

September 8 2008 (4:42pm)

**Amrao Singh Bains & Gurmeet Singh Bains**

Interviewer- can I please have your full name?

Amrao Singh- Amrao Singh Bains

Interviewer- your date of birth?

Amrao Singh- June 8<sup>th</sup> 1920

Interviewer- and your name?

Gurmeet Singh- Gurmit Singh Bains

Interviewer- and your date of birth?

Gurmeet Singh- October 12<sup>th</sup> 1935

Interviewer- who was the first person to come to here from your family?

Amrao Singh- my grandfather

Interviewer- his name?

Amrao Singh- Briam Singh Bains

Interviewer- what year did he come?

Amrao Singh- 1907. His father's name was Bhagwan Singh.

Pritam Kaur- He had two sons, Briam Singh and Shaan Singh.

Interviewer- why did he come here from India?

Amrao Singh- us?

Interviewer- no your grandfather

Amrao Singh- the country had become free so some people left to Pakistan and others left to Canada or the States. To earn a living.

Interviewer- did he come alone?

Amrao Singh- he came alone

Interviewer- were there other villagers that came with him?

Amrao Singh- we don't know

Interviewer- they came on a boat right?

Amrao Singh- yes on a boat. The airplanes only started to be used in '51. Pyara came on a boat but Surjit came on a plane.

Interviewer- when they came, where did they stay first?

Amrao Singh- my grandfather?

k-yes

Amrao Singh- we found out that they worked in the farms in Chilliwack

Pritam Kaur- they lived in Chilliwack

Gurmeet Singh- there was another person who lived in Chilliwack too...

Amrao Singh- they all came to Victoria then dispersed from there. Our Chacha lived in Victoria.

Gurmeet Singh- then in 1923 our uncle came

Amrao Singh- Mangal Singh

Interviewer- who sponsored him?

Pritam Kaur- his father

Amrao Singh- our grandfather

Interviewer- Mangal Singh is your uncle then?

Amrao Singh- chacha

Interviewer- did he come alone too or with family?

Amrao Singh- yes

Pritam Kaur- he came alone first too

Amrao Singh- families didn't come then, they only let people come alone. I'll tell you the story ahead.

Interviewer- who else did your grandfather sponsor?

Amrao Singh- he didn't sponsor anybody else. My chacha , Mangal Singh, when Dr. Pandia was around and the law changed so one could sponsor nephews...

Gurmeet Singh- no first he sponsored his son

Amrao Singh- no they came before, Surjit and Pyara, then he sponsored us

Gurmeet Singh- he sponsored Pyara first

Pritam Kaur- I will tell you. First chacha ji sponsored Pyara, he came on the boat. Then Surjit and his mother came and then...

Amrao Singh- he sponsored us then because the law changed to include nephews and then he called us both brothers, me and my younger brother Bakshish Singh. We then came by plane in '59.

Interviewer- together?

Amrao Singh- no he came one month after me. Came here to earn a living but when we got here and saw the area, we thought to ourselves about how we would ever make a living. The white people here told us to cut our hair and that we need to know how to speak English, then there's work. Farm work was only 75 cents while the mill pay was \$1.88 on chain and the ones working inside the mill got paid 10 cents more. I stayed a couple of weeks here and Pyara guys went and asked for work and found there was work but they were like us. The rest of the guys, had their hair cut. When I first came to the airport, Pyara came to pick me up and outside there was a white man who drove a truck. When I got outside, you know who used to go and get the people? A person would charge \$10 per person to just talk for someone. The agents would themselves drop/see a person off and pick them up. Then on the way, he said to me if I wanted to get baptized. It was a small airport, just over there. I was looking around and he said to me "Sat Sri Akal, Sat Sri Akal" [imitating someone with the wrong accent] to me, because they didn't know Punjabi. Then, I looked around, I said I wanted to go to Victoria and I'm here now in Vancouver. Then I asked where Kuldip was and was told that he was in Victoria. After asking for Pyara, I was told that he was waiting outside and he came to get me. Then they told me to show my passport before going outside. We left and when passing through Richmond, we got a liquor bottle, and he asked me if I want to get baptized. I was puzzled so didn't reply. He asked me again, said "older brother what did I tell you?" I told him that I understood which baptizing he was talking about [cutting my hair]. I told him that until I meet my chacha, I won't make a decision. Then once coming home, they called and notified family. They said that I should be sent right away on plane, but Pyara wanted to send me the next day. They said I was to leave at once because they knew he was a drinker and he would get me drunk. Once I reached there, my chacha said to me that if I could just get by like this, due to his children and others, it would be good.

