time. And what happening during the early 1970s is that our east Indian population was increasing and then when our wedding took place at the gurudwara it was fully packed inside the main hall and people were not only sitting they were standing on the side, and it was very tight. And, which called for the need for building a larger gurudwara which was built eventually in the late 70s and I believe it was open in the early 80s, across the street. But then, we were married in the old gurudwara and what happened last year is my son got engaged and he was married here in Canada and so we thought it would very nice that seeing that the old gurudwara had been fully renovated now and it had received the designation as a national historic site in Canada. It was decided that after the renovation which occurred in early 2007, my son had his engagement the first ceremony after the renovation, he had the ceremony in April of 2007 and again that was you know very nice and it was well received by everybody that it was nice and peaceful venue to hold the engagement and we had the ceremony, engagement ceremony inside the old gurudwara. Obviously when my family we had three sons and every time there when my sons were born, we took them to the old gurudwara for their first attendance. And, I believe we got some, we have to look for the photographs of, I'm sure we got some photographs when we take the little babies when they are born, right after they are born to the gurudwara. Those are some of my recollections wrt life during the 50s and the old gurudwara.

Interviewer- what, how do you feel about the gurudwara being the national historic site? What do you envisage should be done in the future?

Nash- I think Canada is like any other country it's taken many, many years for it to grow and develop. There was obviously much prejudice and discrimination in Canada during the early 1900s that extended into the 1950s. Things that happen in those days by way of prejudices and bias and discrimination are no longer existing now, there's very much less of it now. The old gurudwara being designated as a national historic site I think this is a feather in the cap of the Indo Canadian community. This is luckily the only existing surviving original gurudwara that exists of the earlier gurudwaras. The Vancouver gurudwara doesn't exist, the one that was in New Westminster does not exist, the one that was in Fraser Mills does not exist and the old gurudwara of the Victoria does not exist. Of all the old gurudwaras, this is the only one in Canada that is the original building that still exists. And again now, one of my other recollections wrt to the gurudwara is that, any building that is going to be preserved and be saved it's gotta have a good roof on it. If the roof goes, the rest of the building goes. During the 19- late 1960s and 1970s, my father Indar Singh Gill was the president of the gurudwara. And what he did was he had initiated putting a new shingle roof on it. So all the old shingles were old and weathered and were not good so they had those stripped and he had new shingles put on. And in those days, he had the shingle put on at very cost effective price, and he had one person put them on, one person went up and it's a very steep roof so they tied a rope to em and then kinda anchored him by taking it around the other side so he wouldn't fall off and he had the roof put on. I would say because the roof went on during the early 70s that helped preserve the whole building until the present time, until it's been re-roofed now during the renovation. And because of, you know, it saved the underside of the building, we've got most of the building still preserved. There was, you know, many other volunteers and sewa daars that kept the building preserved but you know it took everybody's little effort to do it. There are many other stories regarding people in our community donating the milk, donating butter, paying for all the expenses, there was even a time that I remember when my father used to say that they had difficulty paying the property taxes and then, you know, whatever property taxes had to be paid they all collected the money from the community members and would pay the property taxes.

Interviewer- I was wondering, you know, father who began his life as a saw worker eventually became an sawmill owner and what kind of, where did they like get their inspirations from?

Nash- that would be hard for me to answer, I guess it would be my father who would be the proper person to ask on that, but as to what gave him a drive to go from a sawmill worker to a sawmill owner, I don't know it would be hard for me to answer. I would say I could be some other role models that were in the community who were previous to him, they were older than him, one would be persons like Babul Singh Kapoor who owned the saw mill in Sooke Lake, obviously he owned a sawmill and this was during a period when my father was younger and he was teenager and in his early 20s. and then there was also, Mayo Singh who had a sawmill in Paldi and Mayo Singh had also employed many east Indian workers at the Mayo Lumber Company in Paldi, and Paldi is located near Duncan. And, at that time Mayo had, Mayo Singh also constructed a Sikh gurudwara in Paldi and that gurudwara is still standing. But it's not under, well it's still being maintained as a Sikh gurudwara and I did travel to there in the year 2006 I believe and I met the Sikh priest there and its being maintained as a Sikh gurudwara. But as to

my father building a mill and employing, I don't know it was just the drive that the Indo-Canadian had at that time.

Interviewer- and could you talk, a little bit more about his lifestyle?

Nash- well, the lifestyle would be, I don't know, it would be he was a family oriented man, he wanted to raise his kids, he wanted his kids to have good education, he wanted them to have an easier life than he did, he wanted them to live nicely, he would forego a lot of his own luxuries for the sake of his family.

Interviewer- did he have a car?

Nash- yeah, no no no he, I believe he bought his first car in 1954. Because he was in the trucking business he had to order a new truck and so he ordered it from General Motors that were located in Oshawa, Ontario. So he ordered a truck and then he said that now we are ordering a truck we might as well buy an automobile so he bought a 1954 Pontiac and it was colored candy-apple red. He sent one of his workers down, and one of his workers he was also an east Indian young fellow and his name was Johnny Billin and they used to live on the common island near Mission. So he sent him down to Oshawa and in Oshawa he picked up the truck and he placed the car on the back of the truck and drove it back all the way across Canada back to mission. And then obviously he's had other motor vehicles since that time. You know then, I believe, he bought a 1958 Buick and then other vehicles. But in those days there was very few people that owned motor vehicles, it was only business people or people that were not labor class that owned motor vehicles.

Interviewer- do you have any recollections of how he felt about the national historic site and the gurudwara?

Nash- well obviously the effort to promote this gurudwara for a national historic site commenced a few years back so approximately, you know, probably 5 years ago when there was some talk about promoting it, I believe it was Sheila Copps who of the liberal party at that time, and he would go to the gurudwara many times and meet the politicians and meet some of the bureaucrats wrt to obtaining national status. He was in attendance when John Cretian the Prime Minister of Canada attending the gurudwara and you know there's some photos that we have of him with all the politicians and the prime minister Jean Cretian at that time in the Sikh gurudwara.

Interviewer- do you wish to add anything to this?

Nash- yes wrt the gurudwara it's newly renovated, I think it looks very beautiful, it looks nice. I think it should be maintained, there should be more tours, it should be promoted as a place to, for tourists and visitors who come to the Abbotsford area to go and have a tour of it and also somebody to explain to the tourists and visitors as to some of the philosophical principles of Sikhism and you know things along those lines. Then again, the historical history of the Indo-Canadian community of this area.