

## Amarjit Singh Heer

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Centre for Indo-Canadian Studies  
University of the Fraser Valley  
Indo-Canadian Sawmill Pioneer Family Oral History Collection Project

SB: Uncle-ji, what is your name?

AH: *Amarjit Singh Heer.*

SB: What is your date of birth?

AH: *March 13, 1952.*

SB: What is your birthplace?

AH: *Kharhacharwar, Punjab, India.*

SB: How do you spell that?

AH: *K-H-A-R-H-A-C-H-A-R-W-A-R.*

SB: Uncle-ji, in what year did you come to Canada?

AH: *1972.*

SB: Do you remember the date or...?

AH: *August 25 or 26, I'm not sure.*

SB: When you came here, how did you come here? What was your immigration status?

AH: *Visitor.*

SB: Visitor? And then how did you end up staying here? Point system, sponsorship?

AH: *Point system.*

SB: Point system? Ok. Are you a citizen now?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: Before coming to Canada, where did you live, Uncle-ji?

AH: *Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India.*

SB: Did you used to study there or work?

AH: *I used to study.*

SB: What did you study?

AH: *Government College of Hoshiarpur. I did my Bachelor of Arts and MA, then I came here.*

SB: When you came here did you start working in the mills?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: After how long?

AH: *Maybe after 4-5 months or something.*

SB: Do you remember the name of the first mill?

AH: *No, I don't know about the first mill. It was near Williams Lake.*

SB: Was it sawmill?

AH: *Yup. A small sawmill.*

SB: In that mill, what work did you start on?

AH: *On the green chain.*

SB: On the green chain? How did you find it when you first started working there? Was the work really hard or...?

AH: *No. It wasn't hard. We were very young; to a young man nothing is hard.*

SB: How long did you stay on the green chain?

AH: *I think maybe 5-6 months. Then we had a problem there with roti. The place where we stayed, it was single men. 4-5 men. They told us that 4-5 of us couldn't live there.*

SB: Who said that?

SB: In one house?

AH: *Yes, in one house.*

SB: That many people couldn't live together in one house?

AH: *Yes, then they told us that those that moved in after should move out. So the two of us that had moved in after had to find somewhere else to live. So we found a basement together and the renter said we couldn't cook in the basement because of the smell of our food. Because when you make "tardka" it smells. So they said you can stay here if you eat outside somewhere. So I stayed there for a month like that. In the mornings I would put eggs in milk and go to work like that and then come back from work and eat at a hotel. We would do that and then on weekends we had friends at 100 Mile House and we would go visit them. My friend lived in Merritt, close to Kamloops. I called them, my friends, and explained my situation and they said come work here, you will get food. He said if you aren't eating good roti what the point is, so I left the work there. They told me when you come to Kamloops call us and we'll pick you up. So I took the bus to Kamloops. So I called him after arriving in Kamloops because Merritt was a 45 minute drive from Kamloops by car so he came and got me. I stayed there for 4-5 months. Then my cousin lived here...*

SB: Did you live there [in Merritt] in their house?

AH: *Well, they were living in cookhouses.*

SB: Okay, so they were living together.

AH: *So I stayed with them for a bit. 4-5 months...maybe 6 months. I don't remember for sure. Then in the summer for 2-3 weeks, in June maybe July, I had come to meet my cousin here and he said some work here and since then I have been here.*

SB: But when you went to Merritt, were you able to find work in the mill?

AH: *Yes, I found work.*

SB: What kind of work?

AH: *I was on the chain.*

SB: Was it sawmill?

AH: *Yes it was sawmill, it was an Indian-owned sawmill. Tara was the mill owner. I worked there for 5-6 months. I had come to holiday for three weeks.*

SB: In Duncan?

AH: *Yes, Duncan. Then here my cousin's father-in-law was a foreman at a mill here. There was a plainer shift open at the mill so I told them I could do the work. This was '73.*

SB: Uncle-ji, you were on the green chain in Williams Lake? By the time you got to Merritt had you started working as a plainer or were you on the green chain [there]?

AH: *In the mill I was only on the chain for 1-2 days. I pulled lumber for 5-6 months.*

SB: In Merritt?

AH: *Yes. After that I came to holiday here and I've been here ever since.*

SB: When you were working in Merritt/Williams Lake, how much were you making per hour?

AH: *I don't remember now.*

SB: Do you remember roughly?

AH: *I think maybe \$4.*

SB: Per hour?

AH: *Yes, I think \$4 per hour but I don't remember for sure.*

SB: Were you sending money back home to India or saving up here?

AH: *I had to send some money back.*

SB: Who got left behind back in India?

