

Bant Singh Brar Transcription

Interview Date: November 1st, 2014

SB: What is your name dad?

BB: My name is Bant Singh Brar.

SB: What is your date of birth and place of birth?

BB: I was born on April 2, 1940 in Dedarewala, Punjab, India.

SB: When did you immigrate to Canada?

BB: August 31st, 1972.

SB: What is your immigration status now?

BB: I'm a Canadian citizen.

SB: When you came to Canada what was your immigration status?

BB: Immigrant.

SB: family class, point system, how did you come here?

BB: I was a visitor. I came here and applied for immigration.

SB: Points Basis?

BB: No.

SB: Before coming to Canada where did you live?

BB: Sydney, Australia.

SB: Did you work before you came here?

BB: I was a teacher in Sydney, Australia.

SB: Did you work in a mill or did you own a mill here?

BB: I started mill right from the beginning and it was a really small operation.

SB: In what year?

BB: I started in 89.

SB: What was the name of the mill?

BB: Mission Shake and Shingle

SB: Where was it?

BB: Mission. It was situated in Mission on the river bank

SB: And mill ownership...how did that work? How was your experience?

BB: We were two partners me and my...50 50 shareholders. Then within 6 months I got...I was involved in an accident I crushed my legs and then.

SB: Did that happen in the mill?

BB: Yeah it was in the mill. We were pulling logs out of the river my legs were squeezed in between forklift and log and they were broken and crushed. Then we have to have another partner. Before that we were 50 50 shareholders then we gave him 6...11 shares each and then we were three partners and I was mostly looking after in the office and they were doing the mill work

SB: What is your first memory of owning the mill?

BB: It's pretty tough you have to work pretty hard. There was no money in the beginning it is a pretty tough life and... but we work very hard and we went through it and we did pretty well.

SB: Do you have a story of hard times in the mill?

BB: Oh yeah sometime yes sometimes you went on the log and fell in the river and its freezing water and it's so hard. Have to work very hard.

SB: As a mill owner what was your job?

BB: I had to sell shakes and buy logs. Look after the payroll and do supervision of the mill during the day time.

SB: Do you remember what the price of wood was in the beginning?

BB: No. It used to be cheap but I don't exactly remember it was so long ago.

SB: Hmm umm tell me a story about your experience in the mill...day-to-day life. How was the work? How did people treat you?

BB: Oh mostly they were our worker and they used to work very hard and it was like a family and our workers they were very devoted people and we never treated them...we were just like a family we were working together we went through it pretty good. It was really rewarding experience. We used to help each other but it was different at that time. It was not employee-employer relationship it was like a family. And we used to treat our employees really like family members and they were really honest and dedicated workers.

SB: The workers in Mission Shake and Shingle what background were they racially/ethnically?

BB: Most of them were East Indian there were few people who were white people but the—The most memorable thing is that in 1987 American that was free trade and they hit us with a tariff that we are destroying their shake and shingle business they put 35% import duty on shake and shingle and people were thinking that's the end of the shake and shingle industry but in reality that was 87-88 were the best years because the price of logs came down and we were making more money than we were making before. But the news was very scary but it turned out to be pretty good.

SB: Umm what are some successes/advantages of working in the mill...or owning the mill, sorry.

BB: Owning mill is not as...it's very hard work you have to work...I used to work 7 days. 6 days we used to run mill and 7th day we had to do the repair work. It's a pretty tough job and at the end of the day it's very rewarding. I'm very proud that we created hundreds of jobs, we contributed to the progress of BC and Canada. I really feel great about it.

SB: What were some challenges? What were the difficulties of being an owner?

BB: Difficulties were that white people used to hate us they used to say we'll buy you out this and that...they were jealous. We had to overcome those challenges and we did it and we did it very successfully.

SB: Were there any problems with people making threats like that?

BB: Umm not...well yes actually. In 1989 there was a murder....someone shot a guy...an East Indian man and we were very scared. No one knew what happened. But we were cautious and nothing happened in our mill.

SB: Did you ever find out what happened in that case? 1989

BB: No the Police were looking for them but they could never find the murderer. And we didn't have a clue and we were cautious and nothing happened in our mill.

SB: Do you remember what mill that happened

BB: That was in Fraser...Fraser Cedar on Lougheed Highway. The owner was Gill...Mr. Gill.

SB: Do we know who was murdered? The name of the man that was murdered?

BB: Oh he was a watchman I don't know his name and, that's all I knew he was a watchman. He got killed.

SB: How many Indian mill owners were there when you owned a mill?

BB: When I owned the mill it was Mission Shake and Shingle and there were 3 or 4 mills and we had about 100 employees. After Mission Shake I bought another mill Redwood Shake and Shingle.

SB: What year? Do you remember?

BB: I bought that in 87.

SB: Was that a shake and shingle mill as well?

BB: Redwood Shake and Shingle yeah. I had about 35 employees there.

