

## Gurbakhsh Singh Narang

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

MB: What is your name?

GN: *My name is Gurbakhsh Singh Narang.*

MB: Okay. And when were you born?

GN: *11<sup>th</sup> of August, 1931.*

MB: Where were you born?

GN: *Sidney, BC. Close to Victoria.*

MB: Okay, so whatever questions are about immigration won't apply to you because you didn't immigrate here.

GN: *No.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *My dad was.*

MB: Your dad was an immigrant.

GN: *Yes, he was here as a student.*

MB: So you've been born as a citizen here and have been that since.

GN: *[laughs] Natural born citizen.*

MB: So maybe you can tell us about your dad and his story of immigration.

GN: *He came as a student at UBC.*

MB: *Okay. When?*

GN: *In 1919.*

MB: In 1919 he came on the grounds as a student?

GN: *As a student, yeah.*

MB: So since then, he stayed in Canada?

GN: *Well, because as a student since he couldn't afford the fees of UBC and he was scared all the time of anyone grabbing him while he was working – then he went to the States, Mexico and came back. Then he went back to India in '29. 1929.*

KS: Did he finish his degree?

GN: *I don't think so. I'm not sure, yeah.*

MB: I can't ask you the immigration questions, so I'll ask you a little bit about the mill. Have you ever worked in a mill?

GN: *Yes.*

MB: When did you for the first time?

GN: *'49. 1949...December 15 I started work.*

MB: Okay. How old were you?

GN: *I was eighteen only.*

MB: Eighteen years old?

GN: *Yeah. When I came back from India.*

MB: And do you remember what the name is of the mill where you first worked?

GN: *BSNW.*

MB: BSNW?

GN: *Yes.*

MB: And how long did you work there?

GN: *I started in '49, December 15, 1950, a whole year. In 1951, they shut down the mill. Then they merged with H&R McMillan and then we transferred to Port Alberni.*

MB: So after merging, at Port Alberni you...

GN: *Yeah, it got shifted to Port Alberni.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *Because that company had other mills as well.*

MB: When did that transfer?

GN: *In '51.*

KS: Uncle, where was the first mill? The first mill from '49?

MB: The BSNW one, where was that?

GN: *The name of the owners, that was Great Central Lake.*

MB: That is the actual name of the mill?

GN: *No, no. That was the name of the place.*

MB: Of the place? Okay. And do you remember if it was Punjabi-owned or gora?

GN: *It was gora-owned.*

MB: So why did it get shut down in 1951.

GN: *They were saying that there was too much freight. The one that ships the lumber, either by truck or by train, they were saying that it was too much, we better shut down. They had other mills in Port Alberni. One mill's name was Sumas Division and the other was APD Division.*

MB: So after shutting down in 1951, they merged with H&R McMillan. And then all you workers got transferred to Port Alberni. And how long did you work there?

GN: *There I worked around...my dad came back from India in '52. I then went in '54.*

KS: India?

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: So then you worked three years because you went back in '54 to India.

GN: *Yeah, to get married. [laughs] It doesn't all come in here, does it? [Referring to recorder]*

KS: Everything goes in there.

MB: [laughs] why?

GN: *Oh, I'm just asking, dear.*

MB: So in '54 you had gone back and got married. I guess then you were 23 years old?

GN: *Yes, when I got married.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *If you want to ask my marriage date then I can tell you, too.*

MB: Do tell.

GN: *20<sup>th</sup> of March, '54.*

MB: So tell me about after your marriage.

GN: *After the marriage, after staying in India for about two years, I came back.*

MB: Okay, so till '56 you stayed there then?

GN: *Yeah, roughly.*

MB: Okay.

KS: Did you come by yourself or with Aunty?

GN: *Alone. I came back alone.*

MB: So when you came back, did you make any efforts to find work?

GN: *Right away I knew how to work. The company respected me. The next day I was on the job.*

MB: Really?

GN: *Yeah, honest!*

MB: What company hired you?

GN: *The same company.*

MB: BSNW?

GN: *No, they had merged.*

MB: Okay, so what was their new name?

GN: *McMillan.*

KS: H&R.

MB: Was H&R McMillan the full name?

GN: *Yeah. H&R.*

MB: So, do you remember the date?

GN: *When I started to work again?*

MB: When they had rehired you again after your arrival back.

GN: *I think roughly around November or December.*

MB: Of '56.

GN: *[yes]*

MB: Okay.

KS: Was this a lumber mill?

GN: *Yeah, sawmill.*

MB: So this was a sawmill?

GN: *The ones before were sawmills too.*

MB: So BSNW was also a sawmill?

