

Piara Singh Dhillon –Transcription
Interview Date: January 14th, 2015

MB: Okay, what is your name?

PD: My name is Piara Singh Dhillon.

MB: And when were you born?

PD: 13th of July, 1948. India, Punjab, Village Buttar.

MB: And when did you immigrate to Canada?

PD: I came as an immigrant. In 1969.

MB: So how old were you then?

PD: I was under 21 then.

MB: And on what basis did you come? Was it the point system or family class?

PD: Then I had a Bhua (father's sister) here and it was a quota system then. However long you studied in India, whether it was 2 or 5 years, it was based on that. If it came through in a letter then the person would definitely come here. It was a quota system then.

KS: Did your Bhua (Aunt) sponsor you then? Family sponsor.

PD: Yes, yes. I was her nephew.

MB: Okay, and what village did you live in before coming to Canada?

PD: The district is now Moga but it used to be Firozpur. And the village Buttar.

MB: And did you do any work before coming here in Buttar?

PD: In Buttar, I did 4 years of farming.

MB: Then?

PD: Then I came here on May 25, 1969.

MB: And on what terms did you have plans to come here?

KS: Like what did you decide when you said you wanted to come to Canada?

PD: I just had a desire to go and got sponsored. I wanted to see things about how it is there. That I'd work and make good money. That's all I really thought about then. That's all we thought about back then, maybe the thinking has changed now. Back then we thought we'd go to a nice country and work and make money so we could come back. That's all that was running through our mind then.

KS: So you had a plan to come back then?

PD: Yes, that was my plan. That I'd make money by working and come back. Then day by day things were different. In '74 I got married and I stayed there for 4 months. After that, my wife came with me. Back then the wives used to come with the husband and everything would work out in about a month. If you apply for visa you'd get your letter very shortly. Then here I had my wife and had kids and things started going here. So then in '80 my work started going but I didn't like it so I didn't go back for 15 years. I went in '81 in the first month but when I saw the conditions I didn't feel like going back. (Referring to India).

MB: So when you came here what kind of work did you do?

PD: I worked in the mill.

MB: From the very beginning?

PD: Yes, in the year 1969 I worked in a mill in Prince Rupert. In 1970 for 39 years I worked at a mill called Ham and Cedar. For 39 years I worked at that mill.

KS: 39 years.

PD: Yes. One year in Prince Rupert and then 39. You can write 40 total.

MB: And it was called Ham and Cedar?

PD: Ham and Cedar, yes. It was of BC Forest Product. At that time it was BC Forest Product.

MB: In Mission?

PD: No, in Maple Ridge.

MB: Okay. And how did you come to know of work in the mill?

PD: Then the work was only in mills, there was nothing else to do.

KS: Did someone get you started?

PD: No. We'd just fill out applications and ask about our experience. They needed young people then so they'd just hire all the young people. It all came down to if they needed men.

MB: Okay. And Prince Rupert being so far

PD: Then they wouldn't put new men at big mills. If you knew the foreman or anyone then you had an in to ask for some work.

MB: Okay. And what was your job in the mill at Prince Rupert?

PD: Then it was on the green chain.

MB: From the beginning?

PD: Yes. From the beginning it was green chain and then for 2 years I did green chain here. Then with the new machines and seniority, you slowly get other jobs. If you built seniority then you'd be applicable to get training for a month. If someone leaves or goes away for a while, then you could say that your job would be permanent.

MB: And what was the name of the mill in Prince Rupert?

PD: The name was Prince Rupert Forest Products.

MB: Okay. And you said that you worked on the green chain.

PD: Yes.

MB: What kind of work is on the green chain?

PD: Then pieces come through a machine that is 4x10, 4x8, 4x6, and 4x4. They are sized and they are unloaded and there is someone to pick them up. There is a machine called Carry and (lots of fast talking) it would pick it up.

MB: Okay. And at Prince Rupert Forest Products, how many apney and gorey would you say there were?

