

Tarlokh (Terry) Gidda Transcription

Interview Date: January 15th, 2015

MB: What is your name?

TG: Tarlokh Singh Gidda.

MB: And when were you born?

TG: 1938. (Had to be edited out to only year. Interviewee requested privacy for DOB)

MB: Okay. And where were you born?

TG: Sujjon. The village Sujjon. District Jalandhar. It is Newan Shehr now. Punjab.

MB: And when did you immigrate to Canada?

TG: I think it was 2nd of September, 1968.

MB: So, how old were you then?

TG: I think 29 or 30.

MB: And on what basis did you come? Point system, marriage base?

TG: Well my wife was here. She sponsored me. Actually, I got married here. We were engaged in India but her brothers were here and they sponsored her. So she came in '67 and I came in '68.

KS: Did you say your year of birth was '28 or '38?

TG: '38.

KS: Because you don't look like it and you said you were 30 when you came, that's why.

MB: Okay and did you do any work in Sujjon before coming here?

TG: I didn't in Sujjon but I was a health inspector in Punjab and a teacher. I was teaching before I came here.

MB: Okay. And when you first came to Canada what was your first job?

TG: Most of our people were working in the mills so I worked in the mill. I think I went to Mackenzie, BC.

MB: That was the first mill you worked at? Do you remember the full name?

TG: I think it was Katalmar Timber. Something like that.

MB: And how did you find work at this mill? How did you find your first job at the mill?

TG: They were Indo Canadian working there. Somebody said it's available so.

MB: So just by word of mouth? Okay. And what was your first job at this mill?

TG: Well most of the people were working on the chain and pulling lumber so that's what I did.

MB: Okay. And did you build up on that? Did you move jobs in the mill?

TG: I stayed there only for 8 months or so then I think when UBC had summer classes, then I went to UBC for 6 weeks.

MB: Okay, what did you study?

TG: Just improved my English speaking and things like that.

MB: Okay. And what did you do after that summer?

TG: Well actually, the main purpose to do that was because I was a teacher in India and I had a Bachelor of Education degree. So people told me, I think I sent all the degrees to the Department of Education, and they said that I have to appear in front of one of the superintendants in front of the schools, so the closest was Prince George. So I asked and

they gave me time and the superintendent interviewed me and said my speaking/communicating skills weren't enough for teaching. So I think that was one reason why I thought I should go to UBC. So after completing UBC, I went to the superintendent in Vancouver and he approved me. So actually, I got my teaching certificate. They had 3: the lowest, the middle, and highest; I had the middle one. But I also worked in the mill. I did some of the jobs. There was a cement factory that used to make sheets that they use on the roofs. I worked a short time there and then I found another job at Fraser Mills, which was in New Westminster so I used to commute. I think I worked for a year or a year and a half and whenever I was working night shifts, the school district at Mission called me for substitution. So I did do substitutions whenever they needed me.

KS: What year was this in, Uncle?

TG: I think it was 1969 or 70. I think in 70-71 I actually had a job at Fraser Mill and I worked there a year and a half and I was also taking a real estate course. So then I completed that and I quit my job.

MB: You quit the mill job?

TG: Yeah. And then I became a realtor.

MB: In what year?

TG: 1972. April '72.

MB: You became a realtor.

TG: Yes, I still have my license.

MB: And then what did you do?

TG: I sold real estate. In 1995 there used to be a company called Block Brother Realty. They were a national real estate service. So I was working in the office and they were selling that office so three of us bought the office. So we became owners and one of the owners quit and then I managed that office from I think 1988 to 2008. When I closed that office, I sold that office.

MB: Uh, you said you got it in '95. Do you mean 1998 to 2008?

TG: No, 1988 to 2008. I was managing and part owner. And one partner had quit and the other had died in the mid 90's. Then I was the sole owner and I managed and ran that office and I closed it in 2008.

MB: And what did you do after that?

TG: Actually, I was a councilor from 2005 to 2011 in Mission so, actually, I was very busy doing the counselor work. So I was still the councilor from 2008-2011. I still have the [real estate] license but don't do much. I sell hard property if anyone wants it.

MB: Yeah. And what happened to the teacher's certificate? Did you not go back to teaching?

