

Sukhdev Singh Dhaliwal Transcription

Interview Date: February 9th, 2014

Interviewer: What is your name?

S.D: Sukhdev Singh Dhaliwal

I: When is your date of birth?

S.D: March 15, 1933

I: Where were you born?

S.D: Village Tuse, District Ludhiana

I: When did you immigrate to Canada?

S.D: 1949

I: How old were you?

S.D: I think 14 years old

I: Okay. And who sponsored you to come to Canada?

S.D: My father.

I: And right now you're a Canadian Citizen? When did you become one?

S.D: Yes, I am, I received it about 5 years after coming to Canada, I was around 21 years old.

I: And what did you do before migrating to Canada? Did you work?

S.D: No, I was in school.

I: What level of education did you receive?

S.D: I completed grade seven

I: So your father was in Canada while your mother was in India?

S.D: Yes, my mother was in India while my father was in Canada

I: Who was here in Canada before your father?

S.D: My Taya (eldest brother of my father).

I: What was his name?

S.D: Bishan Singh and my father's name was Amar Singh Dhaliwal.

I: Where did you father live in Canada?

S.D: By the time I arrived, my father was living in Mission.

I: So you also lived in Mission when you first arrived?

S.D: Yes, I lived in Mission.

I: And what did you father do in Mission? What about your Taya?

S.D: My father worked in a mill and my Taya owned his own mill

I: He owned his mill?

S.D: Yes, he owned a mill in Vancouver, but then he passed away when he returned to India and so that was that. And then my dad, he built his own mill in Richmond, it was a small mill, called Fraser Valley.

I: What kind of mill was it? Was it a lumber mill?

S.D: Yes, it was a lumber mill. First I had a share in a mill in Mission with Harjot Gill.

I: So when you first arrived, at 16 years of age, what did you do first?

S.D: For the first three months, I didn't do much, I was free. My dad encouraged me to go to school, but when one doesn't know English, there's trepidation to do that. So my dad said, if you don't want to go school, you might as well work. So we went to Yuba to work.

I: Oh, Yuba, is that in Victoria?

S.D: That is on the Island, about 20 kilometers from here.

I: Was there anyone here in Youbou?

S.D: There was a friend of my dad's, Jaspal Singh Brar. So my dad called him, and asked if we could work. There were about 8 men working there then.

I: So did you come by yourself or with your dad?

S.D: With my dad. He only stayed for about three months, helped me to settle in, and then returned to Mission.

I: So where did you live in Youbou.

S.D: I lived in a bunkhouse with about 70 people each in the rooms.

I: What were the ethnicities of the men in these bunkhouses, were they mixed? All Punjabis?

S.D: Out of the 800 or so people who lived in Youbou, only 80 or so were Punjabis, there rest were mostly whites and a few Chinese.

I: Was it difficult for you then while working here? You mentioned that only 80 or so were Punjabi and the large majority were whites?

S.D: It was difficult yes, but then soon after I left for Vancouver.

I: How long did you stay in Youbou then?

S.D: About three years.

I: And did you stay in the bunkhouse the entire time? What work did you do exactly in the mill?

S.D: Yes, I lived in the bunkhouse the entire time and I was young so I would clean the lumber. Then I left to go work in my dad's own mill, Fraser mills in Richmond.

I: Was it quite a small mill?

S.D: Yes, small, about 30-40 people worked there.

I: And what did you do there?

S.D: I had the number one job there

I: Was that because your dad owned the mill?

S.D: No, he didn't own it. He had a share in it, along with Harjot Gill from Mission. He had been a mayor earlier as well.

I: And so when the mill the burned down, what did you do next?

S.D: My taya's son had another small mill, in Vancouver, I went and found work there. But because I earned very little there, I left that job. So I left after a week.

I: And what was the rate at that mill?

S.D: It was \$1.08 per hour

I: And what was the rate you were expecting?

S.D: I was earning about 5-7 cents less than that, so that is why I left. They asked me why and I said that, no, that wasn't acceptable. I then returned back to Youbou.

I: You went back to Youbou? In the same bunkhouse with the same arrangement?

S.D: Yes, that was the only option then. I worked this way for five years and then went to India.

I: How old were you then? Did you go to India to get married?

S.D: I was 21 years old, yes I went to get married.

I: What was your starting wage in Youbou?

S.D: My starting wage was \$1.08, and then it went to \$1.12 and then went up and up, eventually to about \$2.00

I: So, you went to India to get married, how long did you stay and did you bring your wife back with you?

S.D: I stayed for one year, we had been engaged much earlier on, but we had our wedding then. And then by the time returned back to Canada, my wife had our son in India and then eventually they both joined me here [in B.C].

I: So how did that living arrangement work? You were living in bunkhouses, etc.?

S.D: My dad bought us a house.

I: In Youbou?

S.D: No, Lake Cowichan.

I: So, you're dad bought it for you?

S.D: Yes, everything was shared then between me and my dad, so my dad placed the down payment on the house.

I: How much did the house cost then?

S.D: \$5,000.00

I: And where did your dad go?