GN: *Yes, sawmill.*

MB: When they merged with H&R McMillan, it was still gora-owned then?

GN: *Yes, still gora-owned.*

MB: So you got rehired around December of 1956. How long did you work there for then?

GN: *Around 2-3 years, then I had gone back to India.*

MB: Why did you go back to India?

GN: *My wife was there. My mom was there.*

KS: When you came back after marriage by yourself, was it by choice or was it not allowed?

GN: *No, no, it was by choice. Because I'm Canadian-born, nobody can stop me.*

KS: No, no. Was Aunty not allowed to come with you or did you come alone by choice?

GN: *I came by my choice.*

KS: Alone?

GN: *Alone.*

MB: So 2-3 years passed and you went back in 1959? Or '58, or '59?

GN: *Paramjeet was born in '58 ... yeah.*

MB: Or late '57?

GN: *Yes, in '57 I came back.*

MB: So maybe you worked 1-2 years there as opposed to 2-3.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: You said you went back in '57. How long did you stay back in India for before coming back again?

GN: *Around 2 years. Roughly 2 years, then 2, yeah.*

MB: And when you came back, did all of you come back? To Canada.

GN: *No, even then I came back alone.*

MB: Even then, alone?

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: And what year was that?

GN: *I came back in '62....*

MB: And you had one child at that point?

GN: *Yeah, I had my eldest daughter.*

MB: So your wife and your child were in India when you came back?

GN: *In India, yes.*

MB: Okay. So tell me about your arrival back – like of finding work.

GN: *Right away.*

MB: The same company?

GN: *Yes, that same company.*

MB: [laughs] So in 1962 H&R rehired you again?

GN: *Yeah. Excuse me.*

MB: [yes]

GN: *Then there was a shortage of work. Then I went to the Williams Lake and I worked about 15 weeks there. I didn't like that area so I came back. [laughs]*

MB: Oh, okay.

GN: *Back to my – we have a house in Port Alberni. Our own house. So I came back. Then...*

KS: You didn't like that area, that's why you came back.

GN: *No, no, no. The Native people were being really difficult towards us.*

MB: So there was a shortage of work here, that's why you went to Williams Lake for the first time?

GN: *Yeah, yeah. For the first time.*

MB: And you spent 15 weeks there.

GN: *Yes, yes.*

MB: And because you didn't like it, you came back to Port Alberni.

GN: *Yes, back to Port Alberni.*

KS: You didn't like the area, or was it because people were being difficult?

GN: *The Native people were being difficult towards us. In 1 room, there would be 10 men. This is where people slept – our people. The washrooms were made outside.*

KS: By 'our people' you mean Punjabi people?

GN: *Punjabi people. If this wasn't here (referring to recorder) then I'd tell you the whole story, just turn this off. Over there, our people, please forgive me, would keep separate toilet paper even. Separate toilet paper!*

MB: Why?

GN: *Just because they were too cheap. When I came, my uncle was there, who I came to, and on the weekend we went to go get groceries. In the shopping cart I put chicken and all kinds of meat. There was another man there who was living with my uncle – his name Jagvir Singh. He said "your nephew (Bhateejja) is living freely – I can't afford his expenses." I said to him, "Mister, you have a free meal today. Thank you very much. I don't want you to pay me any money. I'm sorry I can't survive without eating." You know. I don't want to say that man's name, he'll say I mentioned him.*

KS: Was it a gora or apna?

GN: *Apna, it was apna.*

KS: We want to have your full story Uncle, but if you feel as though there are parts that you don't want included in it, we can take it out too. You can trust us and tell us anything.

GN: *No, no, I trust you. Then I just didn't stay there. The mill there was good, no doubt in it. But our people there were like knives to each other. My job there at Williams Lake, it was a really easy job. But our – there were 2 more my age, the sons of my Chacha and Taya. There wasn't any union there. Go and give a gora a bottle and you moved ahead to my job and move me elsewhere to a different job.*

KS: Apney, Punjabi people?

GN: *Punjabi, yeah.*

MB: So you were treated unfairly?

GN: *Yes, I was treated unfairly. If you really want to know the truth, I had prayed to God that I wouldn't have to come back and work there again. Forget about working – I haven't even gone back to see where Williams Lake is since then! Now it is established and there are two temples there too, there is everything, but I haven't gone back there since then. God had heard my prayers so much that I haven't gone back there since then.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: So you only worked there 15 weeks and due to the shortage of work, was everything still alright with H&R where they'd consider hiring you again?

