

Mohinder S. Gill Sawmill Transcription
Interview Date: November 20th, 2014

SB: Hello Uncle Ji what is your name?

MG: Daughter my name is Mohinder Singh Gill.

SB: What is your birth year and birth place?

MG: Birthplace?

SB: Yes sir.

MG: Nathu Vala Jareer and district at that time was Ferozepur and it is now Moga.

SB: In what year? What is your date of birth?

MG: Date of Birth?

SB: Yes sir.

MG: Ok January 3, 1933.

SB: When did you immigrate to Canada?

MG: What date?

SB: Yes sir.

MG: No problem. In good Punjabi I can tell you whatever you want to ask me. Child I came to Canada in November 23, 1962.

SB: Right now what is your immigration status? Are you a citizen --

MG: --My sister was here and she sponsored me and I immigrated here.

SB: At this time are you a Canadian citizen?

MG: Yes I am a Canadian citizen.

SB: Before coming to Canada which city did you live in, in India?

MG: In India, child, my pind is Nathu. First from 1933 to 1951 I lived in the "pind" then I went to trucking. In 1962 I came to Canada.

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

MG: Yes child I worked in India. I used to drive a truck there.

SB: When you came here, when did you start working in the mills?

MG: Ok daughter I said I came here Nov 23...and on Dec 4 I started working in the mill after 7 or 8 days.

SB: Do you remember the name of the mill?

MG: Yes I remember the name of the mill child. Nicola Valley Mill was the name of the mill and it was in Merritt.

SB: Merritt, ok. That's a new one I'm hearing about.

MG: Huh?

SB: That's a new mill name I'm hearing about...And what type of work did you do in the mill?

MG: Look child when a man comes new from India they don't have lumber in their minds...whoever hires them, they have to start where they are put. They neither have experience nor are they a spokesman. Back then in the mills there was this, our Punjabis called it 'phateh khichna' [lumber pulling]. And whatever kind of mills there was...in some sawmills the lumber came from behind, and others the lumber numbers are made and you have to dry...and a person has to dry it [the lumbar] or whatever else they have to do.

SB: What job did you start doing first?

MG: On the first day child they call it 'number file'. Two men hold lumber from here and there and put it here and put a tick on each piece and then when they dry killed it the hot air would get in there and the number would dry.

SB: Is that like grading? Do gorey call it grading?

MG: No grading is something else.

SB: Ok. Ok. Umm before working in the sawmill did you try finding work elsewhere?

MG: No daughter I found work after only 7-8 days. They told me a man was very lucky to find work upon arriving here. I didn't try anywhere else.

SB: Did you ever change jobs?

MG: At the mill?

SB: Yes sir.

MG: Ok child. On the first day I was on number file and then there they call it an automatic chain and all the numbers come on it... if there is 10 feet then one belt would work for just 10 feet [gesturing with hands] or together going two inches where the 10 foot belt would come the lumber would fall and where the 12 foot would come it would fall separate. Every two feet there would be a level that would drop the lumber and you would straighten the lumber and the forklift would pick it up and take it away.

SB: Ok um. Day to day what was life like in the mill?

MG: Daughter at that time, first the biggest thing was what they call 'roti milheTo make it easy for you'. For those who came here new they were grateful for what they received...whatever they got life was good. Then there was that we had come here and there were three kids, a man worries...at this age, you must be seeing it...we used to think it's good. The first day of pay I received \$7.50. I made a dollar an hour for piece work it was contract based. Then the mill's union was \$1.65 per hour. In one day I would make \$14.65.

SB: Umm ok. In the mill were there a lot of our men? Or other...

MG: There were mostly our men...there were our men but in the mills there were also experienced gorey.

SB: But were there more of our people?

MG: Yes, many more were our men.

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

MG: Daughter nothing was hard. I spent about 3 weeks first...first look on the 7th on 23rd there is Christmas...after keeping me for two weeks they said that it's Christmas holidays and they gave me \$50 advance and I came to Vancouver...my sister. And after a week I returned. After another week the work wasn't good so I came back to Vancouver again.

SB: When did you leave the job at the mill? And why?

MG: Left it and why I left it?

SB: Yes.

MG: To make it easy for you, I was laid off. No job. They didn't have any. Work shortage.

SB: And when you were working in the mill then...did you

MG: Don't hesitate...

SB: I'm not hesitating. I'm trying to figure out how to ask the question...

MG: Ask in English even. I will find a way to answer. No problem child.

SB: By working in the mill did it become easier to become a Canadian citizen?

MG: Look child, I only spent three weeks there. After coming to Vancouver I stayed for a long time and then started working in the mills again. In those days it wasn't hard to become a citizen. Then there were three—five years after which you filled out an application at the notary public and the citizenship would come to your house. This thing wasn't hard back then. There was no question of have you studied. There was only to get papers filled out and signed from someone and the notary put the stamp that this man is actually this man.

SB: Now it has changed a lot.

MG: Yes now it has changed child.

SB: And last question is: what is your first memory of working in the mills.

MG: Huh?

SB: First memory? Of working in the mill? Or of coming to Canada?

MG: How? I don't understand.

SB: What was your first memory of working in the mills? Of the work you used to do?

MG: Look child there I worked for three weeks. Then after three weeks I came here to my sister and stayed there for two months. Then in March/April I got a job in a mill in Langley. There I spent four months there. Then after leaving that I went to Vancouver and found work and then worked in Vancouver for three straight years. Then sometimes I would start on my own and then sometimes I would stop I was crazy. Normally, when our men start work they do not stop. I don't know why I went in circles. In 1965 or 1964...in 1964...two times we went. After spending two, three years in the mill I stopped. Then I went to Toppli, then after 8 months I left Toppli. Then the mill laid me off then after the mill they asked for me there and then I went and then their mill burned down. Then I came here and they started me up again here. I kept walking in circles. A person promised me, the first time I stopped working. He said whenever you want to come back to work come meet me and don't worry if you want to go then go. I went to this person at 11:30 in the day and he said there is only 30 minutes until lunch and give me a phone—there weren't cell phones in those days—he said give me the phone of where you will be and I will dial it now. Whoever's house I would go to he would call me and he would ask me to come back. Then when I came back the second time he said I have a promise with you to give you a job but our mill has a frozen shift. When that shift becomes available it will be your shift. It was easy child.

SB: That's good. Actually I wanted to ask one more thing. You said there was a mill in Langley? Do you remember the names of the mills?

MG: Langley's name was Ted Water.

SB: And do you remember the other names?

MG: The first was Nicola Valley. The Langley one was Ted Water. The third one that I went to was Silvertree After going to Topli two times, I came here. Topli is 800 km from Prince Rupert...no Prince George. Burn's Lake is 18 miles ahead. And there was only a mill there. No town. There was a rail station and a bus stop. There was nothing else.

SB: Was it really cold there?

MG: The cold was a lot. In -35 we worked. There was no roof. No roof. Perhaps you know, we used to put lumber waste in a furnace. When we would work if someone was cold they would go to the burner for 4 minutes and would come back.

SB: There was no roof even?

MG: No roof!

SB: That's all. My questions are done.