

Jinder Heer Transcription

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

MB: What is your name?

JH: My name is Jinder Singh Heer.

MB: Okay and when were you born?

JH: October 5, 1949.

MB: When did you come to Canada?

JH: 1970.

MB: Okay, so you were around 15?

JH: No, 19 years old.

MB: Okay. And on what basis did you come? Did somebody sponsor you or was it education based?

JH: I came on my own. Just to see about.

MB: So as a visitor then.

JH: Yes. My sister was here and my immediate family was in England but my sister used to live in Africa then.

MB: So she sponsored you then?

JH: No, I came on my own. Then I applied afterwards.

MB: And where did you live before coming to Canada?

JH: India, Punjab. My village is Dudhiar. It was a very nice and popular village in the District Hoshiarpur. My grandfather went to Africa in 1898. His little brother went in 1902. My dad's brother went in 1921 and my dad went in 1936. To Kenya.

MB: To Kenya. Why?

JH: Just with the same idea that we come to Canada. They went for some work.

KS: How much did you study before coming to Canada then?

JH: I studied up till grade 10.

KS: And so you thought about coming here to travel around. Did you go back ever?

JH: Yes, I go whenever I feel like it.

KS: No, when you first came here.

JH: No, I just stayed back here then.

KS: How did you feel about staying here? What about Canada did you like?

JH: It was good. I liked it a lot. And then I applied and then my sister got numbers from the point system. She was older than me. She still lives in Duncan.

KS: Is Duncan the first place that you had come to?

JH: Yes, I first came to Duncan and my immediate family lives in Vancouver and Surrey.

KS: Did you do any studies when you came here then?

JH: No, no. I just worked. In the mill.

KS: After how long did you begin working in the mill?

JH: I began just after a year of being here. It was Slegg Brother Company, a mill here.

MB: What was the name?

JH: Slegg Brothers. That was the company.

MB: Slegg?

JH: Slegg.

MB: Slegg brothers?

JH: Slegg Brothers. It's a big company here still.

MB: In Duncan? Victoria?

JH: In Duncan. Then I worked to move in Vancouver in '74 and I worked in the Meel Sawmill.

MB: Meel?

JH: Meel and Sawmill. Mainland.

MB: Okay and what year was this?

JH: '74.

MB: Why did you move to Vancouver?

JH: The mill here had stalled and so I had found work here. I did some work there for a little while and then I went to England to get married.

MB: Okay, what year was that?

JH: I had gotten married at the end of '74.

MB: At age 21?

JH: 24.

MB: Did somebody find work for you in Vancouver or did you find it yourself?

JH: No. They knew me very well. They gave me work. The superintendent and manager were out changing the Sleggs and the foreman told me to come and so I did. Then I began working there.

MB: Okay, and what did you do after your wedding?

JH: Then I came back to Victoria and worked in the Plumber Way Sawmill.

MB: Plumber?

JH: Plumber Way Sawmill.

MB: What is the spelling?

JH: P-L-U-M-B-E-R W-A-Y Sawmill. Even that mill had stalled so we started our own mill in Victoria called the Plywood Co-op.

MB: Your own mill?

JH: Everyone. Co-op. It was about 100 people. 200-300 people worked for us. We ran that mill for 10 years and that one had stalled too.

MB: Why?

JH: It got bankrupt. We didn't have the logs and logs were very, very expensive at that time. So we sat down, you know. Then I drove a cab, you know.

MB: What year did the mill stall then or what years did it run?

JH: From '84-'94. Victoria Plywood Co-op. Then after '84 I've driven a cab. Since now. I own the yellow cab.

KS: So how did you feel you'd work in the mill for the very first time?

JH: My brother in-law was working there and he told me about it so I filled out an application and then told me to come.

KS: Your sister's husband?

JH: My sister's husband. My brother in-law.

MB: And what kind of mill was it? A shingle or?

JH: The shingles are mostly where you are in Abbotsford and Mission. This was a sawmill where they cut lumber and lumber dust.

MB: So what were your jobs then in the mill?

JH: First I worked on the green chain but as more people were doing other work, so did I. At that point I was doing trimming. I did trimming and everything.

MB: So how many apney were there at this time? In Victoria and Duncan when you first came?

JH: In Victoria I think there were close to 300 families at that time.

MB: 300?