SB: Umm...But were there other...at BC at that time how many more Indian mill owners were there?

BB: Ohh maybe in total 5-6 mill owners

SB: Not very many?

BB: No.

SB: Umm did you ever in that industry have to work with other mill owners? Were there any challenges with that or is it mostly a self-run...?

BB: No, No we did not have anything to do with other mills we were run independently and.

SB: Did Indian mill owners have some sort of contact with each other?

BB: Not really...no not at all.

SB: Ok. Umm when did you end up leaving both of the mills?

BB: Oh I we had a problem in our partnership and I sold my Mission Shake and Shingle in 90 and I was allergic to shake and shingle...I was allergic shake smell and uh cedar powder.

SB: Did that happen because you were working in the mill?

BB: I was exposed to shake and shingle so long.

SB: Was that common for workers?

BB: Some people are allergic some are not. I was one of them. In 91 I had to sell Redwood Shake and Shingle as well.

SB: Do you remember what it was like to live in Canada at that time when you were owning the mill

BB: It was very tough. We started from scratch there were challenges but we overcame them.

SB: What kind of challenges? I'm just trying to get some stories

BB: Challenges...we needed a lot of money to buy logs and was being financed by a broker and they were making a lot of money from us but he have no other way to do it. And uhh...

SB: Did the brokers ever take advantage?

BB: Oh they did sure they did. In Mission it's called Mission mafia. The mill owners they tried to crush other newcomers but we were hardworking people I wouldn't say lucky...we were just smart and hardworking and we overcome those obstacles.

SB: Do you remember what food was like in the mills? Some of the mills had cooks? Did you guys have a cook in the mill?

BB: No we didn't have. People used to bring their food from home. There no cook or no nothing.

SB: Do you remember what food was like back then? Where did you go for Indian food and was it different from what it is now?

BB; No same, same Indian food. It was available at the time People used to cook at their home and bring it for lunch.

SB: Where would people buy like dhal and Indian things?

BB: They used to prepare in their own homes.

SB: But where would they buy like the lentils. Like now there are stores.

BB: There used to be stores yeah. Not that many but there were stores in Vancouver

SB: Do you remember the names of the stores in Vancouver?

[Paramjit Brar]

PB: All India on Victoria Drive

SB: Do you remember when you came from India in 1986, how was food different here? Getting groceries? Now there it Fruiticana. Then did you go to Vancouver?

PB: Yes we used to go to Vancouver from Mission. It was on Main...All India Foods.

SB: Yup. How often did you have to go to get groceries?

PB: You know Dhal and beans? We would get all together for a year.

SB: Did a lot of people do this?

PB: Yup all the people did this mostly.

SB: Once a year you would go get a lot? Is there anything else that was different?

PB: Sweets we had to get from there as well. We didn't celebrate Vaisakhi or Nagar Kirtan. That started happening after. There was no Nagar Kirtan.

SB: Why was there no Nagar Kirtan? Do you remember?

PB: There wasn't much of a population of Punjabis. In 1986 there was no Nagar Kirtan. Now all the cities have it, Vancouver, Surrey even Abbotsford

SB: Our functions...like weddings. How did people do food? Sweets?

PB: Indian...the type they did for weddings our food was the same.

SB: Was it hard to find? Like sweets...Or did people make them yourselves?

PB: We would make ourselves. Ladies would get together and make themselves.

SB: That's good Thank you Mummy.

SB: Rest...do you have a story some interesting story. About your experience. Or what was a typical day for you as a mill owner?

BB: Oh we used to start our mill 7 o'clock and then...so long as I was owner of the mill we would always run two shifts...day shift and afternoon shift. When market was good we used to run 6 days and even sometimes 7 days when market was good and we just...we just were very hard working people. Committed people and we did it and we did it very good and we are proud of it.

SB: You said a lot of your workers a lot of the people in the mill it was like family right? Are there any examples if that? Did you guys get together during New Year's or Christmas?

BB: Oh yeah we used to have party at New Year.

SB: At the mill? Or just together?

BB: No just at the mill we used to celebrate at the mill. Yeah.

SB: How would you celebrate that?

BB: We used to bring sweets and pizzas and drinks. We used to drink together and enjoy together.

SB: Sweets? Where would you get the sweets?

BB: We used to order mostly pizzas.

SB: But did the sweets come from the same place that mom was talking about in Vancouver? Did you have to go to Vancouver to get it?

BB: No, no that was available in Mission and Abbotsford. So we didn't have to go to buy that food from there.

SB: In what year was this? Same time...in the 1980s?

BB: Uh yeah early 80s, late 80s up to 1991.

SB: Ok umm. So you told me how you left M--actually you told me how you left both mills. Ok I think I'm almost done. Is there anything you want to tell me about your experience owning a mill? Looking back on it now.

BB: That was a pretty tough work. I have no regrets I feel good about it. And at the end of the day I was a winner and that's what matters.

SB: Thank you.