TG: No, I thought I was doing better at real estate than teaching and I didn't like the teaching profession because the way we taught in India, with discipline, I noticed the kids here don't have much discipline. And if you have a problem with a kid here, you take them to the principal or the vice principal- you can't really punish them. So I'd rather do real estate work than the teaching work and make more money. And I made my living by selling real estate or managing a real estate office.

MB: Okay, so you only worked in the mill for 3 years?

TG: For about 2 years.

MB: And that was basically your first job.

TG: In the mill, actually if you want to hear, about Mackenzie it was very cold in the winter. The temperature actually went down to as low as minus 60 and we had Indo Canadians and a cookhouse and they were all Punjabis/Sikhs. We had our own cookhouse and white people had their own. So what happened was when the temperature was so low, the pipes all froze and the water system was all blocked. So we used to truck our water for cooking and to take a bath we used to go about a mile away. The white people had their cookhouse and their facilities to take a bath or whatever. And to go to the washroom, because the pipes were all frozen and we couldn't use the washrooms, we had to go to the outhouse. Had to dress really heavy because it was so cold! It was a really tough time. So when the temperature improved then we got the water and our life was much easier. And mosquitos were big!

MB: And you said that you had a cookhouse that was separate from the white people. Was there any reason for that and there being so much separation?

TG: No, because our food was cooked separately. We had a person, I don't know whether you know him; Baba Nand Singh, have you heard of him? Bimb, have you heard of him?

MB: Bimb is my Uncle, yes.

TG: Bimb's dad. He used to be our cook and we used to pay him for our service. And so because we had separate house, it was like a larger house where all the people slept and ate, and the gora people had their separate one far away from ours. And that's why it was separate, because we used to cook our own food and they used to eat whatever they ate.

MB: They ate their food and you always ate the traditional Punjabi food? And you had that cook making the three meals everyday for everyone.

TG: Yeah, yeah.

MB: Okay. And so, your first job you said was with the green chain. What was that like? What was your first impression?

TG: Well, it was very difficult for me. You know, I was a teacher and the son of a farmer. I did do some farm work when I went to school. But when I was working as a health inspector and teacher, I had a very easy life. So, it was tough in the beginning and then I got used to how the people work and once you get used to it you don't feel it. But the first week I felt very tired and I was ready to go India!

MB: Yeah. What did you find to be the most difficult thing of working in the mill then? Some of the disadvantages and the challenges.

TG: Well the thing is, when you're normally used to something, but it was very tiring. I was very tired and slowly I think I got used to doing what the other people were doing. And when I worked in the Fraser Mill it was much easier. The Fraser Mills on the green chain. When you put a piece of lumber, they had rollers on the chain and when you put a piece of wood those rollers would help you, so it wasn't really that hard.

MB: So there was more technology there then?

TG: It wasn't, well you know, now everything is done and nobody is working on the green chain because its automated. Where Mohinder works now, it's all automatic. But at that time in McKenzie, it was nothing like that but here it was much better.

MB: And so was McKenzie a union or non-union?

TG: It was a union.

MB: and what about Fraser Mills?

TG: That was union too.

MB: And was McKenzie gora owned or apna owned.

TG: It was a company, a gora company in McKenzie. But Fraser Mills, is a very famous mill. The people sometimes they talk on the radio or TV. A lot of people work there and they also had a small Gurdwara. And Fraser Mills also had some small houses for the people to live in there, renting for cheap. But when I worked there they were going to discontinue renting the houses and the Gurdwara wasn't there when I worked.

MB: Oh, it came after?

TG: Well the Gurdwara used to be there before.

MB: Oh, way before your time.

TG: Yes. If you've heard of Mewa Singh. And I think when he was cremated, he was cremated in the premises of where Fraser Mill was.

KS: In New Westminster?

TG: Yes, in New Westminster.

KS: So why were the people living in the cookhouse together? Where were their families?

TG: Mewa Singh's family?

KS: No, your families. You people lived in a cookhouse, all of you.

TG: My family wasn't there, it was just me. All of them, they didn't have their families.

KS: So where were the families?

TG: Family – my wife was here, in Mission.

KS: Oh, not in India.

TG: No, she was here in Mission.