GN: *No, dear, I'll tell you. I went from there to New Westminster to a friend. Then I had started getting UIC, which we call Unemployment now. Then I got a call from my family in India saying come back. My dad was here and so was my brother but nobody wanted to go back. So I figured, let's go. I had to go because my children were there and my house situation that was established was a little upset.*

KS: So after spending 15 weeks in Williams Lake, you then went to New Westminster.

GN: *Yeah, I spent about a month there, then I went to Mission. Oh, yes, excuse me! After Williams Lake, I went to Mission.*

MB: After Williams Lake or after New Westminster?

GN: *Yes. In New Westminster I had stayed with my friend for a month.*



KS: Okay, I'll ask again. You worked in Williams Lake for 15 weeks then you worked at New Westminster for 1 week.

MB/GN: *No, no.*

MB: 1 month. Unemployment. Then after that 1 month you went to Mission.

GN: *Yes, then I went to Mission. There I found work at the company Wonnoc Lumber.*

MB: Wonnoc Lumber?

GN: *Yes, that was a company, also sawmill.*

MB: And that was gora-owned?

GN: *Yes, gora-owned.*

MB: At this point you hadn't gone back to India yet, right?

GN: *No, I was in Mission then.*

MB: And how long did you work at Wonnoc Lumber?

GN: *One month.*

MB: Then?

GN: *Then I had gotten that message from India so I quit my job and went back.*

MB: Okay. Then how long did you stay in India for?

GN: *In India I... in '62 I came back.*

MB: You had said that in '62 you came back and there was a shortage of work. Had 1 year passed, or is this about '64?

GN: *I came back in '62 ... '63.*

MB: Okay. India.

GN: *From India.*

MB: So after just one year.

GN: *Yes, then I came back. Because whatever establishment that had to be done there, I did it and then I came. And then I ...*

KS: In '62 you came back, then?

MB: No, he's right. It's fine. Okay then you went back to India in '63 after just one year.

GN: *Yes.*

MB: And how long did you stay in India then when you went?

GN: *Around a year.*

MB: Okay. And you came back again then in '64 and '65.

GN: *No, no. In '63 I began working in Longshore in Port Alberni as a part-time worker. Where the ships load and unload, you may have seen it. Then afterwards, me and a gora who were working in the same gang, I told him that I want to work in plywood. They then called me for an interview. I said "take me too, I don't have a ride." He said "let's go." We went there where you see the 25 year old photos. He talked to the gora, Ray Morse, who was the person. He said "what can I do for you?" and I said that I'm looking for a job, same thing. He said "fill out the application." I said "even before you guys just throw them in the garbage can. I come every week or two and not this time!" I filled out the application and he said to come work at 4 o'clock. [Laughs] Honest! I am telling you my story, right.*

MB: At Longshore?

GN: *No, plywood plant. Longshore is where I was part-time on the spare board.*

MB: Spare board was your job title?

GN: *Yes.*

MB: And what does he do?

GN: *He loads the lumber and plywood into the ships.*

MB: And how long did you work part-time at Longshore Lumber then?

GN: *I would say around a year or year and a half.*

MB: And in what year did you start at plywood plant?

GN: *'65. 5<sup>th</sup> of July.*

MB: And what was your job there?

GN: *There? Dry feeder.*

MB: Dry feeder? And what does a dry feeder do?

GN: *What wood comes piece by piece along the rows, they were 300 ft long. Along the sides they would get dry – first it would be wet on this side. Where I was working there feeding, there used to be three men, then two, and then they created two automatic machines and I had been left all alone.*

MB: Was plywood plant sawmill?

GN: *No, plywood, they would make veneers from the logs. They make veneers.*

KS: What was the name, plywood plant? Or is that just the name?

GN: *It was a company of here.*

KS: No, what was the name?

GN: *That was the division – Plywood Division.*

KS: No, what was the name of the company?

GN: *Weyerhaeuser*

MB: Weyerhaeuser?

KS: Yeah, Weyerhaeuser. Okay, so here you were a dry feeder. And was this too gora-owned?

GN: *This was also gora-owned.*

MB: Then what did you do after that? Sorry, how long did you work there first?

GN: *Up till '90.*

MB: Till '90?

GN: *Yes. Then they shut down because they were losing money.*

MB: So you worked there for 25 years.

GN: *Yes, I have a photo there for the 25 years [laughs].*

MB: Yeah. So why were they shutting down, you said?

GN: *They were saying that the company was losing money.*

MB: In 1990?

GN: *[yes]*

MB: Then what did you do?

GN: *Then I had taken early retirement. Full pension, everything.*

MB: And in all this time, I think the conversation just didn't continue there, but what about your wife and your children? All your family?