AH: *Everyone was back in India: my sister, brother, mom, dad.*

SB: Were you able to save any of your earnings?

AH: *Yes, I had to save.*

SB: What were your expenses at the time? What did you spend your money on? Rent...?

AH: *Expenses were rent, food and that was it. We didn't even have a car then. We got a car later when we came here.*

SB: Uncle-ji, the mills you worked in, were they union mills?

AH: *Yes, union mills.*

SB: All three?

AH: *Yes, union mills.*

SB: When you started working in the first mill, how did you find that work? Friend or family or...?

AH: *There was man from our pind that was living at 100 Mile House.*

SB: Do you remember his name? The name of the friend?

AH: *Sohan Singh Bains. We had been neighbors in India; he was a house down from me. We studied together and he came out here before me and I came out here right after. 100 Mile House was there. I came out here on August 25 and the PNE was happening. The PNE festival. He called me saying he wanted to see the PNE, and that he wanted to meet there in Vancouver. After meeting them, he said you should come to 100 Mile House. I said I don't know how to get there. He said get on the bus and when you get there, call us and we will pick you up.*

SB: What year was this, Uncle-ji? Roughly.

AH: *This was '72. I had gotten a license after a month of coming here.*

SB: But you were still on a visitor visa?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: You could work?

AH: *Yes, I could work. My case had been appealed.*

SB: Your case was freed then?

AH: *[nods yes] Yes, it was freed. Then I got my citizenship after three years.*

SB: You hadn't been married yet?

AH: *I went and got married later. I had left here in '78.*

SB: Okay, so then you went to Duncan?

AH: *No, I came here in '73.*

SB: Can you tell us the name of the first mill you worked in here in Duncan?

AH: *Nanoose Forest Products.*

SB: Nanoose Bay?

AH: *No, Nanoose Forest Products.*

SB: Nanoose Forest Products.

AH: *That was the Doman mill. They owned it.*

SB: Uncle-ji, what year was that in? The Duncan mill.

AH: *1973 to 2002 I worked there. In 2002 it closed. Then I worked in Nanaimo. Six years I worked there, from 2002 until 2008.*

SB: Did you move there or did you stay in Duncan?

AH: *No, I stayed here and I'd go there every day by car.*

SB: Did other men make the same commute?

AH: *Yes, there were 3-4 others. Sometimes 2-3 of us would get together and carpool, sometimes we had to drive separately.*

SB: What was the name of that mill?

AH: *Its name was...it was also a Doman mill. Name, I think it was Nanaimo Forest Products, I think. It was owned by the Domans. I worked at the other Doman mill and they hired based on seniority. 3-4 men were hired from the other mill first. Then it was my turn.*

SB: Was the work good. Did you receive good pay?

AH: *No, union pay was good but I didn't make as much money as I did at Nanoose.*

SB: That was private [mill]?

AH: *No, it wasn't private, it was union too. But when you're doing a high paid job and then you go to a new mill you have to start again from the bottom.*

SB: Is that what happened to you?

AH: *Yes. Once you're at the bottom you got bottom pay and the work is a little harder and you're going to get less money. In 2008 that mill stopped.*

SB: It stopped too?

AH: *It stopped too in 2008. The company owners said if we need you in the future, we will hire you based on seniority. So then I started working at Cowichan Bay in 2009, near Duncan. I worked there for two years from 2009-2011.*

SB: Did you have to start from the bottom again there too?

AH: *Yes, when you leave you have to start from the bottom. When you go to a new mill you have to start over again. The work here wasn't steady because we were at the bottom. They hired us because they had started a new shift, graveyard on plainer. They hired us and we needed 60 days to be a part of the union, when we had just reached 60 days they would end the shift we were working but we had become a part of the union. We would get hired when someone went on holiday or to do clean up on Saturday, Sunday.*

SB: You were doing piece work.

AH: *Yes it was piece work.*

SB: But weren't you protected by the union?

AH: *No, there wasn't any protection by the union.*

SB: Every time you moved [mills] you would lose union protection?

AH: *Yes, you would lose it because you would be going to new operation. You would start from the bottom in a new operation. And when you would get laid off you would again start from the bottom.*

SB: When you had to start again from the bottom, was it always heavy work you would be doing?

