

## Surjit Singh Tatla

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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?

ST: *Surjit Singh Tatla.*

MB: When were you born?

ST: *May 25, 1944.*

MB: And where were you born?

ST: *Kaonke Kalan, Ludhiana, Punjab.*

MB: And when did you come to Canada?

ST: *In 1970.*

MB: And on what basis did you come? Did somebody sponsor you?

ST: *Our mama (mother's brother) was here.*

KS: Family sponsorship?

ST: *No, visitor.*

KS: So you first came as a visitor.

ST: *Yes. And then after I freed up, I started working in sawmill in '70. I worked four years in that mill.*

KS: What did you mean by saying once you freed up? By becoming an immigrant?

ST: *By becoming an immigrant. When we got our stamp.*

KS: How long did it take?

ST: *It took quite a long time.*

KS: As in?

ST: *I don't remember now. But I got a work permit.*

MB: You came as a visitor then? And got a work permit then? Did somebody sponsor you?

ST: *My massi was here and my mama, who sponsored me.*

KS: So he came as a visitor and then he got a work permit and then started working in the mill?

MB: His Mama-ji sponsored him. And how old were you when you first came?

ST: 25.

MB: Okay. And were you married yet or no?

ST: *No.*

MB: Okay. So when did you get married then?

ST: *I got married in '74.*

MB: Okay. And did you do any work in India before coming to Canada?

ST: *I worked 3-4 years in India.*

MB: Okay, what did you do?

ST: *The railway. I worked on the steam engine.*

MB: How much did you study?

ST: *Till the tenth grade.*

MB: Okay. And how did you make the plan to come to Canada?

ST: *Then men would just come. So I came here and I saw what kind of work was here. Back then there weren't much work.*

MB: Here?

ST: *Yeah. The work was mostly just in the mills or doing trucking. There wasn't much work here.*

KS: Did someone tell you to come to Canada?

ST: *We had our mama and massi in Canada.*

KS: Did they urge you to come here?

ST: *They sent for me to come here so I have been here since. And all my family.*

KS: Nash Gill's family? Nash's dad?

ST: *Yes, Nash Gill. Darshan Gill. Of Dhudike. The really old men were here [pioneers].*

KS: Is Nash Gill's dad your Mama-ji?

ST: *He was our Masar-ji. Now Nash Gill lives in Abbotsford and is a lawyer.*

MB: Oh, okay. Is he the one who found you a job then?

ST: *No, when Nash Gill was studying in Mission, he was also working in sawmill on the side on the weekends. So I'd go with him to do work and when he stepped away, I got a chance for work.*

MB: So was your first job in Canada at the mill, then?

ST: *Yes, at the mill.*

MB: After how long did you find a job in Canada and begin working?

ST: *After 4-5 months. That was sawmill.*

MB: Was it difficult to find a job then?

ST: *It was difficult but if you knew anyone, then you'd find work like that.*

MB: Okay. And because of Nash you got a job then.

ST: *Yes, because of him then I started working. I worked four years at that mill.*

MB: What is the name of that mill?

ST: *The name was...I forget!*

KS: In Mission?

ST: *No, it was near Maple Ridge.*

MB: Was it not S&W?

ST: *No, no.*

MB: McKenzie?

ST: *It was...*

KS: It's okay, you can tell us when you remember later.

ST: *You know where the ferry goes?*

MB: Ham and Cedar?

ST: *No, it wasn't Ham and Cedar. It was...Camano Forest.*

MB: Oh.

ST: *Camano. Only apney men worked there, nobody else did.*

KS: Nobody else did?

ST: *Only apney. It was a small little mill. Just about 25-30 people working there. It was Japanese-owned. I worked four years there. Then the mill caught on fire in '74. So after that I went to Ham and Cedar. I worked there then.*

MB: After '74.

ST: *Yes, after '74. And then in 2009 I retired from there.*

MB: Oh, okay.

ST: *When I began working there, the work was very heavy. And ten years prior to now, the work was very hard. Now work is very easy, there are automatic systems in place.*

KS: When you first started, it was heavy work then.

