

Sohan Singh Labh

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

Interviewer: What is your name?

Sohan: My name is Sohan Singh Labh.

I: Lubh?

S: *L-A-B-H.*

I: When were you born?

S: *1931.*

I: And where were you born, Sohan?

S: *Victoria, BC.*

I: Could you tell me a little bit about your family's immigration history?

S: *My father came here in 1906 and my mother came here in 1922. They weren't allowed to bring their wives out for a number of years. So she was one of the first ladies that came to Canada. And my sister was born in 1926. I believe she was one of the first Asian girls born in Victoria. Unfortunately she passed away in 1945. And ... so after that I started work at the sawmills in 1956.*

I: At what age?

S: *Actually, while I was going to high school I used to work there when we had our two months summer off from school. So I started probably when I was fifteen for two months and the following year when I was sixteen years old, used to work a couple of months.*

I: Part time?

S: *Well, while school was out.*

I: So only during summer break?

S: *Just summer break. And I graduated in 1949 from high school. So I worked about a year and in 1951 I went to India and got married.*

I: In 51?

S: *Actually 1950.*

I: 1950.

S: *I came back in 1951 and...being married I just started working, I didn't go to university I just had a high school graduation. And I worked for a trucking company in Victoria...Asian owner for about four years. And then I started in BC Forest Products. That was the main saw mill in Victoria...that was 1956. I worked there till it closed down in 1989.*

I: Okay.

S: *And after that I took early retirement.*

I: So that's the only mill you've worked at. Is that right?

S: *Yeah, that's the only mill I've worked at, yeah.*

I: Okay. For how many years?

S: *I worked there for about 33 years.*

I: 33 years.

S: *I drove a truck for about 5 years.*

I: Prior to that.

S: *Before I started the mill.*

I: Okay. So...at what age did you retire? What year and what age?

S: *I retired in 1989...I was 58 years old.*

I: 58. So you got early retirement since you've been working so long?

S: *Yes I got early retirement. We had a pension plan. I lost a little bit on the pension but I got early retirement. If I'd worked till 60 I would have full pension, so you lose a little bit of that...I could have worked in Vancouver or up island for a few more years but my wife was quite ill at that time so I took retirement to look after her. So...she passed away in 1999. Anyways, so I've been retired for about 26 years.*

I: What did you do?

SL: *Well when I was younger...I played a lot of sports. I organized a soccer team called "Punjab United."*

I: Punjab United?

SL: *Yeah, that was a football club. That was in 1952.*

I: Oh, so while you were...?

SL: *Well, we had an all-Asian team. We had very few people here then, like, old enough to play soccer. They were either too old or too young. And we kept the team together. We had to put on some English players.*

I: Had to? What do you mean by that?

SL: *Well, we couldn't get enough of our boys to come out regularly. I used to have to pick them up. If it was bad weather they would have an excuse not to play and...but we kept it going for a number of years. After that there is some soccer team that I have nothing to do with now because I'm old.*

I: So you founded the first Punjabi soccer team here?

SL: *In Victoria, yes.*

I: Soccer, I guess, foundation...society.

SL: *There is a...book written about soccer in Victoria and there's a picture of our team and a little write-up about it and all that. The reason I called it Punjab United is because we had a few of the kids were born here and few from the Punjab...so we called it Punjab United. United was a common name for soccer teams.*

I: So how was that, being the first-ever Punjabi soccer league of its own...in a predominantly, I guess you could say white...

SL: *Well, there was a First Nation's team called....from Duncan Hills there. There's a lot of Aboriginals there. They weren't as involved though. But actually, the year we were competing there were a lot of German players here, German people and they had a team, there was a Dutch team also and a Scottish team.*

I: Oh. There was a lot of mix here.

SL: *Yeah, there were two or three divisions of soccer teams...anyways.*

I: Can you tell me a little bit about what the demographic was of Duncan at the time?

SL: *Oh Duncan, well actually most of the people lived in Paldi, that's about three or four miles from Duncan.*

I: A Paldi?

