

## **Sohan Singh Birak**

Interviewer- can you please tell me your full name?

Sohan- Sohan Singh Birak

Interviewer- your date of birth?

Sohan- July 1<sup>st</sup> 1944

Interviewer- when did you come to Canada?

Sohan- may 3<sup>rd</sup> 1960

Interviewer- where did you live first?

Sohan- lake Cowichan

Interviewer- who did you come to?

Sohan- my sister was here, Kashmir Kaur Johal

Interviewer- how long had they been here?

Sohan- they came in 1956

Interviewer- you came from India?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- what village did you come from?

Sohan- the village Birak, District Jalandar

Interviewer- why did you first come here?

Sohan- my sister got me to come here

Interviewer- she probably sponsored you then, right?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- when you first came to Lake Cowichan, what did you do?

Sohan- I stayed in Lake Cowichan for 6 months, then in 1960, I came to Abbotsford. In June.

Interviewer- what did you do here?

Sohan- after coming here, I worked in a farm, Marris Growers, on Townline Road.

Interviewer- how long did you live in Abbotsford?

Sohan- from 1960-1963 I worked in the farm

Interviewer- did you know anyone else in Abbotsford?

Sohan- When I came here, there lived Tarlok Singh Bassi.

Interviewer- who else?

Sohan- Avtar Singh Bassi, his brother, Gian Damer, Dara Singh Mann. We all worked in the farm. Also, Jagtar Singh Gill.

Interviewer- what kind of work did you do in the farm?

Sohan- I first picked strawberries for \$0.65 per flat.

Interviewer- after 1963, where did you go?

Sohan- after 1963, I went to Golden, to a town nearby there called Donald. I worked in a mill there.

Interviewer- what was the name of the mill?

Sohan- Silk Spruce Lumber Company

Interviewer- how long did you stay there?

Sohan- I stayed there three years, then in April 1966 I came back to Lake Cowichan.

Interviewer- to your sister

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- then in Lake Cowichan....

Sohan- I started working in the Mill, Western Forest Industry, Honeymoon Bay.

Interviewer- where there a lot of other Indo-Canadians?

Sohan- yes, there was a Gurudwara also. There were about 50 families living there.

Interviewer- in Lake Cowichan?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- when you went to Golden to work, were there other Indo-Canadian families?

Sohan- in Golden? No.

Interviewer- how did you go to Golden, did someone tell you there was work there?

Sohan- Gurdial Singh Dhami took me there. He had a contract there in the mill. He got me a job there.

Interviewer- so you came back to Lake Cowichan in 1966?

Sohan- yes I got a job in the mill, Western Forest Industry, Honeymoon Bay

Interviewer- how long did you work there?

Sohan- I worked in the mill until 1990. Then I got injured.

Interviewer- when did you go back to India?

Sohan- for the first time?

Interviewer- yes

Sohan- in 1978

Interviewer- why did you go back?

Sohan- just to meet everyone

Interviewer- when you first came from India, did you come by yourself?

Sohan- yes, by myself.

Interviewer- when did auntie come?

Sohan- I got married in 1969.

Interviewer- did you get married here?

Sohan- no in the Paldi gurudwara, on July 13<sup>th</sup> 1969.

Interviewer- was she already here?

Sohan- no I sponsored her from India.

Interviewer- how did you sponsor her?

Sohan- I sponsored her from India

Interviewer- but you got married after, right?

Sohan- they came from India first on June 23 1969.

Interviewer- so you started your family there?

Sohan- yes, in Lake Cowichan.

Interviewer- how many children do you have?

Sohan- three

Interviewer- their full names?

Sohan- Harvinder Singh Birak

Interviewer- his date of birth?

Sohan- May 10<sup>th</sup> 1970

Interviewer- then...

Sohan- Kulwinder Kaur Birak -May 10 1973. Third is Jagwinder Singh Birak -August 28 1979

I-when you first came from India, the moment you got off the airplane, how did Canada look to you?