They all had short hair, but he still had a long hair and a turban. He said if I cut my hair, he would be happy, and if I wanted to keep them long, it was my choice, but if by listening to me you keep them then don't cut them later because then you won't ever keep them. So I got them done. After two weeks, he told me that he wanted to take me to the gurudwara. I was surprised because I thought nobody will even let me enter the gurudwara. Once we went there, everybody's head was uncovered. Then Bakshish came here due to workers being needed. Ranjit Mattu had a mill and paid the new immigrants \$1.00 and the older immigrants \$1.88. That still happens sometimes. Then I lived there and he lived here. Then we lived there for 1.5 years while I worked there and the new immigrants would get work but only a \$1.00.

Interviewer- where was this?

Amrao Singh- here in Vancouver. Ranjit Mattu's mill. Then all the new immigrants started to leave towards William's Lake or Quenel due to there not being enough work here.

Interviewer- how long did you work there?

Amrao Singh- I worked here for 1.5 years. Then I left also. I went to Viewpoint where a planar in the Netherland Company, employed me for about 5 years.

Interviewer- how much was the starting pay there?

Amrao Singh- there the pay was \$2. there was a union there also. There were already 5-7 others already living there and I got a chance there as well. Then what they did here was, in the jungles where they are small mills, they sold all of them. For 4-5 months then I had to go up to Quenel. While at the Netherland Company, our brother and sister back home said they wanted to come also...

Interviewer- from India?

Amrao Singh- yes. When I went to Kuldip Bains the agent here to find out, I was told I couldn't sponsor them. This was because the law had changed and I had to sponsor my family first. So filled out the sponsorship for them, but then when the time came for them to come, I thought about what I did. There were only about 3 families in Williams Lake and 4-5 in Quenel. The area was just very different. I came back here and applied at the Swanney Lumber Company to fill box cars, and did that for 19 years. All together, I worked here for 25 years. Then he came...

Interviewer- How much was the starting pay here in the lumber company?

Amrao Singh- it was the same, \$2.5 then slowly \$3. The pay was never much. We used to think how people used to work and save money to take back home. In seven years, I had \$7000 saved. Some of it got used up to sponsor them and the rest to buy a house. My children also came with her.

Interviewer- with your wife?

Amrao Singh- yes

Interviewer- what year did your wife come?

Amrao Singh- they came in '66

Interviewer- and her name?

Amrao Singh- Pritam Kaur

Interviewer- and your children came with her? How many?

Amrao Singh- three sons and one daughter

Interviewer- when you worked alone, where did you live?

Amrao Singh- they had given us a bunkhouse

Interviewer- so you all lived together in a bunkhouse?

Amrao Singh- we made our own food

Interviewer- did you have other expenses?

Amrao Singh- no they had bunkhouses that were free for the white people and us as well. We used to get our food from Williams Lake, but our friends that were here before us, once they found out that there were other Indians, so we became friends and helped each other. Or we would take the bus to Williams Lake to get groceries. Williams Lake was close to us and Quenel was further way.

Interviewer- were you able to get Indian groceries?

Amrao Singh- no we were only able to get non-indian food. There wasn't grocery available here too. We weren't able to get our Indian grocery.

Interviewer- what did you eat?

Amrao Singh- we would buy flour and make roti ourselves. We would make daal and sabji as well.

Interviewer- did everyone get together and cook?

Amrao Singh- we all had to work together

Interviewer- how many people lived in the bunkhouse?

Amrao Singh- there were seven of us

Pritam Kaur- there was a place in Vancouver where we were able to get everything, including daals

Interviewer- how often did you go buy groceries?

Amrao Singh- after a week. If we were free, we would just go and get it if something was needed.

Interviewer- did you have a car?

Amrao Singh- no, I haven't even driven a car to this day

Interviewer- did you get your license?

Amrao Singh- no. After they came, we bought a car, when he was 15-16 years old we bought one. We bought it from a relative. He would take us everywhere. We didn't think we would ever get separated, would live together, so didn't see a point. When they started to make their own living and get settled, they separated.

Amrao Singh- from Bant's house in Victoria, she asked me to do something for her. She said that there are wood pieces outside that need to put inside. Some white woman was asking. When I went there, I put them all inside and she said it was fine and that I could leave. The next day, she again said she needed help this time to cut them and start a fire. I worked for two whole days and only make \$4! So I said that all the work for two days and I only made \$4. now, we say that we don't want to leave from here.

Interviewer- when did you first return to India?

Amrao Singh- in 1986

Interviewer- the whole family?