GN: *They had come from India in '65. On the 12<sup>th</sup> of December.*

MB: And it was one child?

GN: *No, three. 2 daughters and 1 son.*

MB: So in '65 you were at plywood plant by then and they were with you in all the 25 years that you had spent there.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: So you had gotten your early retirement in 1990 after doing 25 years there.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: Were there any other mills? Or were these just the ones that I have recorded from you.

GN: *Yeah, first I was at Great Central, which got shut down and they had transferred us to Port Alberni.*

MB: *Yeah, yeah. Great Central?*

GN: *Great Central Lake. Then I came here and I began working in Sumas Division – that was sawmill too.*

MB: Sumas Division in what year?

GN: *In the same year that they had shifted us.*

MB: Right. Right. That was the name of the company.

GN: *Yeah. Sumas was the division. The company was the same. H&R McMillan and Blodel.*

MB: I think that was all there was. Now I've just gotten all of your information about what mills you worked at and in what year. Now I will ask you about how you first found work in the mill. Such as how you came to know that there was work in the mill.

GN: *At Great Central Lake, my Chacha was living there and he had received me from Vancouver at the railway station CNR. When I came from India from Calcutta to Hong Kong by ship, Hong Kong to San Francisco by ship, then an overnight stay at San Francisco to catch the train and then I came to Vancouver. My uncle had known that I was coming by train to the CNR Railway station in Vancouver and he had come to take me from there. Then we went to Great Central Lake, where he was living and working. Then on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, I got a stamp from White Rock to enter Canada and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of December I began working.*

KS: In what year?

GN: '49.

KS: The 26<sup>th</sup> of November?

MB: To enter Canada?

GN: *Yeah, because I crossed the border from America to Canada, right.*

MB: Oh, so before starting for the very first time you were in India?

GN: *Yes, yes. India is where I came from.*

MB: And by ship you travelled to India?

GN: *By ship.*

MB: And by ship you came back.

GN: *Yes, we were kids then when Dad had first taken us. And when I came back in '49, I had come by ship.*

MB: Okay.

KS: 26<sup>th</sup> of November, 1949.

GN: *Yes, I've got a stamp here from White Rock.*

MB: So your Chacha met you and set you up and then you started working at Great Central Lake?

GN: *Yeah. Oh, yeah.*

MB: So you found a job through family connections?

GN: *Yeah.*

KS: Uncle, in what year had your dad first taken you to India?

GN: *In '34 or '35. Because here in that time they had called it a recession – the dirty thirties. Because there was so much poverty – it was unbelievable. Roti was hard – it was hard to the point where to find roti, some would even come home hungry and go to sleep. Where my dad was, he was a handyman that ran planer machines. And there he became a foreman. And some who he called his close friends, he even invited them over there – for everyone should eat roti happily.*

MB: So your dad also worked in the mill?

GN: *Oh, yeah. He even sold wood by his truck.*

MB: Oh...did you try finding work elsewhere or did you know that the mill would be your job?

GN: *When... One minute, let me take my memory back ... In Port Alberni when I worked, there was also a TESL Sawmill in which I also worked.*

MB: Where?

GN: *In Port Alberni. Tasiz sawmill. Tasiz Company.*

MB: T-A...what is the spelling?

GN: *Tasiz. T-A-S-I; it was something like that, dear.*

MB: Tasiz?

GN: *Yes, sawmill.*

MB: And when was that?

GN: *That was in Port Alberni.*

MB: But what year?

GN: *... one minute... [inaudible] there were two shifts going and then I took one shift. Then we had come to know that Campbell River, one mill had two shifts going...then 2-4 of us got in a car and went there.*

KS: From Port Alberni?

GN: *Yes, to Campbell River. There was me, my brother, and another boy, Gurdev. He had his sleeves raised and showed his muscles. I went and talked in person, face-to-face. They had said for me to come work at night, there isn't any work for the other two. I said [laughs], whoever shows off, never.*

MB: What year was this where you worked at Tasiz, then went to Campbell?

GN: *These are events from around '62 or roughly '63. '63.*

MB: Maybe when you came back after leaving your wife and child in India? From that time?

GN: *They were in India still at that time.*

MB: Yes, you came back in '62, so is it after that?

GN: *It is after that, dear.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *Then I worked there for a few weeks and they closed the shift. I was staying in a hotel there in Campbell River.*

MB: What was your job at Campbell River?

GN: *On the Green chain.*

MB: Green chain puller?

GN: *[yes]*

MB: And what does a Green chain puller do?

GN: *They pull the lumber; they pile it up into loads.*

MB: And what was your job at Tasiz?

