

Hakam Singh Dhaliwal Transcription

Interview Date: January 15th, 2015

MB: What is your name?

HD: Hakam Singh Dhaliwal

MB: And when were you born?

HD: July 14, '49. India.

MB: And in what village were you born?

HD: Chananwal. District Barnala, Punjab.

MB: And when did you immigrate to Canada?

HD: I came on February 18, 1969.

MB: How old were you?

HD: (Some talking) 19-20.

MB: And on what basis did you come?

HD: My father had sent for us.

MB: Okay, so your father was already here? Who all did he sponsor over?

HD: Yes. It was me, my sister, and my mother.

MB: By sponsoring.

HD: Yes.

MB: Alright. So since when had your father been gone?

HD: He had come 15 years prior. He came in 1952.

MB: And on what terms did he come? Was he finding work?

HD: No our Baba's brother, Paul Singh, had sent for him. At that time there was a law for sponsoring nephews. He came through that.

MB: So that was after his wedding of course. You were born.

HD: Yes, we were just kids. When he came there were three of us. Then in '57 when he came back my sister was born.

MB: And what kind of work did he do when he came to Canada?

HD: Mostly drove the truck. He had his own company of his uncle's.

MB: Alright, now I'll ask you questions about when you came. But first I want to ask, did you do any work in Punjab before coming to Canada?

HD: No, I was studying.

MB: What were you studying?

HD: I was going to graduate but had a year left.

MB: In what studies?

HD: Well there it's just the basic studies after passing the tenth grade. I was just in the middle of the studies and then I came here.

MB: Oh, okay. The plus 1 and plus 2 studies?

HD: Yes.

MB: So you weren't able to finish it.

HD: No, I never was able to. They were taking admission but I never went ahead. I studied just 7-8 months.

MB: Okay, so you have completed your studies till the tenth grade then.

HD: Yes.

MB: Okay. So tell me a little bit about how Canada, a new country to you, seemed at first. What your first impressions were.

HD: Well, all our family was basically here and it seemed all right to me. For a new person it takes time, after all. I came and for fifteen days I stayed and just after that I was put to work.

MB: Yeah, so where did they put you to work?

HD: There was a mill called Wonnoc Shake and Shingle. It was in the bush (forest) at that time so I was picking the wood.

MB: Oh, in the forest.

HD: In the truck, yeah. I was there I think 6 months and then I started driving a truck.

MB: So is your history of working in the mill just these 6 months then?

HD: No.

MB: Okay. First I'll take your timeline like what you did next. So at Wonnoc you worked in 1959 for 6 months and then you started trucking.

HD: Yes, my dad and Baba Ji (Uncle) had a company and I started driving a truck.

MB: Okay. That was late 1969 to 1970?

HD: Yes.

MB: For how long?

HD: For about a year and a half or two years. Roughly two years. So then I started in 1972 in a shake mill again.

MB: In the same shake mill?

HD: No.

MB: A different one? Which different one?

HD: Yes. It was S&W Shake and Shingle.

MB: Where was that?

HD: That was in Maple Ridge.

MB: From 1972 to?

HD: To... I think '81.

MB: Oh! So 11 years.

HD: Yes.

MB: Okay. Um, that was in Maple Ridge. Where was Wonnoc's mill?

HD: That was in the bush.

MB: In Mission?

HD: Yeah, in the same area there.

MB: Okay. And you worked here till '81. What after that?

HD: That... I worked a couple months in other mills, but forget about that. Then I started my own partnership with Fraser Cedar.

MB: Okay, what do you mean by partnership?

HD: Well, I put some share in there. I was working in the same mill there but as a partner.

MB: Okay, what year was this?

HD: That was from I think 1982 – I think three and a half years or four years roughly. Then I got out of there and took my share out and then I started my own mill with my other partner. So that as Upstream Cedar Products.

MB: Upstream? This was in 1986?

HD: I think I started in 1985, around there, till '89-90.

MB: So, like five years.

HD: 4 and a half, yeah. And then it caught on fire so then I didn't rebuild.

MB: What did you do after it caught on fire?

HD: Well, then I started working for Whatcom Sawmill. That's is Ruskin, Maple Ridge. But their company's name was Shake and Shingle Premium Cedar Products. So then I started working there. It was under Whatcom Sawmill.