PD: There were apney, gorey, Chinese, and everyone.

MB: Okay. And there wasn't any difference amongst any of them?

PD: No, none at all. There wasn't anything like that. There we had a cook. Since there weren't any families, 25-30 people would live together and there would be a cook.

MB: In a cookhouse?

PD: Yeah. It was of the mill's so the mill made it.

MB: And did you all live together or?

PD: Yes, in each room there were two people. There was an upstairs and downstairs so about 14 boys stayed downstairs and 14 boys upstairs. And there was one elderly man we kept to be the cook and we gave him twenty dollars per month for that. Every one – all 25 people. He made more money than us but his work was 7 days where as ours was 5 days. He'd wake up at 4 in the morning and make breakfast for all the boys and food in the evening for the boys with the other shift. But regardless, whether you wanted to eat or not, when you'd wake up, you'd have chai and food ready for you. The counters were a little wider and we'd have large plates of meat, fish, and everything on it and the cook would put it in bowls for us and we'd never complain – no. And the dishes we'd all wash ourselves. And every week, three boys would clean the floor of the kitchen. Clean the sanitary stuff like the toilet and kitchen. For the toilet we'd sometimes call a professional, but we'd clean the kitchen by ourselves.

KS: Was the cookhouse that you lived in just Punjabis? Since you mentioned that Chinese and everyone all worked together.

PD: They lived in houses but we boys, 25-30 of us, lived with the mill.

KS: Punjabi's.

PD: Yes. Some cookhouses like McKenzie or others may have had a mix of people living together but those were the earlier times - before our time of coming here. Like Fraser Mill

being such a big mill that was running before our time. It was running before us and had been running. Then there were cooks for the cookhouse and there wasn't anything of that sort then. There may have been furnaces later but we had to use firewood to keep warm.

KS: And was the food Punjabi food like roti?

PD: Yes, Punjabi food like roti. All the time, roti. One day meat, one day Sabzi (vegetables), one day daal (lentil soup).

MB: Okay. And did Ham and Cedar also have a cookhouse or?

PD: That was before our time, but not then. Either all the boys would join together and buy a house. I had bought my own house. Could keep someone there to help around, but there wasn't any of that during our time. But before '69, it was common for 200-300 men to be working at the mills. There wasn't any family kind of work. There were *very few* families back then.

KS: When did your family come?

PD: My family came after my wedding in '74. First I came single and lived with my Bhua (paternal aunt) and then I stayed with her for the time being. Moe Gill is my Bhua's son, he is the one who sent for me (sponsored).

MB: And why did you switch your job from the Prince Rupert Mill to the one at Ham and Cedar?

PD: That mill stalled. It was temporarily shut down for a month. And when there wasn't any work there then I had to come back here. If I could've stayed there I would have. There was another mill there but they only kept family men there, not single men. There was a little bit of difference. Because single men there wouldn't go to work. Mills would run seven days a week and single men would say they didn't want to work or something, so because of that they wouldn't give work to single men. Family men would come and stay put but single men weren't reliable and they wouldn't believe them. I mean they would, but, no. So when I came back here, I filled out a letter and right away I got working.

MB: Okay. And you said that you also did green chain when you were starting at Ham and Cedar?

PD: Yes. When you are starting anywhere, you have to begin at the green chain.

MB: They call that an entry-level job don't they?

PD: Yes, the bottom people. And under them would be the clean-up crew.

MB: Okay. And for how long did you work on the green chain at Ham and Cedar?

PD: For about two years.

MB: Okay, then what did you do?

PD: Then I started working on the machines, whichever new ones there were. Getting trained by the foreman. They would ask you if you want to learn the job, but some guys were afraid of

cedar, but I did 39 years of working with cedar, but they would go in and not do anything. There wasn't a blower system then, but when the new mill was made in 1986, they installed a new blow system. There wasn't that before. There used to be low ceiling and all the mess would remain inside. Some would get a breathing problem or a sawdust problem – any man who worked on the cedar was forgiven for it.