Sohan- very nice

Interviewer- where there any tensions?

Sohan- no, none.

Interviewer- what did you bring with you/

Sohan- I brought nothing, just clothes to wear and \$60 Canadian.

Interviewer- when you first came you lived with your sister, but did you find working difficult the first time?

Sohan- yes at first, the work was hard but then I got used to it. I was about 16 years old at the time.

Interviewer- when you first started work at the mill, what was your pay?

Sohan- in the farm it was \$0.85 per hour

Interviewer- per hour?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- how many hours did you work per day?

Sohan- 10 hours sometimes

Interviewer- was it seasonal work?

Sohan- yes seasonal, June to November

Interviewer- what did you do the rest of the year?

Sohan- nothing, unemployed.

Interviewer- when you lived in Abbotsford?

Sohan- yes. When work finished in November, I went back to visit my sister. I would return again in May or June.

Interviewer- when you came to Abbotsford, who did you stay with?

Sohan- I stayed with Gian Damer

Interviewer- was it a house or a cabin?

Sohan- it was a cabin on the farm, on Townline Road.

Interviewer- Were there mostly bachelors?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- how many were there?

Sohan- there was 6-7 men

Interviewer- in one cabin?

Sohan- there were 3 cabins

Interviewer- when you started working in the mill, what was your pay?

Sohan- \$1.28 per hour

Interviewer- in Golden?

Sohan- yes in '64.

Interviewer- when you lived in Abbotsford with other men, did you do your own grocery shopping?

Sohan- we did it ourselves. We got it from South Popular grocery store on Huntington Road.

Interviewer- did you cook the food yourself?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- or did one person make it for everyone?

Sohan- no by ourselves.

Interviewer- when you went back to Lake Cowichan and worked for Western Forest Industry, Honeymoon Bay, what was your pay then?

Sohan- when I first started, it was \$2.50, in '66.

Interviewer- was there a union?

Sohan- yes IWA union

Interviewer- so you probably worked 8 hours then

Sohan- yes 8 hours, 40 per week

Interviewer- when did you get injured?

Sohan- I got hurt in '90.

Interviewer- what happened?

Sohan- first I got injured in 1963, when a tractor went over my legs.

Interviewer- in the farm?

Sohan- yes. Then in 1990, my legs started getting weak so I had an operation for my knees. I stopped working after that.

Interviewer- when did you get the operation for your knees?

Sohan- one was in '90, and the second in '92.

Interviewer- did most of your family settle in Lake Cowichan

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- who was left in India?

Sohan- when I first left India, my mom and dad were left. My dad's name was Dalip Singh and my mom's Nachittar Kaur. I also had two brothers named Gurbaksh Singh and Sewa Singh and a sister named Jageer Kaur. My sister was married but my brothers lived with my parents.

Interviewer- did they ever come here?

Sohan- I sponsored Gurbaksh Singh in 1969

Interviewer- when you wanted to sponsor someone, what did you have to do? What was the procedure?

Sohan- a job letter and bank balance was needed.

Interviewer- how much bank balance did you need?

Sohan- at least \$1000

Interviewer- did your parents ever come?

Sohan- my father passed away in 1972.

Interviewer- were you still in Canada?

Sohan- yes, then in 1974 I applied to have my mom, Nachittar Kaur, and younger brother Sewa come here. Then they came in 1977.

Interviewer- did they come to Lake Cowichan?

Sohan- yes

Interviewer- when you lived in Lake Cowichan, did you have a house?

Sohan- yes, we had a house

Interviewer- do you remember where it was in Lake Cowichan?

Sohan- yes, 115 Joal Road.

Interviewer- when your mom and brother came, who lived in your house?

Sohan- at the time, Kulwinder, Jagwinder, and Harvinder, me and my wife.

Interviewer- what's your wife's full name?

