

Kulwant Singh Cheema Transcription

Interview Date: January 20th, 2015

SB: Uncle Ji what is your name?

KC: Kulwant Cheema.

SB: What is your date of birth?

KC: 1942, September 5th.

SB: Where in India were you born?

KC: Mehal Kalan.

SB: When did you immigrate to Canada?

KC: 1966.

SB: What is your immigration status at this time?

KC: Meaning?

SB: Are you a landed immigrant, a citizen...?

KC: Landed.

SC: No you're a Canadian citizen.

KC: Yes, Canadian citizen.

SB: When you came to Canada before, what was your immigration status upon arrival? For instance, before there was a point system.

KC: No, no my brother sponsored me.

SB: So family class.

KC: Yes.

KS: Did he sponsor you?

KC: Yes.

SB: Uncle Ji, where did you live before coming to Canada?

KC: Mehal Kalan.

KS: India, Punjab?

KC: Punjab.

SB: Before coming to Canada, did you work in India?

KC: No, no. I just did farm work.

KS: How old were you when you came [to Canada]?

KC: I think I was 26 or 25?

SC: 25. He was born in '42 and came here in '66. So 24-25.

SB: Uncle Ji, did you work in the mill?

KC: Yes.

SB: Which mill did you work in first?

KC: I started working upon arriving here. Let me tell you the story. When I landed in Vancouver I was very hungry. I didn't eat anything on the plane journey. Back then the plane would land outside and you would exit by the stairs. The airport was very small. There the airport agent was walking around. No one had come to pick me up. I met him. He said whose house you want to go to. You know, Mota Singh Grewal, I said "I want to go to Mota Singh Grewal's house". He said come sit in my car. He put my suitcases in another car and had me sit in his car. I thought my luggage is gone. When we got to his house I asked will I be able to have some roti. He said yes you will get roti. When I got to his house I ate roti with good sabzi and I thought even if someone took my luggage at least I'm here and my stomach is full. Then there was my uncle's dairy farm in Mission. He dropped me off at the dairy farm. My brother lived in Merritt. I came here on Wednesday. My brother came to get me on Saturday, we went back [to Merritt] by Sunday. On Monday we needed to weed the garden. Monday I started weeding the garden, after that I got a call for a job offer that night. That's it.

KS: Where, in Merritt?

KC: Merritt.

SB: Uncle Ji do you remember the name of the mill?

KC: KP.

SB: KP. What type...was it a saw mill or shake and shingle?

KC: Saw mill. Saw mill.

SB: What work did you start at in the mill?

KC: Pulling lumber. Green chain.

SB: Did you try finding work elsewhere at that time?

KC: No, no I started there first.

KS: Did you like the work so you thought there is no need to look for work elsewhere?

KC: No, no. You don't know the situation. So many of our men worked there, spoke Punjabi. Then the pay was \$2.50. I would make \$20 in 8 hours.

KC: Was that a good salary for that time?

KC: Huh?

KC: Was that good pay at that time?

KC: At that time, things [we needed to buy] were cheaper. Pay was good considering.

KC: Did you think I'll keep working here, the salary is good?

KC: No, no the salary was good but I didn't have any other job.

KC: In your heart, did you want to do something else?

KC: We didn't have any other choice. When the phone would come from the foreman for overtime...we wanted overtime, to make more money, right. My brother would pick up the phone and ask me if I wanted to go to work. I would go. In overtime you would make \$30 for 8 hours.

SB: Uncle Ji, how long did you stay in the KP mill?

KC: I worked there for a year and 9 months. After that a strike happened. The strike occurred for 9 months.

SB: Do you remember why the strike happened?

KC: Over pay.

KC: To increase wages?

KC: To increase wages, yeah.

KC: Did they [the wages] increase?

KC: No, the strike happened for 9 months and then our mama lived in Mission and told us to come there. We went there and my brother got a job in a Mission mill and I went to Squamish. I worked in Squamish for 6 months.

