

Rashpal Singh Bassi Transcription

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

Interviewer: Oh, so they picked you up from Seattle

RB Did they pick you up in a car

RB: Yes, in a car. My Bhua Ji came from a plane. They must have been on a holiday or something.

I: Oh okay, so that was your first time in Victoria

RB: Yes, first time. From the flight we landed at Victoria airport.

I: What did you think of it when you first arrived?

RB: Because it's changed now, India. We slept outside, our legs were sticking outside while our heads were covered.

I: So, you were about 14, 15, years old when you came

RB: You were young

RB: Yes, so when I arrived, I went to school for about four months.

I: You went to school

RB: In Victoria

RB: Yes, here in Victoria, Douglas school. And then I started working.

I: In your Uncle's mill?

RB: Yes, in my Uncle's mill.

I: What was your job?

RB: That job, I used to deliver saw dust near Bay Smith. You would fill up a basement with saw dust. That's the fuel because there was no such a thing as oil...for the furnaces.

I: That was burning for cooking?

RB: For warming up a house

RB: Yes, for cooking for heating.

I: So they would fill an entire basement with sawdust

RB: Yes, then women would come and fill up large canisters with it. Later, things would become electrical.

I: So you started driving as soon as you arrived?

RB: No, the deliverer/driver was someone else, I wouldgrab....

RB Do you understand?

I: Yes, yes, I see now. How long did you do this?

RB: I did that for about three or four months, and then I went into stenciling. Now it's automatic.

I: On each log?

RB: On each board. 1 by 2, 1 by 4, coming in stamp it....[mimicking stamping sound]

I: What was the name of the sawmill?

RB: Pumber Bay Sawmill

I: And then after that RB

RB: After that, after the stenciling, I started

I: Of, because you became stronger then?

RB: Yes, I became stronger! And then I became a planer field. That was a very hard job. Nothing on top, rain snow, you name it. It was a hard job, but good wages. Ever since I started that at the age of 15, I never had time off. Was working two shifts every day, seven days a week. Watchman, and then I did all the house work. I was sending monies back to India, because my brother was there.

I: And what did your sister do?

RB: My sister went to school.

I: Since you had arrived when you were young. What were your thoughts-that you would stay here?

RB: I had no idea or thoughts about it then 8-10 men came and they had already arranged my marriage, so when I disembarked, around 1952, or 1953, I don't quite remember, you know how it is sometimes, they did my engagement right there and then.

I: Where, at the airport?

RB: Yes, right at the airport.

I: [Laughing] With who?

RB: To the woman I'm married to, to this day! And then 8 years after that we were officially married.

I: And where was she?

RB: She was in India.

I: Okay, so you were betrothed, and you knew you were going to marry someone in India.

RB: Yes, so the engagement was arranged by all the old men, just in between them. My wife's nana (mom's father) was a friend of my "phupher" (Father's, sister's husband).

I: Oh, the phupher who lived here?

RB: Yes, the one living here.

I: Oh, I see, so did you go back then after those eight years?

RB: I didn't go back until 18 years later

I: So you two were engaged but she still remained in India?

RB: No, no, after the engagement, she came here. After three years.

I: So the wedding was here?

I:

RB: Yes, the wedding was here, at this temple

I: which one? Paldi or Victoria?

RB: This is the new building now, ours was at the old one.

I: Have you got photos of your wedding?

RB: Somewhere, I have them. Yes, I have some. I gave them to my wife's brother. They went all the way to Toronto.

I: So, how many years did you work at the mill?

RB: I stopped working in the mill in 1995.

I: So you worked for that long then in that mill? Was it the same mill-Hardit Singh's?

RB: No, not in the same mill. There I just worked for three years. Around 1955 or 1956, it's been quite a while, that mill shut down. And then after I went to a private plant, a private mill.

I: Whose mill was that?

RB: That was owned by white people, Mr. Cameron, he owned it independently. He was the richest man on the Island. He was an old friend of my Uncle's, so he gave me the job.

I: And you worked there for the rest of your life?

RB: Oh yes, till the very end. I started doing cleanup work, with the broom, and then I ended up in shipping.

I: So you moved?

RB: Oh yah, I had the responsibility for some 60 million dollar a year in sales. I sent one order to Pakistan, Memorial hospital of Youb Khan. Pakistan President, the hospital was in his name in Karachi.