ST: *It was heavy then. There used to be a chain and at least 15 men would be pulling lumber. And after that, they tore down an old mill and made a new one. And in that mill, there was lots of easy work.*

MB: So you've worked in just two mills then, Camano and Ham and Cedar then, right?

ST: *Yes, just two.*

MB: Okay. And you said Camano was very small and there were just about 40 men.

ST: *Around 30-40, yes.*

MB: What kind of men there? You said that there were Japanese. Were there Chinese and gorey too then?

ST: *There were gorey and there were apney, too; 8-10 apney men. The mill was Japanese-owned and there were 5-7 Japanese men there.*

MB: So it was a mix?

ST: *A mix, yes.*

KS: Where were you living at the time?

ST: *In Mission.*

KS: So you've lived in Mission from the beginning, then.

ST: *Yes, in Mission.*

MB: Were you living with your Masar-ji?

ST: *No, with my Mama-ji.*

MB: And when did you start working at Camano. '71? '70?

ST: '70.

MB: And what was your job here? Was it on the green chain?

ST: *It was on the green chain. At first I started at the clean-up and then I worked on the green chain. Then on the trimmer, and then the ager. After that at Ham and Cedar, it is now a company of Enterfor.*

MB: Enterfor? The owner?

ST: *Yes, Enterfor is the company's name. The owner. First it used to be Fletcher Challenge. Then they sold it and they bought it. Before that it used to be BC Forest.*

MB: And so what was your job at Ham and Cedar?

ST: *At Ham and Cedar I first started at the green chain. I did the green chain for a little bit and then did trimming and after that I worked as a sawyer. After working as a sawyer, the new mill was made. After that I did [inaudible] but it was done all automatically by pressing buttons. You'd send it to whatever number it needed to be and it would automatically go.*

MB: So it was less labor because of the technology.

ST: *Because of the technology, yes.*

MB: Okay, so was Ham and Cedar gora-owned then?

ST: *Yes, goras. It was a union.*

MB: What was the other kind like? Was that union too?

ST: *No, that one wasn't union. But because it was a gora mill, it gave ten cents more than the union ones.*

MB: The gora mill?

ST: *Yes, the first mill.*

MB: Okay, you got ten cents more.

ST: *Yes, more than the union. We'd stay working and we had lots of advantages of working in the union mill. Because of the pension and everything.*

MB: Is that why you stayed at a union mill, Ham and Cedar, for that long then, because of those advantages?

ST: *Well, I had turned 65. And the company said if you want you can continue working another two years, but I said that I did not want to work anymore. I got my pension so what was the point.*

MB: Did you get early retirement then?

ST: *I retired from there after being 65. I worked 35 years there.*

MB: Yeah. Okay.

KS: You worked 35 years in one mill, so that must've meant that you found the work good then, right?

ST: *Well, in that time everything was automatic. Say I am sitting on this chair and whatever I see is coming next, I press the button for that number for where it needs to go.*

KS: For how long have things been running automatically?

ST: *About 25-30 years. Around 25 I'd say. They tore down the old mill and made a new one. So they changed the whole system entirely.*

MB: When did they tear down the mill?

ST: *I don't remember what year.*

MB: And how many apney and gorey were at Ham and Cedar?

ST: *It was a mix – there were lots of apney while there were also lots of gorey. At first there used to be three shifts running at the mill, even at night. I think there were at least 500-600 men working.*

MB: So lots and lots of men were working at that mill then.

ST: *Yes, lots of men were working.*

MB: Because the company was so big.

ST: *The company was very big. But then slowly when things started becoming automatic with the new system, they started lessening their number of working men. Right now, that very mill is still running but only one mill is working and there are very few men working, around 50-60. Where there used to be 500 men, there are now just 60, 70, 80 men. After making everything automatic.*

KS: So how much hard, physical work did you do? Because for 25 years the work must've been easy [because of technology].

ST: *It was at first when it was really bad, when there were many bad [inaudible] too, in '72 or '74. Back then it snowed heavily too. And because of that, for three months we lived in harsh cold, too.*

MB: So, at Ham and Cedar, were all the men who worked together, even the supervisors, getting along alright?