SB: Uncle Ji do you remember the name of that mill? The Squamish one?

KC: No I don't remember the name of the Squamish mill. I worked there for 6 months and after that Whonnock in Mission started two shifts and I got work there. Then both of us brothers worked here for 20-22 years.

KC: Did you live in Mission then, too?

KC: Yes in Mission.

KC: You moved there?

No, that mill closed. The same company gave us work in New Westminster.

KC: So you moved from Merritt and started living here.

KC: We had moved from New Westminster when the strike had happened. Then we got a house here in Mission. It cost \$32,000. My brother had made \$12,000 and I had made \$20,000. We couldn't get a \$20,000 mortgage.

KS: Were you and your brother married at the time?

KC: We had kids.

KS: When you came to Canada?

KC: This one [points to Sukh Cheema] was born in India.

SC: I have an older sister who is 3 years older. I'm 48, she's 51. We were...I was 3 and she was 6 when we came over in '69. When my dad left I was 2 months old. When he left India.

KS: So you came to Canada alone?

KC: I came alone.

KS: Not with your family?

KC: No.

KS: Why not?

KC: I came alone and my family came after. The sponsorship letter was just me. We couldn't afford it.

SB: Uncle Ji what is your first memory of working in the mill?

KC: Huh?

KS: What are some memories from mill times? Share some of your stories with us.

KC: I moved from Merritt to Squamish. In Squamish, 19 men lived in a 3 bedroom house. The bedrooms were small. There were small beds and just enough space to walk in between. The house was owned by an Indian and we paid \$20 to stay there.

KS: Did the mill owners arrange that or did you find it on your own?

KC: No, no I got it on my own. 19 of us lived together in a 3 bedroom house. And when we needed to go to the bathroom, like in India when you would line up to get a ticket for a car...that's the lineup that would be there for the bathroom. I stayed there for 6 months.

KS: Who made your food then?

KC: We would make food ourselves. I didn't know how to make roti and they said you have to do something so I learned how to make the flour. 3 men would make the roti, 1 would keep putting down the roti [on to plates], one would put down lentils and you would eat and wash your dishes and put them back in the cupboard.

KS: Like langar?

KC: Yup. You would put them there and when you wanted to eat roti you would pick them up from there also.

KS: What would you eat? Just roti and sabzi or Canadian food too?

KC: Roti, sabzi, chicken tari we ate roti and sabzi. There were maybe a few people that took break to the mill but everyone else took roti.

KS: Hardly anyone took bread, most people took roti?

KC: Yes.

KS: You would take your food with you?

KC: Yes, in lunch kits.

KS: So 19 of you lived together. Did you celebrate Indian holidays like Lodhi, Diwali?

KC: We lived there for 5 days of the week and then whoever had relatives in Vancouver...our mama lived in Mission...on the weekend, Saturday Sunday, 1 or 2 men would be left in the house. Everyone would move. The 5 guys that had cars would charge \$1 fare to take people to Vancouver, \$3 to go to Mission. If you wanted to go to Vancouver, 4 days in advance you would ask and say I'm going with you. Like you get tickets. \$1 to Vancouver, \$3 to Mission.

KS: Not everyone had cars?

KC: No, no. Maybe 3-4 and the guy who owned the house had a car. Mohinder Gill of Abbotsford had a car.

SB: When you needed to buy lentils, where would you get them from?

KC: Lentils we could get from the one store on Hastings. Italian girls were working there. All of the Indians that lived in BC would buy things from that store.

SB: Do you remember the name of the store?

KC: No I don't remember the name. There was only one store for Indians. No other store.

KS: On Main Street?

KC: No, on Hastings. I and my brother would come through Hastings and we would ask one another to pick up a bag of flour.

SB: In what year did you go to that store in Vancouver?

KC: It was on Hastings in '67.

KS: When did you wife and kids come to Canada?

KC: After 3 years.

KS: So did they not come with you only because you couldn't afford it or were there any rules about it?