MB: Did they change their company's name?

HD: Well they had 3-4 companies and one company was Premium Cedar Products.

MB: So you went from.

HD: 1991 to last year.

MB: Oh! To 2014.

HD: 2014. I retired then.

MB: You said that the company has different companies under it. The first one you were at, which one?

HD: Well actually after my mill, I started Premium Cedar Products but the main name is Whatcom Products, it's already under there.

MB: Okay, so that's you're whole timeline.

HD: That's right.

MB: Now that I have your timeline I'll start asking you questions about your experiences. Okay. Alright so, your first mill at Wonnoc Shake and Shingle, for 6 months, you said you found this because of your family, your family had you working here?

HD: My family had a truck there. They were hauling it.

MB: Oh, they were hauling it.

HD: So I was just picking the wood and throwing it on the truck. Taking it away and putting it on the trailer.

MB: How did you like this work and how did it make you feel? This was your first job in Canada.

HD: Well, in your mind, you have to work and you have to work. That's all I can say.

MB: Yeah. Okay, this was outdoors the whole time then.

HD: That's right.

MB: So what made you want to join trucking with your father and your uncle?

HD: Well I was picking the wood and at the same time they said you can get the license for trucking the truck. So I got the license and I started driving the truck. In the same truck that I was working and throwing the wood in was in fact the same truck that I ended up driving.

MB: And you only did trucking for two, maybe two and a half years. Was it local?

HD: Yeah, it was from Maple Ridge to New Westminster.

MB: Okay. And how did you find trucking? How did you think the work was?

HD: It was okay because it was under the family name.

MB: Yeah, and it's independent work too.

HD: You know, the family manages you. My dad was driving the truck and my uncle was driving the truck, it was the same thing.

MB: Um, why did you leave trucking then? You started in '72 back in a shake and shingle mill, but why did you leave trucking?

HD: Well, actually, I had a major accident.

MB: Oh, a trucking accident?

HD: Yeah with my truck. And I didn't like it, so that was that.

MB: Okay, okay. So that made you want to go back working in the mill or did you try looking for other jobs for your career?

HD: Well actually, a couple of my friends were already working there and at that time at a shake and shingle mill you can make a lot of money at that time. So I started that job and I started making money.

MB: What paid better, trucking or the mill?

HD: Mill.

MB: Okay. And so, was S&W Shake and Shingle apna owned or gora owned?

HD: No, no it was Whatcom. Like I said. It was Leonard Watcon, he was the owner.

MB: Okay, so it was gora owned. This was the same owner as the Premium Cedar Products?

HD: S&W Premium's son.

MB: Ohh, okay, so it was under the same tree.

HD: My boss lived 25 years now and I worked with him and I worked for him. So for my own company they were my guys.

MB: Okay, I will ask you questions about your own company. What would you say the population was at S&W. Were there more gorey or apney, or was it mix?

HD: Ah, there were more goray.

MB: Alright. So how about Fraser Cedar. Was this too gora owned or apna owned?

HD: This was of apney men.

MB: Okay. So there must've been more apney here then than gorey.

HD: It was mostly apney. If any gorey, than just one person.

MB: Okay. And so, tell me a little bit about the differences of working in a company that was gora run vs. apna run. There must be some differences.

HD: Well, in that time the apney men were working under the gorey and I was a worker there. So when I started as a partner and a foreman that was different. I can't say, because if I was working for apney men then the story would be different since I wasn't a partner there and the role would've been different. A lot of people would've worked under me. So that was quite a bit of difference.

MB: Mhmm, was there any reason why you were partnered in shares?

HD: Well there wasn't any reason but I had a friend there and he had passed away. He used to tell me, "You can do it, you know a lot about shake and shingles." He said "Let's build a mill." He was manager in Chilliwack and he said I'll give you a place. They have a place there and he said, "Would you run the mill?" and I said, "No, no, I don't want it." So later, when they tallied the cheque they were from shake and shingle too, they said let's put shares in so we all put shares.

MB: Shares to go towards your mill Upstream Cedar Products?

HD: No, these were the first shares that went towards Fraser Cedar.

MB: All of your guys' shares were towards Fraser Cedar?

