

Rajinder Singh Gill

Transcription Interview Date: November 20, 2014

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

MB: What is your name?

RG: *My name is Rajinder Singh Gill.*

MB: When were you born?

RG: *I was born on August 28, 1950.*

MB: And where were you born? In what village?

RG: *In Dhudike.*

MB: In what district?

RG: *The district then used to be Ferozpur.*

MB: Okay. When was the first time you immigrated to Canada?

RG: *In 1964.*

MB: And what is your status right now? Are you a citizen?

RG: *I am a citizen. Back then after one year one would become a citizen.*

MB: Okay. And when you came, what was your status? On what basis did you come? By marriage? By sponsor? Family class...point system?

RG: *Before me there was my grandfather here already. In 1959 my father was here. Then in 1963 my dad went to India. For me, he brought me with him here in 1964. Then after one year...I came in '64, in '65 I got my citizenship. Back then one used to get it after a year.*

MB: So you came here on the basis of family then, with your dad.

RG: *Yes, yes.*

MB: Okay. Now I will be asking you about your immigration story. Tell me about when you first came to Canada and what the conditions was like.

RG: *The conditions then were that I was fourteen years old.*

MB: Yes.

RG: *Then for a little bit I went to school. After that I...I didn't like school, well, because even in India I didn't like school.*

MB: [laughs]

RG: *Even there I didn't have much education. Here, I didn't like it very much because then if there were any East-Indians in school it would only be one or two, otherwise there wouldn't be. So then after that I began working. I worked here or I worked there.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *And then I began working in the mill.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *In '67 I began working in the mill; I was seventeen years old.*

MB: Okay. And what was the mill that you remember working at?

RG: *Well, one was Topley, one where Uncle and I were working together.*

MB: Topley?

RG: *Topley. It in by Prince George near the Burns Lake area. Where there is a small Topley town, there is a town named Houston. There we used to work in the mill.*

MB: So, the first mill you worked at was Topley and you were seventeen years old.

RG: *Yes.*

MB: And what year was that?

RG: *It was '67. In '68 I began working at Mackenzie Mill.*

MB: Okay. And after that?

RG: *In '68 I was working in the mill. There I worked 4-5 years. There I did many different types of jobs.*

MB: What kinds of jobs?

RG: *I actually did work as a planer feed.*

MB: Yes?

RG: *Planer feed; the one in which wood goes through. It planes, as in this will be rough.*

MB: Oh, okay. In the mill?

RG: *In the mill. I also did trimming.*

MB: Okay. What does a trimmer do?

RG: *A trimmer does...for instance the size of the wood, like there is a set length for to be however long like 10 ft. or 8 ft. or 12 ft.... A trimmer is like that.*

MB: So were these your jobs? Planer feed and trimmer man?

RG: *Yes, there were different jobs, you know, like work two months here then do the next thing. Then I began working the carry; a carry is one that holds the lumber.*

MB: Yeah.

RG: *Then I worked the forklift for three years. I was a forklift driver.*

MB: You said you worked at Topley and at Mackenzie.

RG: *Yes.*

MB: Are there any other mills that you worked at, or was it only these two?

RG: *Yes, I worked here at Fort Langley, there was a MacDonald Cedar where I worked about 17 years.*

MB: What years?

RG: *Here I started at 1986...*

MB: Yes.

RG: *And worked till '97. At MacDonald Cedar in Fort Langley.*

MB: Okay.

RG: *Then after that the mill had closed and I went to Vancouver at Canadian White Pine on Marine Drive; there was a mill there. Where there is Boundary and Main and Marine Drive, on the right hand side. At that mill I work 3-4 years. That mill is closed now and there are now apartments built there.*

MB: This mill you just said, Canadian White Pine...

RG: *Is in Vancouver.*

MB: This you worked at when MacDonald Cedar had shut down.

RG: *After '97. After '97.*

B: So 1998.

RG: *Yes from '98 on.*

MB: How many years here? You said three?

RG: *Yes, just three years.*

MB: Okay. And in that time that was in between...in 1967 you said Mackenzie but in 1968 it was MacDonald Cedar...in between?