SL: *Paldi, BC. There was a big sawmill there. The owner of the sawmill actually came from Paldi, India. So he actually...the area of the town that was actually registered there, they had a post office, Paldi, BC. And there was a school there also. After that, for the number of years...like it kept going...the mill finally closed down and a lot of the people moved, Duncan is a bigger town. There used to be a Sikh Temple right at the sawmill, still there actually, it's just the temple. But all the housing is torn down, the mill's gone and there's another larger temple in Duncan,*

BC. A lot of the families have moved in and around Duncan closer to town. And there's other temple in like Nanaimo, Port Alberni, you know wherever there's Sikhs, there's temples. There just used to be the one here and we tore it down and built this one. And now there's two more in Victoria.

I: So a majority of the South Asians were in Paldi then?

SL: No, actually most of them were in Vancouver and Victoria. And...this fellow Nimratan [inaudible] Mayo Singh. The mill was mostly run by South Asians. There were also Japanese workers and Chinese workers. Victoria was the main city for the island, but they couldn't get jobs here. Most of the mills were up island...a lot of the later-comers went to Duncan or London...in Port Alberni there were two families there and now there must be 100-200 families there and a couple temples.

I: So, when your dad came here, there must have been barely any...

SL: Yeah, they actually...I think they rented a house in town for the [inaudible]. There are some pictures...if you go to that house over there they got pictures of, like, the temple in the earlier years...

I: Did you hear any stories from your dad?

SL: Actually, I was only 6 years old when my dad passed away. So it was quite hard for my mother. She never married again, obviously. It was quite hard for her; there were four of us. My sister, she was 9 and I was about 6, my brother was 3, my younger sister was only about 2 years old. My dad, I guess, had worked in the mill for a while and then he had a little truck business. My mother kept it going and hired people to drive the truck. And when we got to be like 15 or 16...actually my sister drove a truck for a while. What it looked like, being a girl and driving a truck...well it was quite different. And I drove it when I was going to school too, had to drive it on the weekends. And my brother did also. Unfortunately they've all passed away now. I can't believe I'm the only one from the family now.

I: Didn't she have anyone else here? Any other family here, like how did she hold the family together with no husband at the time?

SL: Well no...we had, well they weren't really uncles, they were actually really good friends of my father. They helped us out quite a bit. They came out from India together. And when my father passed away, probably one of the first people to pass away here...because I can remember there was a photo my brother had, they actually had to pile the wood, you know, and put him on fire. Now they have a crematorium, they didn't have one there.

I: So it was like a traditional...?

SL: Yeah, I wasn't there but I had seen a picture. I guess some photographer from one of the newspapers here, I guess they haven't seen that here.

I: And may I ask how he passed away?

SL: How? I'm not sure. I think he had some heart problems.

I: So, nothing related to extraneous work in the mill or anything?

SL: *No, I don't believe so. I think it was just his heart because I've have open heart and my brother some heart problems too. So it kinda runs in the family. My mother passed away fairly young too, 1956. That's the reason I got married, too. You know, because my father passed away and she wanted some grandchildren and so that was when he...just had his eyes full and I ended up planning to get married.*

I: Married at 54?

SL: *She died in '57 and my son was born in...well my daughter was born in '52 so she'd seen my daughter and my first son was born in '56. So she got to see the two of them and passed away about a year or two later.*

I: What was it like going to high school...how many apnas were there then?

SL: *Well, there were four of us...*

I: Only four apnas in the whole high school?

SL: *Yeah. We still have our reunion. In fact we just had our 60th year high school reunion.*

I: Wow. That's amazing.

SL: *Every year. And our class has two lunches a year. There were two girls, myself, and another boy. There were four of us. We graduated in 1949.*

I: Was there any sort of, I guess you could say, any sort of discrimination?

SL: *Not at that time. No.*

I: And everyone got along with one another?

SL: *Yeah. We had, we both had turbans and beards at that time when I was in high school.*

I: So you were already a minority.