Amrao Singh- Yes, no. she went with me. One of our sons was born here, the fourth. He was 18 years old and just the three of us went, Ranjit Bains. We went in November and then when we went, everyone had their faces covered with blankets due to the cold.

Interviewer- did your father come here also?

Amrao Singh- no

Pritam Kaur- he returned from Hong Kong. He left but then when in Hong Kong, his eyes started to water so they failed him.

Interviewer- his medical was failed?

Pritam Kaur- yes

Interviewer- what year did he go to Hong Kong?

Gurmeet Singh- our father came one year before our grandfather, so in 1906. He didn't pass so he had to return so our grandfather said he will go instead. There was a law then that a person over the age of 18 cannot sponsor their parents to come, only a kid less than 18 years old could. My father's age was more so instead my chacha came.

Interviewer- did he ever try to come again?

Amrao Singh- no

Interviewer- what was your father's name?

Amrao Singh- Basant Singh

Interviewer- when did your wife first start working?

Pritam Kaur- I didn't. He didn't let me work.

Amrao Singh- my oldest son was 14 years old, and the younger one was 7 years old. They needed to go to school, come home so they needed someone to walk with. There were people that would ask her what she was doing at home and why she didn't work. I told her that I would work and she would stay at home and raise the kids. When we would go get groceries, they had us numbered, like 1, 2, 3, 4. We would still be out in town and our groceries would reach home before us. At that time, milk, butter, or eggs would all be delivered to our homes, now we have to go and buy them from stores. Also, the laundries would come and take our clothes to be washed. When they would return them, it would be as if we had just bought them from a store, they were that presentable in packages.

Pritam Kaur- they would put red handkerchief's in the pockets too.

Amrao Singh- we would pay them after two weeks for the service.

Pritam Kaur- there also used to be a man that would come to the door to sharpen the knives.

Amrao Singh- the store on Fraser Highway, Rokko Saris, used to sell clothes out of a trunk before when they first came.

Pritam Kaur- they used to call one house and let them know which day they were coming and get that house to tell everyone else. There weren't phones then either.

Interviewer- what year did you hook up the phone here?

Amrao Singh- we got it hooked up as soon as we bought the house

Interviewer- what year did you buy a house?

Amrao Singh- in '66. I bought it in the beginning of the year and they came in mid year.

Interviewer- how much did the house cost?

Amrao Singh- the house cost \$13 500. There were two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. It still stands.

Interviewer- do you still have it?

Pritam Kaur- we still have it. Our kids always tell us to sell it but we still have it.

Interviewer- is it rented?

Amrao Singh- it's rented up and down both. There used to be wood fireplaces before and we would cut up wood and have it next to it in a box.

Pritam Kaur- we would put a plate on top and then when it would heat up we would put a pot of water on top. On top of that we make our rotis and make daals.

Amrao Singh- then outside we put a metal pot on the side to catch all the sawdust automatically. The heat was by sawdust, there was a spot where we would put 10-12 buckets of sawdust and light it up to heat up the house.

Amrao Singh- they recognized our community as hard workers later. In the mill, on the chain you would seldom see a white man working, it would almost always be an Indian. They were hard workers. That's why the law changed. The younger men started to say that our elders are back in India and we send them money constantly so they were told that they should get the receipts from the bank that show they send money so they can claim them on their income taxes.

Interviewer- to show that they make a certain amount?

Amrao Singh- no, to show that they send money to their parents

Interviewer- when you came, did the other communities get a long with the Indians?

Amrao Singh- they were good. The ones that came before us told us that the others used to taunt them sometimes.

Pritam Kaur- no, they used to throw eggs at us too! The kids used to do that whenever we would walk by them.

Amrao Singh- the earlier settlers used to tell us the same thing.

Pritam Kaur- we used to dress different according to them and they would tell us so.

Amrao Singh- do you know what the ladies used to wear? Has anyone told you yet?

Interviewer- they used to wear dresses

Amrao Singh- yes dresses. There were long shorts and pants for them but then they brought some clothes from India, Indian clothes. I'll tell you a story. Our chacha left from home, he used to live on 57-58<sup>th</sup> avenue here, in an apartment. He got on a bus from there and when he saw her wearing a salwar kameez, he quickly got off on the next stop. He said for us to go ahead and he will meet up with us later.

Pritam Kaur- he knew the white people were going to bug us due to our clothes.

Amrao Singh- they used to say that they are wearing their sleeping clothes. When he used to be home he would be dressed up as a sikh, but he minute someone knocked on the door, it didn't matter who it was, he wouldn't open the door until he put pants on.

Pritam Kaur- he would get dressed before opening the door.

Interviewer- did you all start wearing suits?