ST: *Yes, we all did. There were a few men in there who didn't care for the apney men, but when they realized that the apney had high seniority, they settled down on their own.*

MB: How was the first mill?

ST: *The first one was good, too. All the men would come and work together. It wasn't like "this is your work and you have to do it."*

MB: Were there not any problems regarding language and English?

ST: *No, we didn't feel the need to. Because there were so many apney there. There were some supervisors that were also apney. Because of them we didn't find any problems.*

MB: And if you could ever say you faced any difficult times, what kinds of things did you find difficult or challenging?

ST: *There is no difficulty. It was at first when it was very cold and it was difficult to commute in the snow. Sometimes it would snow so much at night that getting the car out had become very difficult.*

MB: So you had to adjust to Canada.

ST: *Yes, but there wasn't that much difference.*

KS: So in all the time that you've worked at the mill, have you found it so well that you never thought about switching to do something else?

ST: *No, it wasn't like that. It was at first when in India it was different circumstances. But when we came here we understood that the system was totally different.*

KS: No, I meant did you ever feel like changing your line of work, or did the mill seem okay to you?

ST: *It was like this – when you are first starting somewhere, it will seem at first that it's not going to go well. But after a while when you're married and have got a family, you begin thinking that if my job here falls through and I cannot find any other work, then...*

KS: There was stability.

ST: *Yeah, so you have to change for that. Your seniority builds after a while and things work in accordance to that – unlike if you work somewhere new and you could get laid off tomorrow. Then that's hard.*

MB: So, Ham and Cedar was a union company. What were the advantages of working in a union mill?

ST: *In a union, as your seniority builds with your job your wages increase accordingly. And in a union, if you have any problem then the union will solve it. For example, if you work in a private mill and you have to go to India or whatever, for 2-3 weeks, you ask for holidays and they don't give it, it is their choice. But in a union you are guaranteed at least 5-6 weeks of holiday every year. If you want to go on holiday for 3 weeks, all you have to do is fill out some papers and they'll give it to you. If you're somewhere else at a private company, it is their decision for whether or not they'll give you holidays or not. But here, even if you need to be away for 2 months or even 3, if you need to take holidays, you can. The company will show that yes, you can go away for 3 months.*

KS: In unions, was the promotion system a lot better than other mills then?

ST: *Yes, it was very good. If where you're working, another job comes up and you apply, you will get it based on your seniority. If you have seniority, they'll interview you and train you for 2-3 weeks before they put you to work. If you're training and it works, you don't get traded and you'll get the job. However, if during training you cannot do the job, then they'll refuse you for the position.*

MB: So all the jobs that you did, at the green chain, the trimmer, and the sawyer...

ST: *I had to get trained for them all.*

MB: They then trained you.

ST: *For 5-6 weeks, they train you. And then they see how well the man works at his job. When they can see that he can do it, then they'll give him the job.*

MB: Okay. Were you supervisors mostly gorey or were they apney?

ST: *They were mostly gorey. There were about 2-3 apney ones.*

MB: Were there any language problems then for communicating with one another?

ST: *No, there were no problems.*

MB: Okay. And you retired in what year? 2009. Yes. And you had taken early retirement right.

ST: *Yes.*

KS: At the age of 65?

ST: *Yes, 65.*

MB: Okay. And if you can tell me a little bit about what the nature of Canada was like when you were living here. Such as, were the living expenses less or how many apney men were there?

ST: *There were very few apney men. When I first came here, I don't know how many there were, but when I was here in '70 there were very few men here.*

MB: In Mission?

ST: *In Mission, but Abbotsford too. There were probably just 5-7 families. There were no apney homes in the town of Abbotsford.*

KS: Were there more in Mission?

ST: *There were more in Mission. There were more in Mission because there were 3-4 mills here nearby. Because of the mills, lots of men were there. They were men set to work for the mills, too. There were no other jobs then here. Here now we have Pepsi trucks and building suppliers, electricians, or builders as all apney men. Back then there was no business of this sort.*



KS: How was the sense of community amongst the apney people?