SL: *Yeah. Oh yeah but everything was fine in them days. It just started in...I guess in the '50s, I heard about all this trouble in Vancouver and Quesnel when immigration was coming out. But here was pretty good.*

I: So then at what point did you decide to cut your hair?

SL: *Well actually...about 1958. I was playing a lot of sports so I trim it for hockey [inaudible] ... so I just thought I'd take it off.*

I: You thought it would be more practical?

SL: *Yeah. Well, my brother kept it until he died. He died about three years ago. He never shaved his...and he went to high school too for a couple of years. But most people, after us they all cut their hair. Now the people are keeping turbans again. And Vancouver especially, yeah, not so much here.*

I: So you did trucking because that was your father's...

SL: *Yeah, that's right.*

I: And then did you want to do anything else after that?

SL: *Well I wanted...I was planning to go to university. But then getting married and having, like I said, my daughter was born when I was 21 years old so I had my family and my mother was quite ill. So I started working. We all lived in the same house for quite a while. Then when my daughter was born, actually after my son was born we moved out.*

I: So then why did you start working in the mill?

SL: *That was probably the easiest place to get a job at the time. The pay wasn't bad then. Originally it was, in the stories I hear in the '30s and early '40s, the Chinese and the South Asians they did mostly hard labour work then, piling lumber. They would get 10 cents per hour where our English people, the Europeans would get 15 cents per hour. But when the Indians came in about the late '40s, the unions mills were...well, we got equal pay. The mills that were non-union they had to go to, the members that had to go get up to a union, they had a harder time, I guess. The mill when I started there their union was already in the mill. It was quite a large mill, so we got union rates so everybody was... But there was some discrimination for a while even the union couldn't do too much about it. Like, there were some jobs like lumber grading and inspectors... Even though South Asians like I had a grading ticket but the foremen seemed to pick, you know, the white people to do the jobs. But near the end, we got all the jobs if we were qualified for.*

I: So in my understanding, lumber grading is a little bit of a higher authority, right?

SL: *It was. Yeah. You had to know how to read English, know what grades are, you know and not [inaudible].*

I: And the owners were white?

SL: *Well for most of the mills, yeah. But last year except for two small mills that are Asian owned. They only had maybe 10-12 people working there. But the main mill here, in Victoria, it was nearly 1,000 people at one point. Then it got automated. When the mill shut down there were only about 200 people working there because it was all automations. Before they used to pile the lumber by hand, there was automatic machine.*

I: So, you said you had your lumber grading ticket?

SL: *Oh yeah.*

I: Did you do that job then or was there discrimination?

SL: *No...well I could have got a job as that but even running as a machine operator and you had a grading ticket, they gave you an extra 25 cents an hour. Even though you weren't grading, because they...cause you'd be trimming the lumber like it...if you knew the big knot there you could cut it out. So you would get a higher grade out of the lumber. So having a grading ticket, you know, it was better. To get some jobs, you know, you had to have a grading ticket.*

I: Just having it on your resumé was better.

SL: *Yeah. But near the end, like when the mill shut down, couple of the instructors were Asian people instructing the white people.*

I: Oh, south Asians...so it was the other way around?

SL: *Yeah, it was.*

I: So, was there reverse discrimination then?

SL: *No, it was some...you may find a little bit in the sawmills. Especially some of the jobs were...if you had the grading ticket...you couldn't get that job unless you had the grading ticket. And the fellow might be a junior fellow with the ticket and the senior fellow might be doing...and he wouldn't get the job. He would be like "I've been at that job a lot longer, I should have that job," a little higher paying job. They weren't quite qualified for it. But that was just, you know, people think they should get a little more since they've been there longer.*

I: So you built your seniority at BC Forest Products at that time.

SL: *Yeah...and then if two people are equal and if one person has been there one day longer, he gets the job. Even half day would have made a difference. If someone gets hired in the morning and someone gets hired in the afternoon, when the job becomes open and they both want it, so...*

I: So the morning guy would get it.