MB: But other people were they single men then?

TG: They were all single. They were all single.

MB: They were single men, that's why it didn't happen.

TG: Actually, there were hardly any facilities. There was one store. And there was one store, I think it was Seven Malls, we used to go once a week and buy groceries and bring whatever the cook would tell us what he needs. We would bring it once a week.

MB: Where did you go to get groceries?

TG: McKenzie. You know the mill was outside.

MB: Oh, it was further off.

TG: Not right where McKenzie is a small town now. They have more facilities there now and they also have a Gurdwara. They didn't have anything at that time.

MB: So you always had to travel to get the food, your groceries.

TG: Yeah.

MB: And was it a hard time finding Indian food and Indian groceries?

TG: No, they actually used to bring it from either Prince George or somebody comes to the Vancouver side. Even in here, there used to be only one shop, Famous Foods. Was on Dodgson or something like that. Anywhere you go now you get food all the time.

KS: What do you mean here? Do you mean Mission?

TG: In Vancouver.

KS: In Vancouver there was only one shop. Famous Foods.

TG: One shop, Famous Foods. And they used to have international foods so whenever somebody used to come here then they would take a whole bunch of stuff, whatever we needed.

MB: Okay, and so you said that McKenzie was gora owned, so was Fraser Mills also gora owned then?

TG: Yeah, it was a big company Fraser Mill. Actually, when you pass Portman Bridge, on the left you see those big stores like Staples and I don't know what other stores are there, there are a bunch of stores that was all owned by Fraser Mills.

KS: What is the full name of Fraser Mill?

TG: I think they used to call it Fraser Mills and if it was a different name then I don't remember.

MB: And what was the demographic of this mill, was there a mix of people or were there mostly apney or more gorey?

TG: No, there was a mix. Actually, it was a very large mill. There was a green chain and where I worked, they used to call it the Yard Sizer. There was a planer and they had huge property, very large property! Very old mill too. Now it's all gone I guess, I don't see it.

KS: Who else was working? You said there was lots of variety. There was Indian people and who else?

TG: It was mixed I guess. I don't know about gora people, I don't know what nationality they belong to.

KS: Chinese or Japanese?

TG: No Chinese, no.

MB: Okay. And what were you jobs at Fraser Mill then. You were there for about a year and a year and a half.

TG: Sometimes I did the trimming, it's called trimmer. And other times I worked on the green chain like pulling lumber. At that time I also passed my tally exam. For tally, there is a position for a person that counts all the lumber and each load, and that man is called the tally man. That was a position that I didn't get, there were other people. And I also qualified for lumber grader. I wrote the exam and passed. Actually, my practical for lumber grading was done when I was in real estate. So I went there at that time and I got a ticket, they call it, A ticket – the top ticket for tallying. Not tallying, it was grading. But at that time, I was realtor. I did that in case I have to go back and my real estate doesn't work.

MB: Okay. And how did you find your job at Fraser Mill? For McKenzie you said it was through word of mouth.

TG: Actually, my brother-in-law, my wife's brother, used to work there. He had a good relationship with the foreman and he asked if they had a job for me and they said sure,

bring him in. Actually the Fraser Mill people were quite happy and they were prepared to give me some sort of job in the office but then by that time I left.

MB: And at McKenzie you were living in a cookhouse during that whole time, but what about when you were working at Fraser Mill?

TG: I was commuting from Mission. Everyday. It's an hour drive from here.

MB: And at this point you were married so you had your wife with you too. Yeah, okay. And so could you tell us a little bit about how the atmosphere and environment was at McKenzie. How was the treatment amongst the white and the apnay, because there was segregation and, you guys had your separate cookhouses?

TG: Well, actually, the shift that I worked in was all Punjabis. And actually, the Punjabi superintendent and the foreman were Punjabi. Actually, their treatment wasn't that great. They had some favoritism for different people working there. So there was discrimination by goras with us and there was some discrimination by ours with our people.

MB: Apney with apney. Could you touch on that a little bit like the reason?

TG: Well I didn't stay there very long so I... I used to remember one person, he hardly did any work but he got paid. And so, I didn't stay there very long so I...

KS: Was there any language problem? Your English was good but for others any language problem while working?