S.D: After about fifty years, my dad returned permanently to India. After he set me up in Canada, he retired. But he would return back to BC again and again to visit.

I: He was a Canadian citizen as well?

S.D: Oh yes, we all were. My dad lived with us, I had a son by then.

I: But where did you work as you had left Youbou earlier?

S.D: I had left, but I returned back to Youbou! And then I was at Honeymoon Bay for 30 years. For a short time, I was laid off, and then went into logging but it was very dirty work, we would get very wet, etc. So then I was at Honeymoon Bay doing a range of jobs from grading, marking, etc.

I: Did you have to get your grading certificate?

S.D: Yes, I got my grading certificate, plane shafting....all kinds of jobs

I: How did you feel working at the mills? Was it hard? Or did you get used to it over time?

S.D: You know, for those who came very first, they had very little education, because their mom and dad's couldn't educate them. If, however, a person is educated, then can get other jobs. But there was discrimination, nobody would hire us outside of the mills. If there weren't white people to be hired in the mills, then they would hire Punjabis.

I: Did you ever face discrimination? Do you have a personal story perhaps?

S.D: No

I: Did you have your haircut then?

S.D: Yes

I: Do you think that was a factor into you not facing any discrimination?

S.D: Yes, certainly, it could be. It's also a matter of mixing up, smile, and work together.

I: And you mentioned that there were certain jobs Punjabis wouldn't be hired for, what did you mean?

S.D: I meant positions within the mill, higher up positions, like working with the machines, etc.

I: Oh, so you mean higher up jobs? Supervisor, Foreman, were these sorts of positions ever given to Punjabis?

S.D: No.

I: Did the mill belong to whites or Punjabis?

S.D: The owners were white.

I: Was it a union or non-union?

S.D: It was a union, employing about 800 people.

I: And how long were you there in Honeymoon Bay?

S.D: I was there for a long time, until 1997, and then I bought my own gas station.

I: Did you buy the gas station because the economy was better and it was cheaper?

S.D: No, not really, it was just a system. I had five kids by then, three boys and two girls and so they were all educated in the Canadian school system, they're all happy.

I: Was it common for Punjabis to own gas stations then? It must not have been.

S.D: No, no, it wasn't common, white people owned them. I also built our house above the gas station.

I: Where was the gas station?

S.D: Here in Lake Cowichan.

I: Do you still own it?

S.D: No, I sold it.

I: Why didn't your children want to look after the gas station? Was it because they were educated in different fields?

S.D: I think kids are just in general careless.

I: Can you tell me about your culture shock after arriving in Canada at only 16 years of age. You didn't know much English....

S.D: I actually picked up on English very fast while I was living in Mission, I was free for three months, so I was speak a lot in English and practice. Even though my dad encouraged me to go to school, I didn't want to.

I: Did you not want to go to school because there were very few Punjabis there?

S.D: Yes

I: Were there any Punjabis there in Mission? What about Youbou. You must have left more at home because there were all Punjabi men with you in the bunkhouses?

S.D: There were no Punjabis in Mission then. In Youbou, yes, they were all Punjabis, but they were older. As you know, they couldn't call over their families.

I: When you're wife came, she must have experienced culture shock?

S.D: Well when she came, she went to school?

I: Oh she went to school?

S.D: Oh yes, without schooling not much can get done.

I: Did your wife work here when she came to Canada?

S.D: No, she did not work.

I: Can you tell us of any unique story or experience about the mill?

S.D: One has to work, without work, nothing can get done. Education was impossible then, nowadays without education, kids can't get work. I have tried my best to instill that in my children.

I: Did you ever send money back to India?

S.D: Oh yah, as I was making good income in the store.

I: Did you have siblings in India? Did you sponsor them to come to Canada?

S.D: Yes, I sponsored them all.

I: What did mainstream society think about mill workers then?

S.D: You have no choice, when you don't know English, there was no option.

I: What about farming?

S.D: Farming is not unionized, mill work is.

I: Did you find it hard to do a labour job right away while so young?

S.D: When you're young, you don't feel things like that. There were men to play football with us, etc.

I: Besides mill and your work like, what else was there to do in your life?

S.D: Social life.....from Lake Cowichan, I came here to Duncan in 1975. Here, we have two homes, two acres of land, I started living there. I got both homes and land for \$10,000. There was 11% interest, which I also gave. I rented out the properties.

I: I mean, social life, weddings, get together, were there?

S.D: Oh that we had, people would come over to each other houses, etc. There was the Paldi Gurdwara, we went there. There were very few weddings, there. There were hardly any kids to get married!

I: Just once in a while...and what did you eat? Where did you get groceries? Did you get Indian foods? Where did you go?

S.D: We ate Indian food and were able to get Indian groceries then, though not as much, for example, from Safeway.

I: What clothes did you wear? Western? What about your wife?

S.D: You're correct, right, we wore western clothes, and so did my wife. She wore dresses, skirts, pants, everything.

I: Do you have pictures from that time?

S.D: At home?

S.D: Yes, you can come to home to look at them

I: Do you consider yourself, and do others consider you a good citizen?

S.D: Yes, because I didn't harm anyone or wish anyone ill.