RG: *I worked some other places. One place I got laid off so I went here or I went there. I worked in the cannery for some time and other places.*

MB: Oh, okay. So labour jobs?

RG: *Labour jobs, labour jobs. Yes.*

MB: Okay. What kinds of mills were the ones that you worked at? Sawmills? Shingle?

RG: *There were sawmills and planer mills too. All different ones.*

MB: All different kinds?

RG: Yes.

MB: Okay. And how did you find work in the mill?

RG: *Back then it was very easy to find work.*

MB: Oh, okay.

RG: *Then there was a demand and there were many mills. And...one would find work. Now, one can't find work. The mills have lessened and now with trucking, many have found work elsewhere.*

MB: Okay. Did someone else find this job for you or did someone else? What is the story behind you finding your first job at the mill?

RG: *The first time, it was my uncle Mohinder who just left. My father said to go to school, but I didn't want to, I want to work. He said, well if you want to work then come join us son, we have plenty of work. So I first began there. So then I on my own... you know, I became a teenager of 18-20 years old, and began finding work on my own.*

MB: Yes. So in other words, before you came to Canada, in India you knew you'd be working or no?

RG: *No, no. Back then I was just a kid. At fourteen years old what do you know.*

MB: Yes, yes.

RG: *Back then it was just that I wanted to come to Canada.*

MB: Come to Canada.

RG: *Back then I didn't know anything about mills here. What's the need in lying, when really... you know...I just didn't know.*

MB: Yes. Did you try looking for jobs elsewhere or were mills...

RG: *No, that's all. The mill had closed and I retired at 55. It has been ten years now. I had taken early retirement at 55 and now I am free.*

MB: Yes. But back in the early days when you were job-searching, did you try looking anywhere else or was the focus on mills?

RG: *Back then I didn't have any education and I had found work; I was getting money, I was getting my cheque. Back then the pay was around two dollars and sixteen cents.*

MB: What are your earliest memories of working in the mills?

RG: *Memories...well, there's so many, I remember them all! [laughs]*

MB: Well, for instance, the first time you began working. Tell us about how you thought the work was.

RG: *I worked very happily in the mill. I have very good memories because I was young and however much work I got, I did it.*

MB: Yes.

RG: *I also loaded box cars. And I did lots of work in the mill.*

MB: Yes. And when you first began working in the mill, you said you did many jobs. Some were of trimming, some of?

RG: *Well, wherever they needed anyone, they put them there.*

MB: Yes.

RG: *There, for example if you need to put stencils or stamps on the board. Wherever there was a need for work, since I was young, we'd say that they'd grab me by the ear and put me somewhere and I'd say "okay, Uncle!"*

MB: Yes.

RB: *You know...*

MB: Tell me about a day in your life of working in the mill. How it ends and how it begins. Tell me about how your day goes.

RG: *In the mill it's...well, even here, if one is working in the cannery...once they place you somewhere, you just do the work. And that...well what more can I say than that.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *Well, maybe if you explain once again what you're trying to ask me I can answer better.*

MB: Yes. Okay, I...

RG: *Like if you word the question different then give me an idea of what it is.*

MB: So just tell me like this...what was the treatment towards you? Because as you had mentioned earlier, when you came for the very first time there were not very many apney. So if you can tell me about that, please do. About the difference.

RG: *Back then, there just weren't very many apney.*

MB: Yes.

RG: *And the rest...the work was hard—it was hard, but you'd find work in the mill. And there, whatever men there were, they'd said "come here boy, you come work with me"...right? And I'd do it. To them, it was that he's young, he'll work with me and I can tell him to do this or to do that.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *They'd say, "Well you're free now, go get us the sticks."*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *They would...well they'd say it and they'd be older, so I kept working with them. I stayed happy working with all the older man there.*

MB: Yes. You said, one minute earlier that some things were hard. Can you tell me a little bit about what was difficult for you?

RG: *The hard part was that once you start a different job...*

MB: Yes.