AH: *No, in Chemainus there wasn't the [green] chain, here we would spray paint on the loads. I started working on a shift at Mayo. According to the union, if they didn't start a shift for laid off workers within 24 months they had to*

*pay severance. Companies were smart, they would start a shift up at 23 months or 23.5 months to avoid paying severance pay. After 5-6 months I got a phone call from Nanaimo saying we need graders. I said I'll come talk to you, when should I come talk to you. He said come here Friday. A day before Friday I asked my younger boy to make me a resume and said "I'll give it to the mill I'm going to on Friday and to drop it off at 2-3 other mills along the way." The resume was made and I went to talk to the manager on Friday. The manager said come here we'll hire you. I said if it's a steady job I will come. He said I don't have anything steady, this shift is until September. I said if it is only until September I'm not coming because for 7 weeks I had holiday [at the other mill]. If I went to the new mill I would have to quit the old mill and I would lose my 7 weeks of holiday. He said that he had to report that I refused the work. I said Andy, the talk we just had if it went to court I will say exactly this "if you give me a steady job I will be here to work tomorrow. If you don't give me a steady job what you are offering me is a job until September and I already have a job until September at the other mill. You're giving me a clean-up job here, I already have a clean-up job there." Then I said that job is near my home, and second I have 2 years seniority and 7 weeks of holiday. So on my way back that day I gave my resume to other mills. Within 3-4 months I got a call from Chemainus saying if you want to work here, come here. I went there and I have been steady ever since.*

SB: Okay, so you go to Chemainus even now?

AH: Yes.

SB: How far is it from here?

AH: *From here I think about...*

SB: 40 minutes?

AH: *No, no.*

SB: 15 minutes?

AH: *It takes 20 minutes at the most.*

SB: Chemainus is a nice town, isn't it?

AH: *It's a small town near the water.*

SB: Okay, so you're working there. What is the name of the mill?

AH: *The mill's name now is Western Forest Products.*

SB: Western Forest Products. IWA?

AH: *Yes, IWA.*

SB: Uncle-ji, when you first started working in the Williams Lake mill, how many of the workers in that mill were apney, gorey?

AH: *There were at most 4 apney, 4-5.*

SB: How many men were there in total?

AH: *In total I don't know. I don't know for sure.*

SB: 100-150 people?

AH: *No, no. 25-30 people. It was a small mill.*

SB: When you went to Kamloops-Merritt, there [were the same demographics] too?

AH: *There too. There were 50 men at the most. There were about that many.*

SB: How many were apney?

AH: *At the least there were about 25-30 apney there. Because it was an apna mill, there were more apney.*

SB: In that mill, apney men did what kind of work?

AH: *There were on the [chain], they were on jobs too...*

SB: Were they ever in the position of foreman?

AH: *The foreman was the owner's son.*

SB: Do you think people wouldn't put Indians in the foreman position?

AH: *There were very few [Indian foremen]. Here there were Indian foremen when I started.*

SB: In Nanoose?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: In Nanaimo.

AH: *No, here in Nanoose. In Nanaimo there was an apna foreman too.*

SB: At the Doman mill?

AH: *Yes, at the Doman mill.*

SB: They would make Indians foremen?

AH: *Doman mill had apney foremen.*

SB: Normally, do you think gorey were at the top of the hierarchy in mills and then apney. Or were apney able to reach higher-ranking jobs?

AH: *No, they could reach the top. You could get to the top based on seniority. When jobs would open up they would go to the person who had seniority.*



SB: Uncle, when you started working in Williams Lake in the 1970s, there were very few East Indians. Has that changed now?

AH: *Yes that has changed. Before they used to discriminate.*

SB: How would they do that?

AH: *In town it would be really hard even.*

SB: What would they do?

AH: *When you would go to town, walking or driving, they would give us the finger.*

SB: Would they swear at you too?

AH: *Yes, they would swear at us.*

SB: Would they call you Hindus?

AH: *Yes they called us Hindus and swore at us too. At first we listened to the East Indian seniors that said they couldn't go get groceries. 4-5 men had to get together to go get groceries.*

SB: Did this happen in the mills too?

AH: *No, this didn't happen in the mills.*

SB: So did the gorey work well with you in the mill? Did you work well side-by-side without there being fights?

AH: *At first there were fights in the early days at Williams Lake.*

SB We have heard this too.

AH: *This happened early on because other people used to do the mill work and when we came as visitors...a lot of us came in '71, '72, we would stay and do the work and other people would do 4 hours and go home. The foreman would call us up instead of them. It created friction because they thought we were taking their work hours. So they started fighting with us. Fights happened there.*

SB: Did you see them?

AH: *No, I didn't see them. But you've probably heard of this, there was a fight in a pub, gorey went after an apna boy. There were only two apney boys in the pub. So went back to their apartment and 12 men got in to the car. A fight broke out. One boy was thrown through a wall. A case happened because of it. The judge said he couldn't uphold the case because he said 12 men couldn't fit in a car. He said you guys are lying, 12 people couldn't sit in a car.*

SB: How is it now, has it improved?

