

Jasbir Singh Bains Transcription

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

Interviewer: What is your name?

Jasbir Singh Bains: Jasbir

I: What's your address?

J.B: 902 Lesley Drive, Victoria

I: So Veerji (brother), as you know we are doing a project trying to get the stories of men who worked in the mills. So can you start by telling me what day, year, and where were you born?

J.B: I was born on December 25, 1946, at Nangal Kallan? I: And what year did you come to Canada?

J.B: 1969

I: And under what context did you come to Canada? Were you sponsored?

J.B: I came just to visit, site-see.

I: Oh okay, to visit, and then what happened?

J.B: And then my cousin brought me here. He was visiting India in December 1968, and then I told him that I wanted to come visit Canada and go back with him. My cousin told me that they were planning on going somewhere else further and that he would look into it after he got married. The law had just changed for visitors visa....there was a friend of my cousin's who'd been here for a while, Hazara Singh Sangha, who had a business and lived at Millway. My cousin told them to keep an eye out if they could bring me over on a work basis. They knew my father. They said that I would easily get my visa as a recent relative of theirs was forty years old and he received it. So they applied for me with immigration. After four months, I received a letter. The immigration official asked me two things: does anyone in my family have TB or cancer? I said no. They said bring your passport and then stamped it.

I: Was it that easy?

J.B: Things became stricter much later. Over here [in Duncan] there was less work so I went to Williams Lake. By the time I got here there were already two others from my village here. Then by the 70's there were many Punjabis here, in '70-'71.

I: So what did you do once you arrived here?

J.B: First, when I got my work letter, I worked on a farm for a little bit, then in July, 1969, I went to Quesnel. I was there for two years and then in 1971, I went to Asa Johal's mill. And then in 1973 I returned to Vancouver and I did [inaudible 4:19] for a year. And then that shift stopped and then I joined another man and went to Calgary to work for the CP. And then in the beginning of 1975, I came back here. And I've been here since.

I: And then you never worked in a mill after that?

J.B: No I didn't.

I: So just going back. When you were in Williams Lake, what was the name of that mill you worked at?

J.B: Merritt and Wagner Sawmill and Quesnel it was Best Fraser Mill and Asa Johal's mill was Terminal Saw Mill.

I: Do you remember what your hourly wage was?

J.B: It was \$2.97. It was this way, on the mainland, Vancouver Island, although we were all under the IWA union, there were localized unions, some the rate was \$3.50, other it was \$2.97. And then for about six months I went to load cars.

I: Do you remember your experiences at that time? Did you find it difficult to work when you first arrived? First tell me what work did you do in India? Farm work?

J.B: I didn't do farm work but looked after cattle, etc. The thing was, when I first arrived, I was just happy that I had arrived in Canada. I was young and happy. Even now, I recall nostalgically about Williams Lake. We would work in -35 degrees temperature. If it got any colder than that we weren't covered through WCB if any accident occurred.

I: Did you ever used to send back money to India then?

J.B: I never sent money to India because my brothers were in England and I was the youngest.

I: When did you settle down? Did you go to India to get married? When did you get married?

J.B: I was married here in 1974.

I: And then you settled in Victoria?

J.B: Yes, I settled here and never went back to India. When I came to Canada I had so many village friends and here that I knew I would just settle in Victoria.

I: And how did you cook by yourself when you worked here?

J.B: When at Williams Lake, all of us men lived together. Sometimes 5 or 6 together at a time. We would all cook large amounts of food (meat, daal, and Sabzi) at a time for each other. By the 1970's, many more men came. You see, when they received a work letter, it was open-the restrictions came after. So if someone claimed to be a farmer, they would get 15 points. So these men coming would then help with the foods.

I: Have you learned to cook?

J.B: I can make meat dishes but haven't learned to make roti. The *thurka* was my work, and others made the roti.

I: And now you're retired here in Victoria? You're happy?

J.B: Yes, I'm retired and am very happy.

I: Do you have any interesting story to share from those times?

J.B: You know here in Victoria there was, but especially when going towards Quesnel or Williams Lake, there was a lot of discrimination. Because the population was more here [in Victoria] it was somewhat less. In Quesnel and Williams Lake, the new immigrants were always afraid to get into trouble with the law because of the fear of being deported. So if a white person even shouted at them, they would run away. The changes happened there, in Quesnel, Williams Lake, Prince George, when the second and third generation Canadian born Punjabis forged friendships with the white kids. You see when a white kid comes to one of our Punjabi homes, the parents do as much service to those kids as their own, i.e. offering food, drinks, etc. And then those white kids would then tell parents that if their parents are doing so much for me, you all should be doing as much for my [Punjabi] friends.

Let me tell you a story about when I was in Youbou. Then, I was working an afternoon shift. There used to be mailboxes where letters would be delivered into. It was a few miles away from our home. So when we would go out, we would also check our mail. One time, there was a three year old white child who saw us and started yelling "Hindu!" "Hindu!" We just started

laughing. Only if that child is being taught this by his parents can a child as young as three be like this. This is how it was.

I: And then it got better after?

J.B: As I mentioned earlier, it was the next Canadian born generation of Punjabi children being born that the changes happened, by them becoming friends with the white kids, etc. One time we were at Williams Lake and a white guy started calling us trouble makers. And then he called his friends and started beating on one guy.....But the police were very nice. Like the RCMP, etc. Slowly, those [bad] times past.

I: Thank you veerji.