JH: Yeah, Victoria is more than 300. When we came to Canada in the '70's, Vancouver did not have many people, you know. Vancouver Island has more people than the Lower Mainland.

MB: So what kind of people were working in the mill then? Was it a mix between the Chinese, Apney, and Gorey?

JH: It was a mix. Apney were mostly working in the mill. They were less Plumb wood and plywood mills, it was mostly sawmills.

MB: And was there any difference at all?

JH: There wasn't any difference.

MB: So everyone was okay with one another.

JH: Even today, everyone is still okay with one another. There isn't anything like that, I don't think so – no problems.

KS: When you first came to Canada did you experience any culture shock? Was it good or bad?

JH: No, I didn't feel any shock at all. I'm just a free-walking kind of guy, so I didn't experience it, I don't know if anyone else did though.

KS: No, I mean what things did you like when you came here?

JH: It was good. There was honesty here and there weren't any dishonest people or those who lied. It was much better than India.

MB: And did you try to find work anywhere else when you first came here, because you said there was a year's gap.

JH: No.

KS: So what did you do in the year then?

JH: I just roamed around and traveled throughout Canada.

KS: Where did you go?

JH: I would say I roamed around all over North America.

MB: Like Toronto and everywhere?

JH: Everywhere, even now.

MB: So you were a mill owner then.

JH: No, I was a share-holder. Co-Op.

MB: And what kind of advantages are there with that as opposed to being an employee? What is the difference?

JH: The difference is that for the money we were getting decent pay since the pay was low. We were getting our share for bonus like every month, you know. And after a year

we'd get that bonus. We'd get a good bonus every month. Sometimes \$1,500 a month or sometimes \$1,000 or sometimes \$900.

MB: So it was worth your money.

JH: Yeah.

KS: On what basis were you making that bonus?

JH: We were making money back then and at that time we could. Because we were together, we'd put the bonus together and equal it out amongst ourselves.

KS: Was there a union back then?

JH: No, we didn't have any union. Before there was IWA. But we didn't have any union.

KS: Did you feel any difference by working or not working in a union?

JH: Well, you're sure to feel a difference when you're working in a union, you know IWA is the biggest union. There is a difference with IWA – the International Woodworkers of America.

MB: Tell me a little bit about when you first came here. If you can tell me about the cost of living and the economy in Duncan. How it was as opposed to right now.

JH: The economy even right now isn't all that great. You can tell, you're interviewing me right now. The thing is the wages keep increasing, say by \$1.25, but other than that the economy is nothing special. With just ten dollars can you say you're okay with this economy?

KS: What were your minimum wages back then?

JH: I believe I started at \$3.25.

KS: \$3.25. Okay. And what was your diet back then?

JH: Just the regular Punjabi roti.

KS: From the beginning?

JH: Well you can eat from outside if you want too, that's your choice.

MB: Did you have any Punjabi stores? Where did you get your food from?

JH: We used to eat from outside sometimes, like McDonalds hamburgers or what have you.

MB: Where would you go to get groceries like your lentils and everything?

JH: I think there was one grocery store here that we had. Only one store in Victoria.

MB: Okay, so would everyone go there?

JH: I don't know, some would even go to Vancouver or wherever. I didn't go there much though.

KS: Where would you get your groceries from back then?

JH: We'd get them from Victoria or Vancouver. The first year, I don't know though. My sister and brother-in-law would bring it and so I don't know.

KS: So when did your family come after your wedding?

JH: In '76.

KS: You got married in '74 and the family came in '76. Where did they come from?

JH: England.

MB: Were she (wife) born in England?

JH: She was 1 year old when she had come to England.

KS: Is she Indian?

JH: Yes.

KS: What is her village?

JH: Boparai Kalan. It is near Jalandhar.

MB: Okay, Uncle tell me a little bit about the challenges and difficulties of working in the mill. Obviously it was heavy work and the wages were quite low.

JH: The wages back then were just that much. It was alright.

MB: Any difficulties?

JH: I didn't experience any difficulties, no.

MB: On your body though? Was it not hard on your body since it was heavy work?

JH: I was a good soccer player of the country. I was in first place. Me and another man, who is now head of the post office, have played here in Victoria mostly. I've also played in Vancouver and in the clubs as well, but now we are older..

KS: And did you do any physically hard work in India?

JH: No, I didn't do that.