Amrao Singh- then slowly over time everyone did

Pritam Kaur- I wore dresses and pants for a while too. I basically did it all, except work. He didn't let me work.

Amrao Singh- we were getting by fine so there didn't seem a point.

Pritam Kaur- I used to say that when the kids are at school, I could go to work for a couple of hours because I was getting work.

Interviewer- where were you getting it?

Pritam Kaur- here in a laundry.

Amrao Singh- fix up clothes

Pritam Kaur- all I had to do was mend clothes because I knew how to sew. They even offered to drop the clothes off at home. But he said no.

Amrao Singh- I told her to take care of the kids instead. After two months of her dropping of our son Paramjit at school, or was it three or four months?

Pritam Kaur- only two months

Amrao Singh- he told her to not come anymore that he would come home alone. It was about four or five blocks away

Interviewer- school?

Pritam Kaur- it was because when I would drop him off, the other kids would laugh at him so she told me not to come and that he would come by himself. Then one day at lunch time, he got out of school and he went straight...

Amrao Singh- he came towards Fraser Street but didn't turn towards the house.

Pritam Kaur- he didn't realize it

Amrao Singh- he thought the house was still up ahead. He went to Cambie Street and stood crying at the lights. Then, I went to look for him after receiving message that he was lost. I went and couldn't find him anywhere. Then we called the police...

Interviewer- you did?

Amrao Singh- our sister-in-law did. Then they went and saw that this boy is crying and put the two together and they brought him.

Pritam Kaur- it was only after two months of being here. He would come home with me all the time. I still don't know any English up until today.

Amrao Singh- well there was never a need.

Pritam Kaur- we lived in an Indian community and therefore never needed to learn English.

Interviewer- what are the dates of birth of your children?

Amrao Singh- I have to go get them?

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[Interviewing Gurmeet Singh Bains (Amrao's younger brother)]

Interviewer- what year did you come?

Gurmeet Singh- in '69

Interviewer- did you come alone?

Gurmeet Singh- yes I came alone

Interviewer- where did you first work?

Gurmeet Singh- Terminal Saw Mill. I worked their entirely. From '59 up until 2000 I worked there.

Interviewer- you retired from there?

Gurmeet Singh- yes from there

Interviewer- how much was your starting pay?

Gurmeet Singh- in the beginning it was about \$2.10 and in the end it was about \$22.50

Interviewer- where did you live when you first came?

Gurmeet Singh- with my older brother...

Amrao Singh- he only stayed in Vancouver

Interviewer- here in Vancouver?

Gurmeet Singh- yes

Interviewer- then when did your family first come?

Gurmeet Singh- my family came in '72

Interviewer- did only your wife come?

Gurmeet Singh- no my children as well.

Pritam Kaur- two children came also, one son and one daughter

Interviewer- their names?

Gurmeet Singh- one's name is Manjit and the other Karmjit.

Interviewer- and their dates of birth?

Gurmeet Singh- Manjit's is June '68 and Karmjit's is Dec '69

Pritam Kaur- then one son was born here.

Interviewer- his name and date of birth?

Gurmeet Singh- Jasvir is his name and he was born in '73

Interviewer- was he born here? In Vancouver?

Gurmeet Singh- yes

Interviewer- did all your children go to school here?

Gurmeet Singh- yes

Interviewer- what's your wife's name?

Gurmeet Singh- Sukhminder Kaur

Interviewer- did she work?

Gurmeet Singh- She worked about 24-25 years

Interviewer- where did she work?

Gurmeet Singh- in a vegetable cannery

Interviewer- in Vancouver?

Gurmeet Singh- in Richmond

Interviewer- what was her pay like?

Gurmeet Singh- I think starting \$5-6

Amrao Singh- it was probably about that much

Pritam Kaur- it was about \$5 then

Gurmeet Singh- she retired at about \$12-13

Interviewer- she worked 25 years right?

Gurmeet Singh- yes. She stopped working when the cannery shut down.

Interviewer- she stopped when it closed but didn't work elsewhere?

Gurmeet Singh- no

Interviewer- did you face any hardships when you first came?

Gurmeet Singh- no there weren't any hardships. I left home to come home.

Interviewer- because you had family here?

Pritam Kaur- we had almost left home to go pick up Sukhminder when she came home herself.

Gurmeet Singh- it was close. These guys were all still getting ready while I went and brought her home in a taxi.

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Amrao Singh- Here are the dates. Balbir Singh Bains 29-10-53, Kulbir Kaur 22-12-55, Dilbag Singh Bains 22-12-57, and Paramjit 24-7-59. He was three months old when I left them. And Ranjit 11-8-67.

Pritam Kaur- he was born here