MB: Okay. Did you health get effected or compromised because you worked so many years?

PD: So far, I've been good. No, no. It doesn't happen to every man but at least 20-30% of men who worked in the mill after 4-5 years would develop some sort of breathing problem because of the sawdust. But when you can't find other work and you've got families to provide for, you just take the medications and work through the sawdust. There are men at shake and shingle mills who are sick but when you can't find other work then, yeah.

MB: I was also going to ask, what kind of mill was the one at Prince Rupert? Was it a shake and shingle one or?

PD: No, that was a lumber mill. In all my life and 40 years of working, I've only worked at a lumber mill.

MB: And so Ham and Cedar is a lumber mill too then?

PD: Yes, that is a lumber mill. Yes.

MB: And Ham and Cedar, like I asked about the gorey and apney, how was it there?

PD: There was everyone there, it was a mix.

MB: A mix?

PD: Yes. There were more gorey and less apney.

MB: Okay. And even then, was there any difference between one another?

PD: No, no. There was nothing of that sort, no. No.

MB: Okay. Um, and you said that you built your seniority. So how did you slowly-slowly work your way up?

PD: The seniority was bound to build up. As the seniority builds, your work becomes a lot easier.

MB: So what other kinds of jobs did you do then at the mill?

PD: Whichever ones there were at the mill. I did them all. I learned a machine then 4-5 years later I'd learn another machine. There was an ager; a small ager and a big ager (lots of fast talking) if you want to write down the names of the machines.

MB: You said ager? What is that?

PD: *Talks very fast about wood going in the machine and being controlled by a button for size.*

MB: Okay. And what was the other one you mentioned? (Machine)

PD: Gang saw.

MB: Saw?

PD: There are set machines for specific inches so 24-32 pieces of wood can be cut at once.

MB: So you said Yang saw.

PD: Gang saw. G-A-N-G saw, S-A-W.

MB: Okay, and what other machine jobs are there?

PD: There is another job of the sawyer.

MB: The shingle kind?

PD: No, it wasn't shingle type work. It was just lumber type work.

MB: Oh, there wasn't any shingle at this mill then – what they call shake and shingle.

PD: The sawyer is also called the head saw. H-E-A-D. Head saw. This is the biggest machine in all the mills. And in comparison to all the other machines, there is more money with this one.

MB: More?

PD: More. There is more pay in this than the other 5 or 6.

MB: In the head saw. And have you done any work on this?

PD: I did training for it but I never did any permanent work. This work was more of a headache.

MB: Oh, okay.

PD: Yes, yes.

MB: Why so?

PD: There was too much pressure from the foreman and everyone else. Some men can handle that pressure but I couldn't. I learned it but I never did it. It wasn't fit for me and I didn't like it – I didn't want to be under the pressure of others. I had control over the other machines. If you have control over other machines then you can happily work under them. But when you are forced or under the will of the foreman, then it becomes difficult for any man.

MB: So have you done any work in the title of a supervisor then?

PD: No, I haven't. I was offered the chance to but I didn't take the position. They give the option to be a supervisor.

MB: Was there any reason?

PD: No, there wasn't any reason but there is added responsibility with that.

MB: And you didn't want that then?

PD: No, I didn't. No.

MB: Okay. And since the mill at Prince Rupert was your first job in Canada and your first mill ever, tell me a little bit about what your first impressions were about it. Like what it was like to do a new type of job in a different company.

PD: It was just that there was money with it. If there was no work, there was no money. It was common for work to be a dollar to two dollars then. If you had it in your karma then there might be more but that was the most it was back then. Back then I started at \$2.25 an hour. That was the most one would be paid then. And any man would be happy at that because there were facilities for medical health coverage, dental coverage, and a little bit of insurance was added into that if there was any accidental injury or death, like 10, 15, or 20 thousand dollars. These were the facilities that were in a union job.

MB: So were both mills union then?