SL: *Yeah. That was kind of the union rules of seniority.*

I: So what kind of positions did you do?

SL: *I had quite a few actually, I operated a crane, I was, you know, on an electric crane. And then I...well I had done all kinds of jobs in the sawmill. I was a trim saw operator...I picked up a lot of the jobs on my own time. Like, you work in the area and it would change if the other fellow got to know the job. That way the day would go on by quicker too. Not just on one job for eight hours straight. We would change around on our own. But you would only get your own rate of pay. You might do the higher paid job but the other fellow's got that posting. It's just a break from kind of doing the same thing all day.*

I: So, because you're Canadian born, English is probably a strong asset for you. Did you ever in mill find yourself in the position where you were speaking on behalf of the people?

SL: *Oh yeah. I was on the plant committee and the first safety committee and...well I can speak Punjabi, I can understand it so I was the interpreter. We had a couple cases for the company laid off a person or something and the union would go to court. And the person couldn't speak very good English...I had done that a few times. Most of the time it was the union that, you know, cause there were quite a few people who were very fluent in English. Sometimes they would come to your foreman and put somebody else in the job or send someone home for some reason because they came in late or something. A fellow put in an agreement with the union so they would have to go through the whole process to see who's right or wrong.*

I: And you would advocate for them.

SL: *Yeah.*

I: What would you think were some of the advantages and disadvantages of working in the mill?

SL: *Some advantages?*

I: For you. Maybe you could speak as a...

SL: *Well...it was a good paying job and I had to raise a family so...*

I: And you never had to find any other job? You never wanted to back to university later?

SL: *No, I actually don't belong in...before I got in the mill I did some trucking. They were East Indian owners and the mill I worked at was...it didn't shut down at all...the pay cheques were coming in. In the smaller mills you might be laid off for a few months. I think for the 33 years I worked there, one years it was shut down for a recession year but otherwise, never missed a day there.*

I: So it was very reliable.

SL: *Yeah. The one we worked at, yeah. Quite a few of the fellows here worked at the same mill.*

I: And what was the name of your dad's trucking company?

SL: *Well, I don't remember the name. I don't think he actually had a name. It was a smaller company but we would just sell wood. Like, people would phone in...I'm not sure if he had a name.*

I: Okay. So tell me a little bit about groceries. So you would be getting you groceries, so obviously Indian groceries...

SL: *Yeah, well my wife, she would do the Indian cooking but stories I hear of when my dad came out...they couldn't speak English, well my dad couldn't anyways. And, they'd go, like, you would get a can of fish and it would have a picture of a fish like a salmon or a tuna, so they would just get the can so they know what they wanted.*

I: Like, did they have to go out to get them?

SL: *Well, actually, where we lived, not far from here, there was, that was probably the first house on the street, it was called Sullivan Street. And there was an old grocery store there, been there for years and years. And we used to go there and we could pay at the end of the month. So we would buy a loaf of bread and some milk and pay at the end of the month.*

I: And the only Gurdwara at the time was the one that was in...where?

SL: *It was in Victoria. It used to be... It was 1957 when we built this one.*

I: So what about big events, like Vaisakhi, New Year...?

SL: *Like the other fellow was saying, there used to a big Mela in Vancouver. We used to do Vaisakhi here in April.*

I: Lodi, Diwali?

SL: *Diwali just started in the last few years. We've never done Diwali.*

I: So the community of Duncan would come together at the Gurdwara for sure on Vaisakhi, right?

SL: *Yeah, like it was a big deal. We would go up...Duncan...I think it was July the first and they would try and do something. We would take the team up there and play volleyball or soccer. Or they would come here and play here. Where the parking lot is now, there was volleyball court there. And then there was another mill, just further down from Paldi...there was a community there. They built a temple there too. So they would have theirs in August. And we would go from here and go up. And it was a nice thing, everybody looked forward to getting together and it kinda died out now. They still have a Vaisakhi thing but now it's Kabaddi and all that. They want to play for money and all that. And we would play for nothing. We would get an orange or something at half time. That was it.*

I: And how about you raising your kids here? So, as a Canadian-born with his Canadian kids.