TG: I don't know, there were some young people, you know 17-18 years old and a couple of people were older than me, maybe more than a couple I guess. Language problems – because they dealt with our own people, the foreman was our own. We used to get together and have a drink.

KS: So tell us any experience, any good experience or memory you have of working in the mill.

TG: I don't know anything good but people were very friendly and when I started there, the people were very helpful. Actually, they gave me the easiest job.

MB: At Fraser?

TG: No, at McKenzie.

KS: People means the owner? The supervisor?

TG: No, no, no, the people working on the chain. On the green chain. They were very helpful. They gave me the easiest job for a couple of weeks or something like that. And they told me that you have to do your share. So it's actually, it was a different – what they produced was, it was a planer mill. They used to put 8ft pieces of wood and this machine was producing like crazy on the chain, they were coming like there was no space, it was so fast. So the people who used to be in the front would put 3-4 pieces. They first row they'd make then they'd put 4 pieces together and push it and I'd think, 'My God, they make it so easy!' I got tired of pulling one piece at a time but these people were doing 4-5 pieces! But then I got used to it when I did the same thing. So anything you do, when you don't know how to do it, it's very tiresome and very disorganized I guess. Once you know when you do it, then you can do a much better job. So that was the mill at that part when they were just producing those 8ft, they used to call them starts. And the planer mills used to train them and send them like crazy.

KS: I wanted to ask, how did you feel from working in the mill, other than physical tiredness, but coming from India as a teacher then working in the mill, how did you feel about it?

TG: I didn't like it. But then I got used to it and once you get used to it then there's no problem. Fraser Mills was a very easy job because of those rollers, you'd hardly get tired.

MB: And you had this mindset that it would be temporary up until your teacher's degree would be qualified. That was your mindset that it would be temporary.

TG: And then I'd get a teacher's job, yes. But then again, the difficulty was that once a year the teachers have a convention. There was 2 of us, me and another guy, his name was Ben Dhaliwal. I was a BA and he had a master's degree, MBA. So we both went to interviews when they had this convention. And the school board, it's not like India and the Education Department hires. The school boards hire here. So we went for interviews with different school boards and nobody had hired us because they had produced so many teachers here, their own! So why would they hire foreign teachers. There were some foreign teachers. When I was at UBC I met two people, one was Mr. Kapoor and there was another guy he was a retired military general, a very high position. They both were also attending this summer session at UBC. So I met them and I mean, there were some Indian teachers at that time, but when they interviewed us there were no jobs available. So when I substituted, it used to be \$23 a day. So it wasn't enough and I thought do something else so I took a real estate course and became a realtor. And then I thought well, I don't want to do the teaching because real estate was very rewarding.

MB: Yeah. I want to bring you back to working at McKenzie. You said there was discrimination against apney with apney and a little bit of favoritism, but you talked about Fraser Mill as being a happy place and being with happy people. Could you talk a little bit about how that environment was in contrast?

TG: Well the people on the chain, well when I was new, they didn't have to help me. Well they helped me by giving me an easy job but later on they said that I have to do whatever they have to do. They were good people too.

MB: So there was not that same discrimination or favoritism. Okay. Do you remember the last date that you worked at the mill? The day you last left it? Maybe after your grader's practicum.

TG: Well, I don't remember, I think I...

KS: The year? Year and month?

TG: I think it was '69. UBC started when the schools were closed. I remember when they had the rocket on the moon, I was at UBC. And we watched it from the UBC campus.

MB: You mentioned you were at Fraser Mill from 70-71, so I'm thinking that your last date might've been '71, that year.

TG: Uh, well I think I left – my real estate career started on April 12, 1972, so sometime just before that I left.

MB: Okay. Um, and so obviously you had other professions in mind, that's why you had left the job at the mill.

TG: Well, because I joined real estate. And our last question for you is if you can tell us a little bit about the nature of living in Canada at the time and the cost. Like you said, you

had to get groceries from afar. Or maybe you can tell us about the changes you've seen in all the years that you've been here.

TG: Can you ask me that question again?

KS: How was life when you came to Canada. Normal like general living. Living conditions.

MB: Cost conditions. In Mission.