GN: *At Tasiz I had the same job, here I was a trimmer, at Tasiz.*

MB: And how long did you work at Campbell River?

GN: *I'd say about a month or a month and a half, that's all.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *Because they had decreased one shift. Then I came back to Port Alberni, we had a house there. Then when I came back, Tasiz mill had resumed running the other shift, a planer mill. The superintendent there, he was a really nice guy, Howard Smith was his name and he helped me quite a lot. When the planer mill began running and there were about 5-7 apney people unemployed here and they all went running to that mill so they'd get a job. The superintendent...his name Howard Smith said to go to the planer mill. He said, "Hey Baggit's son!" He used to call my dad Baggit; his name was Bhagat Singh. He said to go ahead to that trim. The other people there that were looking to work wanted to blow themselves up – they were like, "how did Howard Smith give Gurbakhsh work right away?" The other men stood unemployed but Howard Smith knew what my background was and how much of a hard worker I am. That's how it was, yeah. Then since I wasn't working at Longshore, I began working at plywood in '65.*

MB: What kind of mill was Campbell River?

GN: *It was sawmill, dear.*

MB: And Tasiz?

GN: *Tasiz was also sawmill.*

MB: Your first job at BSNW, that was in '49, what was your job there?

GN: *Green chain. I worked on the green chain.*

MB: Okay, and when you merged and became H&R, what did you do there?

GN: *There I was at the green chain too.*

MB: Okay. When you began working at Williams Lake, what were you there?

GN: *Green chain. [laughs]*

MB: Green chain. And when H&R rehired you, were you at the green chain yet again?

GN: *Yeah, first I was at the green chain and then I worked as a jump roll.*

MB: Jump roll?

GN: *Yeah. Separating the good and the bad lumber and letting it go.*

MB: Oh, okay.

GN: *Just like grading.*

MB: Okay. And what was your job at Wonnoc Lumber?

GN: *Green chain.*

MB: And at Longshore in Port Alberni you were a spare-board man and at plywood plant Weyerhaeuser you were a dry feeder.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: Okay. Now I will ask you about your earliest memories of working in the mill when you first began working at the age of eighteen.

GN: *What memories are there to have? What memories does “mzdoor” man have?*

KS: Whatever good or bad experiences you had.

GN: *The experiences are that there was a cookhouse and a bunkhouse in which we lived in. And in the morning when we woke up, whoever had to go to work had gone but our cook was always there – his name was Bhai Gurbachan Singh, an elderly man. After eating our roti and everything, I was with him too. It was about a half mile distance and I’d go there to see how they work.*

KS: Before finding work?

GN: *Before. During the 5-10 spare days I had, I’d go to see how they pull the lumber and one man would tell me how to differentiate between the different woods like cedar, hemlock and fir. From there I remembered to keep an eye out. There was a man named Bhaag Singh there from a Duabi village who had a daughter living in America. He was going to go visit her during Christmas time. And when he was going to go, the personnel manager, because Gurbachan Singh was the cook there and he had taken me to the office, and he said he needs at least 30 men for him to cook otherwise to give the young men work. They said Gurbachan, like the gorey pronounce, Bhai Bhaag has gone to America and in his place they put me on the green chain. Bhai Bhaag Singh came back after around a month and they said that I am laid off. With however much I knew, I said thank you and left. Then after that, around an hour later, they found out that a man who works there had gotten sick. The mill would run from 7 at night to 5-6 in the morning. They said Mr. Basawa Singh, you better go on that dry chain; I said alright. After that, I just worked very hard continuously.*

KS: Were there mostly apney working there?

GN: *They were apney mostly. There were roughly up to 30 people living in the bunkhouse and cookhouse.*

MB: Were the bunkhouse and cookhouse there for those who worked in the mill to live in?

GN: *Yes, it was for them. There were rooms for them.*

MB: And was it paid for? In other words, did they deduct it from their paycheque for the cost of rent?

GB: *Yes, for the cost of rent. Back then, the cost of rent for a room was \$3.50 [laughs] per month.*

MB: Oh! Wow! [laughs]

KS: And the gorey were also working then?

GN: *The gorey had separate bunkhouses and the Chinese did too.*

MB: Oh, okay.



KS: Others were working too then. Tell us more about the others. One was a bunkhouse for 30 Punjabi people. What about the rest?

GN: *The Chinese had two bunkhouses. The gorey had two bunkhouses.*

KS: Everyone was working in that mill.

GN: *Everyone was working there.*

KS: Was the environment and treatment towards one another okay?

GN: *Everyone loved each other over there.*

KS: Towards everyone?