PD: Yes that one was union and so is this one.

MB: Was there a reason why most immigrant Indian men would work at the mill?

PD: Yes. In that time, most of the apney that were coming here weren't well educated or anything. Most that came with them weren't well educated either – at the most maybe, they'd have studied till the tenth grade. And even if they were, they'd still be at mills. And if there was any relative coming then you'd talk to the foreman or supervisor and get them working in the mill too. Sometimes you'd just tell the foreman and if they needed extra men then they would say bring them. It wasn't as formal back then as it is right now.

MB: And was there more pay in this than in farming?

PD: I think in farming it was just a dollar or two. I didn't work in it so I wouldn't know. The men were mostly in the mill.

MB: Okay. Um... and did you know prior to coming to Canada that you'd work in the mill or did you come to know upon arriving here?

PD: No, I wasn't aware like that. My Bhua's son (cousin) was gone to be wedded on January 23, actually. He had gone for 11 months before coming back and told me a lot of things – he said that the main work was mostly in the mills. There wasn't anything like the truck or taxi business – well, there was, but there weren't a lot of men in that field. But now, those kinds of things are common.

MB: Okay. Um... and would you be able to say you experienced in challenges or difficulties while working in the mill? Was there any hardships you experienced while at the mill?

PD: No, the work wasn't difficult, I stayed happy while working. The pay was for 80 hours for two weeks. You'd work 40 hours per week, it was really good. 8 hours a day, 7am-4:30pm, sometimes a half hour to one and a half extra per day. If you start at 7am then you could consider working 8 hours.

MB: Mhmmm.... Are you retired now?

PD: Yes. At 61 I left work. 4-5 years early. Early retirement.

MB: Okay. What year was that?

PD: That was in 2009.

MB: 2009. So it's been quite some time.

PD: Yes, it's been 6 years.

MB: 6 years. Okay. Um, and if there weren't any difficulties, then what were the advantages/successes of working in the mill?

PD: It was that MSA was covered, the medical, the eyes, and the dental, it was all covered. Like the insurance for the home was \$100,000 and insurance for accident was \$200,000. It was just an overall benefit for the rest of your family and your kids for the MSA, the dental, and the eyes to all be free. There was only a small fraction of the percentage we'd have to pay like for the dental, we'd have to pay 20%. These were the advantages – the full facilities.

MB: So when you were working at Ham and Cedar, you mentioned that you had bought a home at this time?

PD: Yes, I did.

MB: So you didn't live in any cookhouse then.

PD: Yes, I had bought a house then. At that time it was \$21,000 – brand new.

MB: Oh! How old were you then?

PD: Then I was about 30 years old.

MB: And this was before marriage?

PD: Yes.

MB: And in what year were you married?

PD: '74. July 28.

MB: ...And you went back to India to get married then.

PD: Yes, for four months.

MB: And your wife came by being sponsored.

PD: Yes, yes. She came by being sponsored.

MB: Okay... And, um, okay. Do you remember the last date you worked at the mill since you said you got early retirement?

PD: Yes. I left on September, I think 31st, 2009.

MB: ...And if you

PD: I left on July 31st, 2009 actually. July 31 was my last day. 2009.

MB: Okay. And you said that your first house was \$21,000 so obviously there was a big change. Tell me a little bit about the nature of living in Canada such as the cost of living and food – a few of the things that you don't exactly see now.

PD: There were no Punjabi stores here in Abbotsford or Mission. We had to go to the Heritage grocery store to get our dry lentils and everything.

MB: From where?

PD: In Vancouver.

MB: Ohh.... okay. So you had to go there.

PD: Yes, we had to go there for our lentils and everything.

MB: Every week?

PD: No, not every week. Whenever we had the chance, every 2-3 months, we would go and about 2-3 families would carpool together and go. There was nothing here in the Safeway or other stores but slowly they started adding them. We started acquainting ourselves with them and became friends with some so they began adding things like our flour to their stock. And then they added our lentils so slowly the things we needed began to be sold here, but that took 2-3 years. Before that, there was a store on Hastings in Vancouver – an Italian store. We used to go there.