SL: *Well actually, a few of the kids have been through marriage. My eldest son's married an English girl and my daughter married an Italian. But my oldest daughter married an East Indian. And my younger son passed away, tragically. So yeah, it's...actually my son retired a couple of years ago, he's 57 now. He retired at 55. He worked for the city, he worked some, I don't know, 35 years for the city. His wife worked for the government, she just retired this year. So they're both retired. And my daughter in Vancouver, she's a grandmother now. So I'm a great-grandfather now. But she was born quite a while ago. And my grandson is in UBC. My granddaughter is in UVic. My grandson lives in New Westminster. I'll be 84 in a couple months. But I still play floor hockey. On a...league for old guys.*

I: Well, I must say you have a very rich history.

SL: *Well, I'm glad my father came here and not to...I know some people went to the States. And some went to Vancouver. Victoria's kinda nicer than Vancouver.*

I: Do you think there's any reason why your dad decided to come here?

SL: *Well actually, our village...we're the only family here. Now there are a couple people from our village in India. A group of us went back about six years ago. I took my son and my grandkids with me to see the village. We still have land there actually. And my cousin's in England, one's in Norway...actually the house is still there but no one's living in it. One of my cousins, they were there for a long time, but they just went to England in the last 10-12 years. And somebody looks after the house. And actually there's a school there and they made...I guess somebody rents the land...I don't know. My cousins, they give money to the school there for computers and stuff.*

I: Sorry, I didn't get the name of your pind.

SL: *Well, it's Gobindpur.*

I: In what district?

SL: *Jalandhar. Well, my uncle was the MLA for a long time. He used to send...he was in jail for many years because they would speak against the British. I remember my sister used to write to him in jail and he would send a letter to her in English and half of it would be blacked out because they would read it first. Probably write things against them. He came out here in 1948 and just kind of toured around. My mother must have told him to arrange our marriages also. So they already had a girl picked out. Mind you, I told my mom that I wanted her to see me and I*

wanted to take a look, too. So anyways, I had seen her and said that's fine, she didn't say nothing I guess. So when she used to come here, she used to argue with me and I told her that she had a chance to say no and you didn't.

I: She was from India, though?

SL: *Yeah.*

I: So while you were in high school you kinda knew who you were getting married to.

SL: *No. Well my uncle, when my uncle came from India I guess my mother told him to find somebody and then I said alright. My mother wasn't well, and passed away, so I would have rather probably kept going to school. But anyhow, that's life. And after that we did bring out the wife's sisters and brothers. And they're all doing well. Some are in Port Alberni and some are in Vancouver.*

I: And her parents?

SL: *Well I brought...her father died while she was here but we brought the mother out. She stayed with my wife's sister for a while and with us for a while, like back and forth. Then she passed away too.*

I: And did she become a citizen later?

SL: *My wife? Oh yeah, right away. Automatically, married to a Canadian, you get automatic citizenship.*

I: Well I guess that was the rules at the time.

SL: *Yeah. I think it still is. I'm not sure if you marry a Canadian...maybe it's different. But then they... yeah, she was a Canadian citizen. She went to school for a little while, in the night school to learn English. But she did pick it up because my kids would talk to her in English. She would talk to them in Punjabi so it worked out. And they did have Punjabi schools here. Like I can read and write in Punjabi.*

I: And she went to, I guess, university to brush up on her English?

SL: *Oh no. Just night school. She only had like grade 8, 7 or 8 in India in the village.*

I: And how did she find it? Like the culture shock?

SL: *In India?*

I: No. Coming here?

SL: *Well there was a small community but she had a lot of support here. It would be hard obviously for a while. There were a couple of other boys born here and they got married after a few years I did, and their wives were from India too. So they got to be friends and it worked out.*

I: Okay, Sohan. That's all my questions for you.