RG: *One gets a little nervous, whatever it is you're doing. But after working for a little bit, one gets used to it, whether you look away and work, it becomes easier.*

MB: And what advantages did you see from working in the mill? Advantages.

RG: *The advantage was that you'd be making money and you'd be working.*

MB: What were the advantages over working at different jobs though?

RG: *The advantage there was that the pay was higher.*

MB: Okay. So, financially speaking you'd be better off by working in the mill.

RG: *Yes, yes. Yes, yes.*

MB: Okay.

RG: *And otherwise, we weren't even diverting our attention anywhere else anyways. It wasn't as though we had education to say 'oh, he's doing that, I want to do that over there.' Our education was just as much as doing the work and staying happy.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *And, I did my own work and in '68 I got my own car. I was free to go about and enjoy doing our thing.*

MB: Yes. Who else there—what kind of people were there working at the mill?

RG: *People back then were very nice there.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *Now, there's different kinds of people. Back then, all the older men working there would say "He's my boy," "He's my kid" and always gave lots of respect.*

MB: And now?

RG: *Now, whether one says it or not, it is not the same. It is just not the same.*

MB: As in, making one your own, it's not like that anymore?

RG: *Yes, for instance, when old ladies meet you they say "She's my daughter, she's my putt", "my girl" you know, this and that.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *But the ones now, you know, one doesn't receive the same respect.*

MB: [acknowledgement] Were there any people of different races working in the mill back then? Were there apney and gorey?

RG: Yes, there were gorey and apney too. Those who were Red Indian too.

MB: Red Indian?

RG: *Yes. Those who we'd just call "thaaye-ke" you know when talking of different colours. And...but everyone was nice; that's all I say.*

MB: [acknowledgement] What things did you find difficult by being a worker in the mill?

RG: *Well discrimination is one thing we just face anyway. Some jobs, even after gaining security, some gorey, foremen, if they had a "gora munda" (white boy) they'd put him on the easy job. It was a little bit, but not so much, you know. For us, whether it was hard work or not, we were used to it and we didn't really care much.*

MB: [acknowledgement]

RG: *But there was a bit of a difference.*

MB [acknowledgement] And you had said that at 55 year old you had retired...

RG: Yes.

MB: Was that your last time at the mil?

RG: *Yes, yes. I had said from an early time that I will take on early retirement. I had begun working at a young age by 15-16 years old and I just wanted to stop.*

MB: What was the date that you retired?

RG: *Retire...well our mill had also closed down. And I...for 6 months, before 55 years had been sitting on sickness leave. To me it was that I'd take sickness leave for a year and after that by getting my forms filled out, I'd go on my pension, however much it was.*

MB: So what year was that?

RG: *That was ...2005.*

MB: 2005.

RG: *'05 or '04. First I had sat on sickness.*

MB: And the reason for that was the mill was shut down.

RG: *The mill was shut down and secondly it was that I had already been working so many years of my life. I didn't want to work.*

MB: Yes. Now tell me a little about what the nature of Canada was like when you first began working and what your impression was of it.

RG: *It was very nice to me and I was very happy. Because I was just a kid in India, and upon my arrival – like the cars driving around, more people, beautiful colours...everything in general just seemed very nice to me.*

MB: Okay. And you said one year after coming here you became a citizen...

RG: Yes.

MB: That had no relation with the mill.

RG: *It was that if your parents are already citizens, then after one year, their child would also obtain citizenship. I was young, I was just a kid; that's about all I can say about that.*

MB: So your dad was already a citizen and he went back to India to get you.

RG: *He had gone to get me, yes.*

MB: And after one year, you became a citizen.

RG: *Yes, in 1965. I even have my citizenship paper, if you ever want a copy, I have one from 1965.*

MB: That was in fact what I was going to ask you next, about whether or not you have anything, like a paper.

RG: *I have my old passport with me from '64 and my citizen paper. If you ever need anything, we can sit and chat again.*

MB: Yes, okay. That is all we needed and all that was left to our interview.

RG: *That's no problem.*

MB: Thank you for sitting with us for fifteen minutes!

RG: *No problem dear, now you just tell me how you think I interviewed!*