MB: And for flour you said

PD: For flour we used to go all the way there then they started bringing it. Slowly when our Indian boys started working there and they got to talking, they told them what groceries we need. Then the companies contacted one another and they started bringing it in with trucks, just like they do now. But the other things we'd be able to get.

MB: Yeah, yeah. Um, and with regards to pay and the low cost of living for groceries..

PD: It was very cheap. So cheap. But then the ladies didn't even have jobs and the men were the breadwinners. Families would go by one man's income.

MB: Yeah, so your wife wasn't working.

PD: Yes. Well, I stayed single for 5-6 years at first. Then from '70 on she came here. Then the women would work a little bit here in there, maybe in a store. Or in a canary – there was a really good one in Maple. There, lots of women had begun to work and the pay was quite decent too.

MB: Did your wife work there?

PD: Yes, she did for about 5-7 years. Then it got shut down and after that my wife didn't go. Then here in Abbotsford my wife would come for just a month or two to do seasonal work.

MB: Okay. Um... and what are your earliest memories of working in the mill when you first started?

PD: My earliest memories of when I was at the cookhouse was that after duty, we'd go out for coffee or to roam around where there were places about 2-3 km away by walking. Because there wasn't much we could afford to always go out and we didn't have a car at the time. Even our laundry we would throw in a garbage bag and walk every 2 weeks; put a few coins in the machine and get it cleaned. So we'd go every two weeks and maybe treat ourselves to some ice-cream in the summer or some coffee in the winter.

MB: Okay. Um... so at your job at Ham and Cedar, you said that there were more gorey there.

PD: There were more gorey than apney.

MB: So, there wasn't any kind of difference between the people of putting anyone down or anything?

PD: No, no. Because once you start working, the gorey and the apney would sit together with one another. There was no discrimination of any sort

MB: And did you apply at Ham and Cedar by yourself when the other mill had stalled?

PD: Yes, I came and applied there.

MB: Okay. And... didn't you try to find work anywhere else?

PD: I was paid well there and the mill still stand to this day – there is one shift everyday. It has been 100 years. It has been running since 1909. Over 100 years, still going. When I started in '70, there were 1000 men working – 3 shifts that ran for 24 hours of the day. A thousand men. After alterations and everything like that, they started cutting the men, maybe 50 or 100 at a time, and now they have cut down to just 120 men working in total. One definite shift. Then when they started cutting down the men and the graveyard shift, then it used to be 2 definite shifts. You wouldn't work Christmas and you were given a break, but other than that, your work days were definite and stable.

MB: Since you've spent so many years at the mill, what kind of changes have you seen with regards to technology and new machinery?

PD: Yes, there is new technology and there is an advantage. More production, less men. At the green chain there used to be 20 men, so for 3 shifts 60 men, and they all got cut. Now there is one man overlooking the machine and a button beeps to notify him now. When the load of 32 pieces is ready to be unloaded. One wouldn't know or understand until they went inside and saw for themselves.

MB: And your work obviously kept changing every 2-3 years as your seniority kept building up.

PD: Yes, on the basis of seniority building. All the best high post jobs are given after 15-20 years of working. Until the man before you doesn't retire or leave for a different job, you don't get up there.

MB: Okay. So how was the treatment towards you as your seniority kept building?

PD: Yes, I got paid more. In comparison to others it was from 50 cents up to 2 dollars. No matter what, as you moved up, your pay was increased by a little amount for sure. For some one dollar, for others, two. Yes.

MB: So, in all these years, your seniority and your pay has increased in comparison to others.

PD: Yes, yes.

MB: Um, so were you supervisors apney then or gorey?

PD: Gorey.

MB: Um... I think you answered all the questions. When Kusum comes we can ask her if we missed anything, but for now, I will pause this.

PD: Okay.