KS: What did you do before coming here then?

JH: My family was all in England and my sisters and Uncles were in other places so I've just roamed around and traveled. But I have worked with the cows and stuff though.

KS: Did you do any work while you were in school studying?

JH: I did a little bit here and there to help my father out but nothing too special.

KS: What kind of work did he do?

JH: He did agricultural work.

KS: And so did you not find it difficult when you came here and had to do such physical work?

JH: It was alright – I was young then.

MB: So did your mother and father not come?

JH: They did. They lived a very hard two months here – they didn't like it.

MB: They didn't like it? How come?

JH: They came at the wrong time. It was November. In '79.

MB: And after coming, they returned within just 2 months?

JH: Within 2 months.

KS: So you and your wife lived here, but your parents never lived with you.

JH: They lived with us when it was just for the two months or sometimes they'd go out and live with my sister. I had a sister in Vancouver and Duncan. I had sponsored for her to come out here in '74 or '75. My family from England would come here too but my parents would go out and live there for 2-3 months whenever they wanted.

MB: So about your living situation, did you buy a house?

JH: We bought a house later but at first we lived in an apartment.

MB: With your sister and brother-in-law?

JH: No, they have plenty of houses now.

KS: When did you get your own house independently and after how many years?

JH: In '84.

MB: How much was it?

JH: At that time, it was \$80,000. When I came in the 70's the houses were around \$17,000 but then I bought a car for \$10,000.

MB: You hadn't bought a car before that?

JH: I had used their vehicle.

KS: Do you have any interesting story or memories of that time of working in the mill?

JH: It was good, we were young. We had tournaments that were held in Victoria for Vaisakhi, but now they have tournaments running constantly. But in the start the tournaments during Vaisakhi would be held here.

KS: What kinds of tournaments?

JH: For soccer or lifting weights, kabaddi, volleyball, and many other things.

KS: What year was this?

JH: This was when I came. The tournaments used to happen ever since 1950. The tournaments wouldn't happen in Vancouver though, they'd happen on the island.

KS: Did you participate in them?

JH: For 25-30 years I had started and run the first East Indian team.

KS: East Indian soccer team?

JH: Yes, I'm the one who was running the tournaments for at least 20-25 years.

KS: Okay, so this is the entertainment that you'd have after working in the mill.

JH: Yes, playing soccer and making our own teams. Some teams would come from Port Alberni, Nanaimo, and Duncan. I used to send for 5-10 teams to come from Vancouver. We all knew each other and our apney men would come out and play. But now in Vancouver there's 400-500 teams.

MB: So what about celebrating things like Vaisakhi and Diwali?

JH: Vaisakhi used to happen here and in Paldi. It also happened in Hillcrest and in Masachi Lake. The August tournament to celebrate the independence would happen out there and Paldi would hold their tournaments. Vancouver would host just one tournament for Bhai Mewa Singh I think.

MB: Oh, okay, so there were often quite a lot of events.

JH: Yeah, like at Williams Lake or Cornel. Or Kamloops – but it started very, very late out there.

KS: And so you worked in the mill and held all these tournaments, what else did you do?

JH: I'd do anything else. I was always running around.

KS: Tell us a little bit about that.

JH: I'd just drive the car around and travel up to 200 miles in a day just roaming around and come in the mornings – it still is like that!

MB: So you didn't live in a cookhouse ever because you lived in an apartment.

JH: No, I didn't. At that point the cookhouses had been lifted and they stopped running. But our house sure did become like a cookhouse! On the weekends 25-30 men would come to my house.

KS: On the weekends to party.

JH: To party or what ever... I've had the top boys come and play for me from the top colleges in Jalandhar. The best players of Hindustan that would come here and stay with me to play. And they are here even now.

KS: Any challenges that came with working in the mill?

JH: No, not for me.

KS: Your relationships with your supervisors or anyone?

JH: Well that happens even now when you get into little arguments with people.

KS: And when did you get your citizenship?

JH: I got that in '73 or '74. I think I got it in '74.

KS: What was the process then?

JH: You just hold your hand up and say the oath, there's nothing more to it.

KS: No, you must've filled out a form though.

JH: Everybody's got to fill out a form.

KS: You didn't have to do a test or have an interview then?

JH: No, I didn't.

MB: Okay, that's all there was to our questions.