GN: *Oh, yes. I had never seen anyone fighting with one another. That's how much it was.*

MB: Was it like that in every mill or just at H&R?

GN: *No, I'm telling you just about Great Central Lake.*

MB: Oh, okay.

KS: What about the other mills?

GN: *I never saw it everywhere.*

KS: No, I mean whatever mill you worked at. Were the conditions good?

GN: *Yes, yes, the conditions remained good. It was just Williams Lake where the people were difficult and everyone was their own cook. And he said if I say it then you will find work and so he went straight to the personnel to talk for me; they said "you have a job." Then that evening, where you go to punch your cards, I ran into a man. He said, "How did you find work here" and I said, "A gora has kept me and I've started." He said, "No, you can't work here." I said, "Oh, yeah?" He said, "You can't work here." When he began showing me attitude, he had a big knife, that man.*

KS: Who was that man? An apna?

GN: *An apna. He was living here in Delta with his sister. I was wearing safety shoes. I slowly untied my laces and took off my shoe. I told him that if he cuts me then I will hit him back with this steel shoe. I had to protect myself after all. Another man there came and asked, "Gurbakhsh Singh, why are you fighting?" I said, "You ask him why he is giving me so much attitude if I have found work." Their reason, for them was for us to remain as their cooks and get the same amount of money. In that one room with my Chacha, if I tell you the truth, there were seven men. Seven men! There was a small little board on which we made our rotis. Everyone was making their own rotis as opposed to working together.*

KS: Were there only Punjabis at Williams Lake?

GN: *There were only Punjabis there in the mills mostly.*

KS: In them all?

GN: *In all.*

MB: And was it gora-owned?

GN: *Yes, the mill was gora-owned.*

KS: Was the treatment from the white's okay? The treatment from the owners?

GN: *Yes, they were good but we were the ones who weren't okay with one another. Because one wouldn't find work here in BC, so everyone was going there towards Williams Lake. There were so many little mills there. It was a really awful time for the apney; it was an awful time to live.*

MB: What were the advantages of working in the mill?

GN: *There was income [laughs] that's all there was – to make some money and support your mother, father or children back at home.*

KS: Were all the mills that you worked at of union or were there a few non-union?

GN: *The first at Central Lake and Port Alberni ones were all union ones and Tasiz was union too. The Williams Lake one was run on a non-union basis.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *The Wonnoc Mill that I worked at was union too.*

KS: Did you see any advantages of working at a mill that had a union?

GN: *Absolutely. Many!*

MB: What were the advantages?

GN: *Whenever you had established and showed others that you are a working man who could do the work, no other man could come along and push you aside just by bribing the foreman with a bottle.*

MB: Okay, so it was fair.

GN: *Yes, it was fair, there is no doubt about that. It was unfair wherever there wasn't a union.*

MB: What unfair treatment was that? Like...

GN: *Just there was a lot of pushing around. You see an easy job, give the foreman a bottle, and there you go. You would get an easy job and be set.*

KS: Were the foremen gorey or apney?

GN: *They were gorey.*

KS: And by getting a bottle, they'd agree?

GN: *My... dear, in those times it was awful. The pay was only two or three dollars.*

KS: No, the gorey who were foremen, they'd take a bottle and be in agreement.

GN: *Well, it has happened to me! Because when I had begun working at Williams Lake, I was working in the area where they do the peeling of the logs with a saw. Then came along a 'kent' that was 6 inches long and when I was about to throw away the kent, it got caught in my legs. It was me and the kent like this. A kent is like a 12x12 or 16x16, really big and heavy wood. I, dear, put the ruler aside and my hat down and the foreman said what's wrong. I said, "I am a family man but I don't want to die here." I said, "If I had fallen in front of the saw, I would've gotten cut up and died." He said, "Why don't you just work the rest of the night," and I said, "Mister, I'm not going to work a minute longer here. And you're saying the rest of the night." I... dear, he put some other man in my place and had me doing the tail-ager work. Tail-ager means that the saws are going and one man is working on it – whatever bad piece there is gets tossed away and the good ones continue going. The story I told you about the two brothers and the bottle that is what happened to me. They came and took my place within the third day and I got placed again at another difficult job. I said now "I'm just not going to do it, I'm just not going to come back here again."*

MB: So, there was no consistency.

GN: *There wasn't.*

KS: At Williams Lake, right?

GN: *Yes, at Williams Lake.*

MB: Was that the only non-union one? In all the mills that you worked at, was that the only non-union one?

GN: *Yes, the Williams Lake one was non-union.*

MB: Okay.