I: Where is the hospital?

RB: In Karachi.

I: Oh, so they ordered the lumber from here?

RB: Oh yes, that was the best wood, much better than this. No nuts, nothing. It was very clear. So we made beds out of it, chairs, tables, you name it, you know. In those days they didn't have chuck boards or saw dust, you know. They got everything now, that was all waste then. Burn it, throw it away, and dump it in the basement.

I: Did you enjoy your work?

RB: Well I liked it. Well the money made a difference, let's put it this way. The money was good.

I: What did you start at? What was your starting wage?

RB: My starting wage was 0.95 cents. Well that was tough times. You couldn't afford anything then. Now, everything is expensive but you can afford it because you're making 40 bucks an hour.

I: But still you sent money back home out of those 0.95 cents an hour you were making?

RB: Oh yes, I would still send money back. Those were my contract wages for three months. Then, once I joined the union, I made \$1.45 and half a cent an hour. It was a hard job. In 1959, we went on a strike for three months. I had my brother over then and I was paying the rations for both of us. So no money was coming. It was a tough time. Looking for jobs. We only received 5 cents an hour wage. But everyone went back to work with a raise of \$3.00 an hour. A lot of old timers I lived with, we have about three big cook houses, right here on Garbee Road. They've been torn down now, and there are now hotels there, there's a home lumber store there. You know that. They own half of Victoria.

I: Do you have any pictures from that time? From the cook houses?

RB: I have one picture, which was aired on TV, it was shown on the Paldi documentary.

I: So while you were alone for those many years, how did you make your roti? Where did it come from?

RB: We had a cook and I used to tell my wife how difficult it was. We had to keep someone to teach him how to make the roti.

I: Would he make you Indian roti?

RB: Yes, Indian roti. He was an apna (Indian) who would cook for us. Whatever we wanted, he would write it down. Chicken, Goat, whatever we wanted he would write it down.

I: Could you get everything here?

RB: Yes, we could get everything. Maybe goat was difficult, but as much chicken as we wanted. We just started getting goat more recently.

I: I see, and was he able to make the rotis?

RB: There were two brothers, I remember. They were making good money, more than anyone else. Charging 12 bucks an hour for each person and there were 50 persons, while working for 24 hours. They hardly had time to sleep.

I: Are those cooks still alive?

RB: No they died, they were part of the first generation. I am talking about some 55 years ago.

I: How did they become cooks? Did they have some past history of cooking in India?

RB: No, they learned when they came here. First the elder brother came and then he taught the younger one. Easy job, good money, stay inside. But it was longer hours. Somebody would come, wake him up...ask to cook food, etc. They would fill huge bowls with the chicken, the daal, etc. Men would eat

more than two at a time, etc., if they were drunk. If one man didn't get one he would make a big show of it and ask where his food went, etc.

I: Did you ever learn to cook?

RB: No, I still don't know. I know a little bit. I can't make rotis, etc., but I can make the masala for the chicken, etc.

I: When you were married, in this Gurdwara, do you remember what year that was?

RB: 1960, January 8th.

I: And did you have children?

RB: Yes, I have one daughter, who lives in Prince George, she's a teacher. And she's got two girls, 16, and 14. I took the whole family to India a couple of years ago.

I: Ohhh.....they're far away from you

RB: Oh they come visit. They were here at Christmas, for a week and a half.

I: And you've always been in Victoria?

RB: Yes, always been here.

I: And where's your sister?

RB: Esquimalt

I: And your brother? Your Bhua (dad's sister) and phupher (dad's sister's husband? And what about their kids?

RB: He passed away, oh yah, they both passed away too. Well even their son passed away and their daughter's passed away. They had grandchildren. Ones in Toronto, one's here.

I: And no one is left back home in India?

RB: No, no one is in India

I: Do you consider Daddowal to be your village now?

RB: Oh yah, I still do. I had some land there which I just sold recently, a couple of years ago. Or else someone will take it. Under Baba's name, we had 137 acres and I didn't know what was mine, because I came when I was 14 eh. So I took somebody to show me which is mine. And I went to the Patwari and he showed me. I had to make four or five more trips to confirm this. So we're talking about 20-25 lakh worth of property.....

I: Do you have your old passport?

RB: Yes

I: Can you bring it on Tuesday?

RB: I unfortunately can't as my wife has knee surgery.....