AH: *Now it has improved. Now it's not like that anymore.*

SB: But you were saying today that people are throwing eggs at your house.

AH: *If you look at the front of my house the signs are still there.*

SB: How do you feel being in the community now?

AH: *It is school kids that play pranks. At our old house I would play cards with my friends on Saturday, my son was sleeping in his room. The house behind us was an Indian house and there were people living in their basement. At 11 pm we went to sleep and they started throwing eggs at our window and 30 minutes later they did the same thing. So I got up and put on my running shoes and went outside. The guy came outside and threw eggs again and one boy went inside, the other ran for it. I ran after him and caught him after 300-400 meters and brought him home. Then I called the police, the police came and said we can't do anything to them. They said we will call his parents and take him home. They called his parents and they came and got him.*

SB: Where was he from?

AH: *He was from here. He studied somewhere here. His parents came and picked him and we don't know what happened after that. What can you do nowadays, you can't do anything. My younger son sleeps downstairs, my older son a floor above. When people bugged us he [the son] put on his shirt and went outside to confront them, but they got in their cars and drove off. He got the number of the car as it drove off and gave it to the police when they came. For 1.5-2 hours I sat in the truck outside our house thinking they would come back but they didn't. I still can't clean the mess [from the eggs] I got on a ladder but my hand didn't reach the spots. On your way inside you may have noticed the two spots.*

SB: Uncle-ji, when you said 4-5 men lived in a house together in Williams Lake and were told you all couldn't live in a house together, you then moved and lived in a cookhouse in Merritt. Was there no cookhouse in Merritt at the time?

SB: Were there not enough men?

AH: *There weren't enough men. It was a small town called Lac La Hache. There was a small mill 20-25 minutes away. It was a small mill. The foreman there was great, he would give us rides after work. He was a gora, but he was nice.*

SB: When you made food, the 4-5 of you that were living together, did you make it yourself?

AH: *By ourselves.*

SB: You could make roti?

AH: *Yes, I came here in '72 when I went to meet the Bains boy I told you about in 100 Mile. The first night we were drinking a bit. Everyone there was from the same district, Hoshiarpur. We started talking about what villages we were from back home. When he told me his village I said my relatives used to go there all the time. He said what connection do you have to the village? I said my mother's side of the family and my sister-in-law are from that village. And in that way we found a relation between us.*

SB: Did you make a lot of chicken? Or lentils and vegetables?

AH: *Chicken, lentils, vegetables. We made all of it.*

SB: Roti.

AH: *Roti too. When I went to meet the boy, I woke up in the morning and he told me to make the flour for rotis. I told him in India I never even put water in a glass. He told me your aunt isn't sitting here to do it for you. He said I will teach you. He told me to put flour in a bowl and then add water. I asked him what if I put in too much water...he said then put in more flour and if there is too much flour put in more water. I stayed there for a week and learned how to make roti before I left. When I lived here, my cousin would make roti.*

SB: When did you get married?

AH: *I got married in '79.*

SB: In India?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: You went back there?

AH: *Yes.*

SB: And then when did your wife come to Canada?

AH: *I sponsored her and she came here the same year, in '79. I got married on February 14.*

SB: Valentine's Day. Your anniversary is coming up!

AH: *Yes, and she came here in May.*

SB: And you have been here ever since?

AH: *We have been here ever since.*

SB: This is the second house you've lived in here?

AH: *Yes, this is the second house.*

SB: Uncle-ji, when you used to make food before, you said there were very few Indian people in Williams Lake. Where would you buy Indian lentils? Was there an Indian shop or...?

AH: *There was a shop in Williams Lake, we would go get everything in one trip or we would go to Vancouver.*

SB: Do you remember the name of the shop?

AH: *No, I don't remember.*

SB: A lot of people that worked in the mill had to leave it because they developed illnesses or got injured. Did you ever see this or did you develop any health problems?

AH: *No.*

SB: Was the work safe in the mills? Did you ever see an accident?

AH: *No, not really. Small accidents would happen all the time.*

SB: Big accidents or...?

AH: *No, from time to time some minor accidents. Even now, minor accidents happen in the mill. Back problems/pain, some small injuries just happen while you work.*

SB: So no big accident happened?

AH: *A big accident happened in Nanoose while I was working. A man died here.*

SB: What happened?

AH: *On the plainer there are loads like this [gestures with hands]. There is a tilt and when the loads are done the next one is placed. There was a man there like this [gestures] and he started the machine and got caught in between and he died. He was Indian.*

SB: Wow. I don't have any more questions. Do you have any other stories you would like to share?

AH: *No, I don't have anything more.*

SB: Thank you, Uncle-ji.