Sohan- Bachni Kaur

Interviewer- what was her last name before marriage?

Sohan- Mandher

Interviewer- were all of your children educated here? In Lake Cowichan?

Sohan- yes, Harvinder and Kulwinder were in Lake Cowichan, and Jagwinder here in Abbotsford

Interviewer- when did you move from Lake Cowichan

Sohan- in 1991.

Interviewer- why did you come here?

Sohan- Harvinder and Kulwinder were doing higher education here.

Interviewer- when you moved here from Lake Cowichan, who lived with you?

Sohan- me, wife, and three kids.

Interviewer- what about your mom?

Sohan- my mom lived with us but my brother was married so he lived separate

Interviewer- when did he get married?

Sohan- in 1978

Interviewer- here or in India?

Sohan- here in Abbotsford. He lives here in Abbotsford

Interviewer- what about the other brother that you sponsored first, did he live in Abbotsford too?

Sohan- no he got married in Lake Cowichan in 1975, he lived there

Interviewer- when did you officially retire?

Sohan- from work I retired in 1990. When I got injured, I got disability payments.

Interviewer- when you came to Lake Cowichan there was a fairly big community right?

Sohan- yes about 50 families

Interviewer- did everyone know each other?

S-yes, there was a gurudwara so everyone went there each week

Interviewer- what gurudwara was it?

Sohan- Lake Cowichan Khalsa Diwan Society

Interviewer- were there a lot of functions at the gurudwara

Sohan- there was at least one function each week

Interviewer- do you still know all the families that were there?

Sohan- yes we still know them

Interviewer- it was a close knit community. When you came to Abbotsford, what did you do here?

Sohan- nothing, I was retired. My son Harvinder worked so we all lived here.

Interviewer- do you go to India often?

Sohan- every year. Since 1996 I spend 6 months there and 6 months here

Interviewer- when you first came here what was the most difficult thing?

Sohan- that I didn't know how to speak English

Interviewer- in the farms there were other Indians, but in Golden, how did you communicate?

Sohan- there was approximately 85% working there. Gurdial Singh Dhami had the contract for work there. Then we learned some English. For one year in Golden, I went to school.

Interviewer- did the mill send you?

Sohan- Gurdial Singh Dhami who had the contract sent us to school

Interviewer- since you lived in Golden for three years, did you go to school for three years?

Sohan- no one year. We learnt in that time.

Interviewer- since you came from India, is there any story you would like to tell me? Any funny story? Something you found really different? When did you learn how to drive a car?

Sohan- I learnt how to drive in 1965.

Interviewer- who taught you?

Sohan- my friend Tarlochan Singh Dhami taught me.

Interviewer- when did you buy your first car?

Sohan- in 1965.

Interviewer- do you remember what kind of car it was

Sohan- 1958 Chevrolet Impala

Interviewer- before you came from India, did you go to school?

Sohan- yes I went up to Grade 6. A funny story, when we came from India we didn't know how to speak English and went to the store to buy chicken. We said to the salesperson, "murga" and then remembered it's called "chicken" in English.

Interviewer- when you came to Lake Cowichan, you must have received quite a bit of help from your sister who's family was there.

Sohan- yes. When we came to Abbotsford, there was no other family except one.

Interviewer- did you ever work in a mill here in Abbotsford?

Sohan- no just farm.

Interviewer- did you work in the same farm?

Sohan- yes Abbotsford Growers, Marris Growers. Where the airport is now, all that land belonged to one man, the owner

Interviewer- what was his name?

Sohan- Eric Marris, he lived on Townline Road. He owned all that land.

Interviewer- what was that farm called?

Sohan- Marris Growers.

Interviewer- what was grown there?

Sohan- we planted strawberries and hoed the land. Then they grew Cauliflower, broccoli, sprouts. We planted them then when ready harvested them.

Interviewer- were they all owned by one man?

Sohan- yes, over all the airport land.