TG: Well I lived in Mission, I came to Mission. And the Indo Canadians had only two cars and Mission had no lights. And to get the driver's license it was very easy at that time. There were no lights and no traffic, not very many cars.

KS: Lights as in traffic lights?

TG: Yeah, traffic lights.

MB: So there were just two apney cars and not many apney families in Mission?

TG: Two cars. There were some families and they also had a mill here and there was a cookhouse and everybody didn't have their family here. Now everybody has their family here but at that time a lot of people used to live in the cookhouse. There weren't very many families.

MB: Would you say the amount of apney here kind of kept together as a community?

TG: There weren't many. The small Gurdwara, the heritage temple, it never filled. I was secretary of that temple for four years from '72-'76. The list of people all in Mission, Abbotsford, and Chilliwack was less than one page. Not 25,000 people like we have in Abbotsford now. Most of those families lived in Mission, there were only two or three families in Abbotsford.

MB: Okay. And when did you end up becoming a citizen? Or are you a citizen right now?

TG: Yes, I am a citizen. I think I got it in '74 or '75.

MB: Okay, so just about eight years after coming around that time.

TG: I think at that time the requirement was 4-5 years.

MB: Of residing in Canada. Okay.

KS: Anything more you want to add, any information you may have?

TG: Well when I became a realtor I had the time and was the director of Mission Community Services where Kusum worked for 15 years. I'm on the scholarship committee of Mission Foundation for 7 years. I was on the Lions Club for more than 25 years and here I've been a secretary or president since '95 so 20 years. I sat on Mission security and the parole board. I've done a lot of community work.

MB: Okay, alright... I think that's all the questions.

Resumed later for more information

KS: So Uncle tell us about how it was regarding weddings, invitations, and other celebrations. How was it amongst you all when you came here?

TG: The functions that happened basically all happened at the Gurdwara because the population was little. So whatever function there was like a wedding or auspicious ceremony, or prayer, or birthday, the invitations were done by hand in cyclostyle. There was a machine from the Abbotsford Gurdwara and we'd get the letters from there. We had a list and a plate thing so we'd put the address and then mail the letters out to everyone. It didn't matter what function it was, every person that lived here would be

invited. And for cooking, since there was no restaurant, the ladies would cook everything at the Gurdwara, even the sweets. They made whatever they could like laddoo, barfi, basin. All this was made at the Gurdwara. And since there were less people, that meant everyone would come to all the functions.

KS: So was everyone helping around with the process of making the sweets?

TG: They would help each other out. If some ladies knew how to make laddoos, they'd work together and form the laddoo with their hands. If anyone didn't know, they'd teach them. And whatever it was, lentils or vegetable sabji, Bhai Nand Singh, after he had retired, was well renowned for preparing the food for the functions at the Gurdwara. At big functions like Akhand Paaths he would do the seva in the Darbar and also make the daal and sabjis in the large pots. So everything was always run on our will.

KS: Like you mentioned about the wedding, like you'd invite everyone from the village, you'd invite those living here. Did you celebrate the Indian festivals?"

TG: Not very much. I remember when I was a secretary, we began to celebrate things like Shaheed Bhagat Singh Ji's and so forth, but for functions like Lohri and whatnot, I don't think there was much. And if there was a function, everyone would come to the Gurdwara.

KS: Diwali?

TG: I believe Diwali had always been celebrated at the Gurdwara.

KS: In those days?

TG: Yes, yes. Diwali, Vaisakhi, or any other days of the Guru's

KS: Are you telling this about Abbotsford or New Westminster where you had worked with the mill workers?

TG: No, I'm talking about the Abbotsford Gurdwara. When I worked at New Westminster, the Gurdwara there had been shut down. There used to be a Gurdwara in Vancouver on 2nd Avenue. It used to be the first Gurdwara and was rather historic and they made a mistake by selling it. After selling it, they used the money to build the Gurdwara they have on Ross Street now. Akali Singh had a Gurdwara on 11th Avenue and since it was small, they sold it and made it on a different street. Those were the two or three Gurdwaras of the time. There was one in New Westminster. Since we were fairly close in distance, the paati and the Giyani Ji would come together and hold the Akhand Paaths together.

KS: Thank you Uncle.