GN: *Because at night the apney people would come in a truckload and come and initiate fights with one another.*

KS: Tell me one thing. Did the people working in the mills have some sense of community with one another? Like, did they have a good social atmosphere or community? In those days, in that time.

GN: *Look, we.... In those days, our people were mostly working in sawmills. Wherever there was a grandfather working, there was his son, and there was the grandson. It was that much. It was after in the '70s when visitors started coming that there had begun to improvement for the apney in BC. The apney people had begun going to the mines or here or there.*

MB: What kind of improvements came about?

GN: *Improvements for health, for everything, and even for living. The first house that we had in Port Alberni, 2 bedrooms and a kitchen, full basement, was \$3500. When we used to live with others, it used to cost ten dollars per head for rent.*

KS: Now tell us the story about you losing your hearing from working at the mill.

GN: *There is a lay-up line coming. Two men here, two men there...there are eight men working on the lay-up line. On one lay-up line there is a supervisor working and his helper. And when they came to me, what I had was a button. My saw was cutting 8 ¼ length and 4 ¼ ft. width. So when it was cut, there would be a full 8 ft of plywood sheet remaining. That wood kept getting piled up and piled up. The heavy sheet would get placed in a pile of 25-30 sheets and the slow ones would get many placed since there was a bigger gap. And so when I'd run, I'd press the button, the rows would lead outside and my forklift would come up. All of that is what made me lose my hearing.*

MB: (to Kusum) any last questions? It's wrapping up. If you want to say anything else Uncle, you can, as we have asked all of the questions.

GN: *No, no, go ahead and ask what you want.*

MB: Maybe if you want to tell us a little bit about what the nature of living in Canada was like during the years that you worked in the mill.

GN: *Living in Canada was just that, well some had come from poverty, so it was to make some money and send it back home. When I was working in Central Lake, for the first year I was pretty unaware. When I had come to know about work, when the foreman had said that they needed men, they hired me [laughs] just by giving them one drink. Then I roughly, well I had taken a loan from India, I won't lie. The week would have around 12 hours for the day shift and for the afternoon shift one would have to do 8 hours in the day and 8 hours at night and work 16 hours. So we started making some money. To this day, I still have the receipts from 1950 from when I was sending money back to my mom and dad.*

MB: Do you still have those receipts?

GN: *Yes, yes, I have them. They must be here somewhere.*

MB: So if you have them, we'll scan them. Well, that's all there was to our interview. Thank you for sitting with us.

GN: *No worries, thank you dear.*

## **Part 2 – To clarify Gurbakhsh's immigration story in depth**

MB: So, where were you born?

GN: *Sidney, BC.*

MB: Where were you raised?

GN: *In India.*

MB: In India?

GN: *Yes.*

MB: And when did you go to India?

GN: *In 1935.*

MB: How old were you?

GN: *4 years old.*

MB: 4 years old? How many years did you live in India?

GN: *Up to '49. 14 years.*

MB: 14 years. So you were raised there. And over there you...?

GN: *Got my education.*

MB: Got your education...grade 5 or 6?

GN: *Up to 10.*

MB: Completed up to grade 10. And who raised you there?

GN: *Mom and dad.*

MB: Mom and dad. Alright. And when did you come back to Canada after that?

GN: *'49.*

MB: In '49. How old were you?

GN: *Eighteen.*

MB: Eighteen. So basically you saw Canada for the first time again when you immigrated back.

GN: *Yes, yes.*

MB: Your status was still citizen though.

GN: *Yes.*

MB: When you saw Canada for the first time in 14 years, how did you think it was? Like the environment?

GN: *A surprise.*

MB: A surprise? What things had surprised you?

GN: *Just how clean it is and how people respect one another, how it is and how it isn't.*

MB: What else were you first impressions?

GN: *It was just that when my Uncle picked me up from the CNR Railway, we went to Great Central Lake. I was free for 10-15 days and then I had begun working, that's it. Then it became all about making money.*

KS: My question was why did you go to India at the age of 3 or 4?

GN: *There had been a recession here which they called 'The Dirty Thirties.'*

MB: Oh, that's what you were talking about earlier.

GN: *Yeah.*

MB: So your mom and dad packed everything up and went to India then?

GN: *Yes, back to India.*

MB: Because the recession here were really awful here.

GN: *It was really awful.*

MB: Okay. Was it just you at the time or did you have any brothers or sisters?

GN: *I had one sister.*

MB: Older sister?

GN: *Younger.*

MB: Younger sister. Okay. So, your mom, dad, and sister, all three of you – all four of you, went back to India.

GN: *All four of us, yes.*

MB: Because the recession was bad here.