HD: Just three of us. He used to be the owner of Fraser Cedar and his partner had left, so we joined him. So we stayed about 3-4 years and we didn't get along too good after a few years, so.

MB: Okay, the three of you men took your shares out of Fraser Cedar. And so Upstream Cedar Products, you

HD: We partners bought a mill that was on sale.

MB: So that's what Upstream Cedar was?

HD: That's when Upstream Cedar came in place.

MB: Okay. And in this position you were the manager then? The top manager?

HD: Well, I wouldn't say that. I was a manager, president, whatever. We had a 4-5 partnership there. Some of us half percent, some of us full percent. They chose me as the president, whatever you can say, because I was running the show.

MB: Yeah, okay. And what was the population of people working at Upstream? Did you have more apney working in your mill?

HD: Ah, yes. There was 1% gora men and we were running two shifts.

MB: Day and night?

HD: Yes. There were about 40 people employed there.

MB: Oh, 40 people working. 40 employees?

HD: Yes.

MB: Okay. And what kind of mill was this? Was it a shake and shingle?

HD: Yes, shake and shingle.

MB: So, tell me a little bit about your work as a president, as an owner, as a manager – what was it like?

HD: It was pretty tough! Too much headache. I've worked a lot in my life. I've done a lot of kind of work in my life. I've done farming. I've done farming too in California, for three years.

MB: Oh, when was that?

HD: That was actually when I left the mill. At the same time I bought a farm there with my brother-in-law in California. So I was steady though there. I was just going there for a month. We didn't have any guy there to look after it. So in the mills, you know, it's just headache – lots of headache since you run the place, you know. So you've got to have a lot of patience, you know, to run the place. It was doing really good, it was just one day, you know, the price was so high so we called everybody to fix the mill properly. We had a lot of orders, gorey orders, so we were going to make lots of money. So we tried to fix the mill Saturday and have a mill wright working in there. One mill wright somehow, I don't know, I told him to cut straight to keep trying to cut it in the conveyer. I think, that's what I'm thinking, that he cut to the side. So, to the side, the flame flew into the wall.

MB: Oh, the sparks?

HD: Yeah, in a shake and shingle mill there is a lot of fine dust. And with that, we came home from work. Saturday was our day off. I worked 6 days for 12-14 hours and there was just 1 day to go out with friends, to do this and that. So I went out with my friends to have some drinks. Our watchman that we had was late that day somehow and the sparks kept starting, and after three hours, it happened.

MB: On Saturday night.

HD: I tried to rebuild but a couple of partners said no, you keep it, this and that. And then I thought no, it's too much headache just leave it. And same time I asked those guys to sell me the property on lease, but they said they didn't want to sell it, so that's why they didn't rebuild. That's it.

MB: Did your partners back out then? What about their shares because some of them had more shares.

HD: No. They said no, we're not going to rebuild so we said okay, and whatever money we had in the account and the money we had from insurance, we gave back to them for their shares.

MB: Okay. That's really tough owning a mill and it just overnight

HD: Yeah, it happened.

MB: And after that, what did you do? I'm guessing it took you a lot of time to deal with everything.

HD: Well Whatcom, they were my brokers and we had our own mill, Upstream.

MB: They wanted to partner right?

HD: No, they didn't partner but they wanted to sell my product.

MB: Ohh, okay.

HD: So, they were right beside me. Because S&W, I was leasing from them for Upstream. So, when they offered me a job and I asked them if they had a job, I said sure and I started working there. I started working as a laborer for a couple of years, you know packing, this and that, then they gave me a quality control job. And then, it's just like a foreman, safe, nobody bothered me at all. Everybody used to kind of, again working under me. Not as a foreman, but Fraser's thinking is that I'm a good guy, this and that, with quality control you have to do a lot of things with the crew. So, after last year that was it, I finished my job.

MB: Was there a lot of loss for all the money that you invested into the mill?

HD: No, I didn't have loss.

MB: No? So you just broke even?

HD: Well we ran about 4-5 years, we made some money.

MB: What was the transition like from being president and going to Whatcom and becoming a laborer, what did that feel like?

HD: Well, actually, it didn't bother me much because it was a lot of headache.

MB: Headache like what?

