

Tarlochan Singh Basra Transcription

Interview Date: February 8th, 2015

Interviewer: Uncle Ji, please tell me your name?

Tarlochan: Tarlochan Singh Basra

I: And where were you born? Which village?

T: India. Village Radhowal, District Hoshiarpur.

I: Oh okay, in Punjab.

T: Punjab, yes.

I: And when is your date of birth?

T: October 6, '46

I: And when did you come to Canada?

T: May 17th, 1968

I: And how old were you?

T: I was 21 years old.

I: What did you do in India before you came to Canada?

T: I used to live with my dad in the Air Force and study.

I: And in the air force, where was his posting?

T: Ambala

I: To what grade have you studied?

T: I passed grade twelve and then left with my dad....

I: Did you do any work after grade 12? Because you pass that fairly quickly....

T: Well it was also because my dad said he wanted to go to England, he was trying.

I: Okay, so you didn't go to College, okay. And then, what was the context through which you arrived to Canada?

T: My massi was living here, in Lake Cowichan.

I: And so how did you get to arrive to Canada?

T: Through an arranged marriage.

I: So she [massi] found your wife for you here?

T: Yes. And then my wife sponsored me to come.

I: And where did you arrive first?

T: Victoria.

I: Have you always lived in Victoria since?

T: No, I've lived in Vancouver, Campbell River.....

I: And what did you do when you first arrived?

T: I came here and began working in a mill?

I: The first work you did was in a mill?

T: Yes, I worked in Sardar Mohan Singh's mill in Victoria, Tyee Road.

I: What work did you do? How did you find the work?

T: On the green chain. It was very hard.

I: How long did you work at that mill? What did you do next?

T: I was at that mill for around 4 months and then, I began working at another mill in Victoria, a very large one called BC Forest.

I: And what did you do there?

T: There I began working on the chain and then when the mill closed down in 1989, I was driving a forklift.

I: How did you receive the promotions?

T: Through seniority.

I: And did you receive any training?

T: Well it was done in this way then, one driver would teach the other driver.

I: And how long were you there until? What did you do after?

T: I was there until 1989 and then I went to Campbell River.

I: And were these mills you worked at all lumber mills?

T: That [BC Forest] was a pulp mill and this [Campbell River one] was a saw mill.

I: And what did you do at the Campbell River mill?

T: I was hired as a forklift driver and when that mill closed down, I began working as a lime burner at sawmill. This would then be placed in paper, and then it was mixed in a pump.

I: And did you change any other jobs after this?

T: No, and then I retired.

I: What year did you retire from the Campbell River job?

T: I was 55 so in 2004.

I: Why did you get an early retirement?

T: They were laying off people then, and I had promised my children when we moved to Campbell River that when I retire I would go wherever they go because they all have to leave their jobs to come to Campbell River.

I: And how did you find working in the mill overall?

T: When I first started it was very difficult, but then my job became easier.

I: So the forklift was easier than the green chain?

T: Oh yes, and even the kiln operator work was easy. I would just sit in front of a computer all day, etc.

I: What kind of nationality of people worked alongside you in the mills?

T: In Victoria, it was half and half [Punjabis and Caucasians], and at Campbell River there were only four Punjabi men and all the other men were Caucasians, there were no other Asians there.

I: So in Victoria, with the 50/50 split did you face in difficulties in speaking English or working with Caucasians?

T: Nope. That was because while I was with my dad, in the air force, we spoke English all the time. Even when I arrived here, my wife being born and raised in Canada, also knew little Punjabi.

I: Do you have any other recollections or memories about working in the mill?

T: The job that I did, as a forklift driver, all the other drivers were mostly Caucasian. I was the first East Indian to work as a fork lift driver. Even though many of the white workers told me to go do another job, I demanded that according to my seniority, I would drive a forklift.

I: So when you achieved your seniority, did you face any discrimination?

T: They were small incidents here and there, i.e. not wanting to give me the forklift position. I demanded it based on my seniority or I threatened to go to the Union.

I: Were both the jobs you worked at unionized?

T: Yes.