KC: No, no rules. We couldn't afford it. No other rule. Very few families moved in those days.

KS: Few families moved in those days?

KC: Yes. I a lot of single men.

KS: You had one child?

KC: No, I have 4 children. My grandkids are married now.

KS: No, when you came to Canada.

KC: I had two kids then, my eldest daughter was 3 years old and he [Sukh Cheema] was 2 months old.

SB: The men that worked in the mill, what was their day-to-day life like?

KC: Life was like this: all the men were single, there were few families. People couldn't bring their families, they lived single and would make roti together, that's it.

KS: Was your relationship with your fellow coworkers in the mill good?

KC: It was good! There was no fighting like there is now.

KS: Did "goreh" work?

KC: Yes they did.

KS: Any other demographics?

KC: It was a mix. In Squamish, here [Mission] and even Merritt there were goreh and Indian both.

KS: Were there Chinese men or just goreh and Indian men?

KC: Goreh and Punjabi men.

KS: So no other denominations?

KC: No. There were very few Chinese men. Maybe one here and there, maybe none.

SB: Uncle Ji, gorey, Indian and other denominations worked together, were there ever any problems? Did you all work together harmoniously?

KC: No, no problems.

KS: Did Japanese men work with you?

KC: There were very few Japanese men.

SB: What did you find hard about working in the mill?

KC: In the shingle mill we were working and making money, there was nothing that was hard. We did piece work. Sometimes when I would fill up my chai bottle at home, the chai was hot and you had ten minutes for a coffee break at the mill. But the lumber was in front of you, the good lumber and you wanted to make good money. I would chug the chai in the bottle. The coffee break was 10 minutes, I would take 3 minutes to drink chai and get back to work.

KS: Did everyone do this, or just you?

KC: Not just me, everyone did this. For piece work.

KS: Did you have the mentality of making the most money you can while working?

KC: The hourly wage you were going to get no matter what. The piecework was our own.

SC: So what they did I can explain because I worked with him. SO they'd have a minimum target, they would make \$15/hour if they did 40 bundles and anything above that they would get paid extra. And then they can see all the good wood coming so they said forget the lunch forget the coffee now we making an extra \$40 today because they'll still get there minimum but once they know they're getting close to the minimum and they got 2-3 hours to go they work really hard to get that extra money. So that's what piecework is. Even if there was no work that day they still got paid but if it was really good they got topped up so that's what happened yeah.

SB: What did you like about working in the mill?

KC: In the lumber mill we were pushing buttons in the shingle mill we did hard work. We got a farm alongside. We would work in the farm and work in the mill. In season, we would sleep 4-5 hours. Same with my wife, she worked in the cannery. We worked in the mills. First, we would work in the farm, then the cannery at night. 12-14 hours we would work every day.

SB: Uncle Ji, when did you leave the mill work? What year?

KC: In 2007.

KS: What was the Canadian economy like in those days? Was there a recession or..?

KC: There wasn't a recession in those days, there is a recession now. In those days, we would fill up the gas tank with \$2 and the car would run for a week.

KS: What about grocery?

KC: I and my extended family would get our groceries together for \$20-\$25 every week. In that we would get 10 cartons of whipped cream. Both of us brothers would come home from mill work at night, pour a glass and throw in some raw eggs. It was so thick when you drank it but we did it and now the doctor says you can't have eggs.

KS: You were young then.

KC: I would eat three eggs at a time.

KS: Outside of the mill, what was your life like? What was your entertainment in those days?

KC: In those days there was no life outside of work. You worked and went home, and went to work from home. That's it.

KS: Social Life? Tell us a bit about that. How did you socialize amongst one another? You must have made friends. What was the social life, did you meet up at wedding functions?

KC: We met up at wedding functions.

KS: Anything else? Like now we celebrate Diwali, etc. Any celebrations?

KC: No, nothing.

KS: There was nothing.

KC: No.

KS: Would you like to tell us anything else?

KC: No nothing.

SB: That's all.