GN: *Yes.*

MB: Can you tell me a little bit about the recession?

GN: *I don't remember much, dear. I only heard things from my dad. It was really difficult to earn enough for roti. Because my dad had told me that when they lived in Victoria, he had bought a cow for \$5 from someone. They would even sell the milk of it to the workers there just for the sake of making a living.*

MB: So when you came back to Canada in '49, the recession had been over.

GN: *Way over.*

MB: So, in comparison, how did your dad feel the change in Canada with regards to the economic status?

GN: *Well, actually, dear, the story of my dad is a really long one. He came as a student and they deported him because he came as a student and was working here. They said to put some action to him, you know. But when I came back, I sent a little money and had done everything for my dad. He came on... 15<sup>th</sup> of June, 1952.*

MB: Oh, so you were alone when you came here at the age of eighteen.

KS: In '49 you came alone.

MB: In '49 you came alone by...plane or...?

GN: *By ship.*

MB: By ship.

GN: *Calcutta.*

KS: What was the name of the ship?

GN: *The ship that came from Calcutta was called Sardana – up to Hong Kong. Calcutta, Rangoor, Singapore, Hong Kong. There I stayed for 13 days. There was a ship coming there from San Francisco on President Line – that was the name of their ship's line. General Gordan was the name of the ship that I traveled on and I also had other*

*company with me, at least 40-50 apney men or women from Hong Kong with me. That was a military ship – one in which they used during fights, that was the ship. I think it was \$235, something like that, for the ticket.*

MB: You said there were 50 men on the ship?

GN: *Oh yeah, gorey or other nationalities – it was a really big ship!*

MB: So gorey, Chinese, or apney...

GN: *Chinese or apney. Yeah.*

MB: Was anyone alongside you or was it just you by yourself?

GN: *No, no. The 40-50 men [passengers] that I told you about, at least 30 were apney. Indian.*

MB: Oh, okay. So they knew you then.

GN: *Oh yeah, totally. Totally. Just by being friendly, sitting on the deck and playing cards with one another [laughs].*

MB: (to Kusum) do you have any other questions about that or anything that I might have missed?

KS: Did your dad come alone in '52 then or was your mom also with him?

GN: *Alone. Alone.*

KS: I'm asking you that over and over again because in that time there was a trend for men to be coming by themselves.

GN: *No, that was in the earlier times!*

KS: Not in your time?

GN: *No, there wasn't then.*

KS: So women were allowed.

GN: *They were allowed. My dad had a permit and my mom also had a permit for her to come. But because my mother and my sister were alone there, she said, "I'm not coming."*

KS: So she didn't come by her own choice.

GN: *Yes, by her own choice. She said, "I'm not coming. If you want to come back then you can"*

MB: And after you, your little brother, he...?

GN: *Yes, he came after me in '53.*

MB: He came in '53.

GN: *Yes, he came on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, '53.*

KS: ... your sister too?

GN: *My sister... well she was firstly Canadian born. And my other sister had gotten married in India. So my brother had applied for them to come so they had come – her, her husband, and their kids.*

MB: ... So when did your mom come from India? Since your dad came by himself and your brother did too.

GN: *Then my dad had gone back to India. He had passed away there in '72. In... '72, yeah. Because Kama was born in the April of '72 and dad's death had happened then too.*

MB: Oh, okay.

GN: *So then I went to India in May and mom's passport had been made.*

KS: Otherwise, was your Canadian life good?

GN: *It has been really good.*

KS: No experience of any sort?

GN: *No, I didn't have any problems because money was being made and all my sorrows had been forgotten. You know...if hurt comes later, it doesn't get forgotten. If after hurt you find comfort, then the past gets forgotten. This was my situation.*

MB: Why didn't you come sooner? Why did it take fourteen years till you came back because I suppose, the recession must've been long over.

GN: *Dear, the recession may have been over but what work would a fourteen year old boy do? In the mills you wouldn't find work 16-18 years old anyway unless you were healthy.*

MB: So did you know before coming to Canada, did you know that you'd be working in the mills?

GN: *Absolutely. I knew that my Chacha was there and slowly I'd stay there and then we'd see.*

MB: So, you were intentional about waiting for your age before you came?

GN: *My age, no. My dad wasn't happy with me coming out here. To him, it was that I was still young, what I would do by coming here. Then I started compelling my mom by saying "Our living situation is poor, please let me go!"*

MB: Oh, okay.

GN: *So my mother pushed everything and by collecting money here and there, we "karaya banakey," (got a loan) and yeah.*

MB: Okay.

**End of interview.**