I: Did you ever have to go the Union?

T: No. My Union's boss name was Sohan Singh Labh.

I: So no other major problems?

T: No, because I didn't have any issues with language. And the other thing was that I was a hard worker, I didn't slack around. I used to work the equivalent of 1.5, 2 men.

I: In the mills, was hard work in demand?

T: Oh yah, hard work, who ever worked hard they received job stability.

I: Were there every any layoffs?

T: In '81 there were layoffs, when the mill closed down. Because of the dollar

I: When you started work, what was your wage?

T: \$1.75. In 1968. By the time I retired, I was earning \$42.00 per hour.

I: What was the advantage of working in the mills?

T: Number one was the Union Pension, Number 2 were the dental, medical, life insurance benefits we received.

I: When you first arrived did you try looking for other jobs?

T: Not really, because the number difference was the discrimination because of colour. Especially against the Chinese and the Punjabis.

I: Were the mill owners Punjabi or Caucasian?

T: They were Caucasian.

I: You said there was a 50/50 split in the mill?

T: No, in the Campbell River mill, there were about 4 Punjabi men working, the rest were white. Here in Victoria, in 1968, there were about 30 Punjabis. In 1971, when another mill had closed which was all Punjabis, and then when some of those men were transferred to my mill in Victoria, it became 50/50.

I: Which mill was this that in 1971?

T: Point Ellis Mill, so when that closed in 1971, many of the men came to my mill.

I: What other jobs could people do then?

T: Either farm work or the mill. But the mill was preferred because of the wages, the 8 hours shifts, and benefits.

I: What were the farm wages then?

T: I think .76 cents an hour.

I: And when did you think that the discrimination ended?

T: Oh right to the end, even now, they prefer to hire Caucasians. Let me tell you, my wife was a Nurse, she wanted to be a teaching assistant, and even she wasn't hired. Despite that she knew good English and Punjabi. The difference is the colour.

I: How did you deal with it?

T: At the end, we thought, at least we have work. It's better than not having work

I: When did you become a Canadian citizen?

T: In 1973. Five years after migrating.

I: Was there a rule regarding this?

T: You received it after five years. No exam.

I: What do your kids do?

T: My daughter is in the RCMP in Vancouver, first she was a bank manager, my son has his own truck business, and I have a younger daughter

I: How did you find the economy when you came to Canada?

T: Very good. It was like this, no matter who came, they would then sponsor their villagers or other relatives. Since immigration demanded some sort of monetary record, or work record. But I was allowed \$6.00 when I came from India. We weren't allowed to bring much money. The government wanted us to work here, pay taxes, etc.

I: Did you find things expensive, etc.?

T: From then to now, it's the same. The wages have increased but so have our costs.

I: Did you drive yourself to work when you started?

T: In Victoria, we used to walk because it was four blocks away.

I: What kind of foods did you eat?

T: At work, we ate white food because they complained that the food smelled. And at home I ate roti. All the stores were available nearby. There was one Italian store by city hall where we could get one jar of Indian achar....that was it. When relatives were coming from India, I would ask for heavy blankets because we found the weather to be cold here.

I: Are there any other stories, about challenges you faced, etc., that you want to share? Can you tell me one story?

T: Overall, I never faced any major problems. However, I used to hang around white people more, working in the forklift, etc....the Punjabis would hang around in their groups more.

I: Did you ever try looking for other work? Why?

T: I have received a great pension. I was always satisfied with my work, so the income allowed me to sponsor my parents and brothers and sisters from India. I could only do so with a steady job, which the mill work allowed. I got them married, got my kids married, etc.

I: What was the social like in the mills?

T: It was number one, because the mill work was five days, and on the weekends, we would visit my massi, maser in Lake Cowichan, etc. Nowadays, there's no time.

I: Did you used to celebrate Diwali etc.? Where?

T: In this Gurdwara, which was built in 1970. I was married in the older Gurdwara. The women would get together to make sweets, i.e. Basen, barfi, laddoo's, etc. Everything was by word of mouth, the invitations were orally transmitted to everyone to attend.