HD: Well, when you own your own mill and your own business, there's a lot of things in – when you own your own mill it's not farming, like it's totally different.

KS: You mean the responsibility?

HD: Yes, yeah. The responsibility and a lot of pressure from a lot of things. You're losing money or you're making money or no recovery, you know. You need quality and this and that. It's not an easy job to do all the things, especially when you've been building it from a couple of years, three years. Even the premium layoff asked me if I want to run the mill, as a foreman, but I said no, if I want to run it then I'd buy my own place, but I didn't like it.

MB: Okay, you just didn't want that pressure.

HD: I had the same kind of pressure, but I was quality control. So I was just working for somebody. I don't care, they lose or...

MB: Yeah, you weren't working for somebody. What kinds of things did you find to be advantages for you when you were an owner and not a worker?

HD: Like I said, you have to see all the responsibilities such as what I have to do and what I don't have to do.

MB: But what were the advantages then?

HD: The advantages are that when you own your own place you can make money, you know. With lots of experience you can do the job you want to do. You can do it and nobody can say to you, "why did you touch this or why did you touch that." If you work for somebody else then you have to ask the guy, the owner or the foreman, "can I do that?"

MB: You're your own boss, yeah. Okay, and what about your family life. When did you get married?

HD: I got married in 1971, after two- two and a half years of coming here.

MB: While you were doing trucking.

HD: Ah, yes, yes.

MB: Alright. And so, your children were born here then.

HD: Yeah, they all are. Three boys and they all are born here. My father in-law was living here in Mission, then when I came here he moved to Toronto. My wife was his only daughter. He called for her as a visitor and our fathers knew each other so they arranged our relationship and got us married.

MB: And you were talking about California before.

HD: Yes, I think in 1981 or '82.

MB: While you were at Fraser Cedar.

HD: Yes, in that time in between, uh it may have been '80 when I was still at S&W. My brother in-law said that he wanted to move there. So we all pitched together and we had 3-4 partners there.

MB: In California?

HD: Yes.

MB: Partner for what? The farm?

HD: Yes, more partners. You know like, it was not enough by one person, you don't have enough money to do that. But when you go in a different company then you can buy a 10-20 acre farm too. So we bought, I think 215 acres, at that time. We were growing peaches and plums. We had a man there so we'd go turn by turn in harvest time. We used to go by plane or car. If we wanted to stay there for a week, we'd take the car.

MB: So for how long did you do this?

HD: For three years. And then we didn't like it. He said we can't stay there so we sold some half property and sold the other one later.

MB: Okay. And my last question is, what was the nature of living in Canada. Obviously it was cheap and living was different.

HD: Well, when I came I was young and you know, when you're 19-20 years old you don't care you just work and go out, this and that, you know. Well at that time it was

pretty nice. When we came there were two full men in Mission. In Mission there were just ten families.

MB: Did everyone know each other like a community?

HD: Everyone knew each other, yes. Around my age I think there were 3-4 boys and we started to get to know each other and relationships came out of it. We enjoyed it and worked. That was my life. There was no...

KD: How was the economy at that time?

HD: The economy was all right. One would find work if they wanted to work. If they didn't want to work, they wouldn't. We had family here already and they put us to work, I said it was alright, and I began working.

MB: And I wanted to ask about your last mill Premium Cedar Whatcom's sawmill. Were you the foreman, you said?

HD: No, I left my position as quality control.

MB: Quality control, okay. I drove the forklift.

MB: So was it harder or easier?

HD: A lot easier. I could do ten more years it doesn't matter. My family said you've done enough. 45 years is lots done.

MB: Yeah. And was this gora owned or apna?

HD: Gora.

MB: And this is in Maple Ridge. How many apney would you say are there? Or is there a mix?

HD: In Premium Cedar it is about 50/50 yeah.

MB: And in all the mills that you've worked at over the years, would there be any mill you'd say that had conflict between any workers.

HD: No. When I was at S&W, I was the board of director to the union. Our election was happening and even then, gora's put their votes towards me. Unless you have something against somebody, well then that's a different story. We worked just like brothers, there was no problem.

MB: And just last year, you retired, right. Any last questions you have Kusum?

KS: No, that's good.

MB: Alright, I'm just going to pause this.