ST: *Everyone acquainted themselves with one another very lovingly. And then, there were very few families. When I came, I saw maybe just 10-12 families in Mission. After that, they slowly started building up. And the Abbotsford temple...*

KS: And so how was everyone preparing for special occasions like weddings, and getting the food ready?

ST: *The small, old temple in Abbotsford used to have lots of people come together on Sundays. The people would see each other and come together once a week or every two weeks.*

KS: The Heritage temple?

ST: *Yes. If around 25-30 men would come together they'd say, "Today we had a big turnout. There are so many people here today." So the people would talk and pass time. And then we had a temple in Vancouver and also in New Westminster.*

KS: And so when special occasions did come about, did you people celebrate them or not?

ST: *Here nobody celebrated back then. Like say, we celebrate Diwali and Lohri now. There was nothing of that sort. But say it was Guru Nanak Dev Ji's or Guru Gobind Singh Ji's birthday, what would happen was, one time the Abbotsford temple would celebrate it, then the next one either Vancouver's temple would celebrate or the New Westminster temple would. They celebrated it separately. The population of apney was just so low. You see it now that we have so many Gurdwaras now in Abbotsford, at least four or five. And all that because of the population in town.*

KS: What were you eating then at that time? What was your diet like?

ST: *We ate roti and daal. Back then there was an Italian shop in downtown Vancouver. In all the ten homes in Mission, there was one car. In that one car, 4-5 men would hop in and go get 2-3 months' worth of groceries. Then more ethnic stores started opening in downtown Vancouver. There was a Muslim man who opened his grocery store on 2<sup>nd</sup> Maine in '72. After that, the stores slowly started increasing. And then Abbotsford started having some stores. With that, it kept on going. In gora stores we could get rice but we still had to go afar to Vancouver to get our flour. And then Safeway slowly started incorporating it.*

KS: From Vancouver you'd get it...?

ST: *Yeah, it was an Italian store in downtown Vancouver.*

MB: Yes, the other uncle was talking about this store too and how he got his groceries from there.

ST: *Yeah. A ration of flour and lentils to last us a few months was gotten from there. When we were about to run out, we'd go and get some more.*

KS: By going together in a car.

ST: *By going together and carpooling, yes. There were more men and fewer families.*

MB: So what was your system before you got married for getting groceries and eating?

ST: *I was living with my Mama-ji. I would pay them back for whatever the cost was for the food and work it out. Like for rent and more things. After that, when I got married I got my own house.*

MB: But before that you were living with your Masar-ji.

KS/ST: *Mama-ji.*

KS: From what family? What is your Mama-ji's name?

ST: *Manga Singh. It has been a long time since his death too.*

KS: And so in those days, what was the economy of Canada like? Did you face any difficulties? What things did you like?

ST: *Back then we had lots of people to meet and see. Like now, people see each other and walk right ahead. Back then, it was that, if one man came from India, every single person would come see him in the sense that, yes, one of our men has come so far from India.*

KS: So if a new man did come from India, everyone would help with finding him work?

ST: *Yes, with finding him work and know which mill had work to do. There was a mill in Squamish. A lot of the men that couldn't find work here would go there. And if they found work here, then they'd come back here to work. But I haven't gone anywhere far, I found work here and stayed here.*

KS: But what about other immigrants that came from different places – what was their relationship like with the apney men?

ST: *Everyone was fine with one another. There were lots of gorey houses here back then but then they changed the law for apney to own too, so there wasn't too much of a difference.*

MB: And when you retired, at what position did you retire? As a sawyer or trimmer?

ST: *What?*

MB: What was the last position you held before you left and retired?

ST: *I was a number 3 or 4 controller. They call it a controller. In one side the logs would feed into the machine – there were 3 or 4 machines. So I'd see what lumber...what be assigned to go in what machine.*

MB: Okay.

KS: When did you become a citizen then?

ST: *I became a citizen in '79 or '80.*

MB: What was the law then to become a citizen?

ST: *Before it used to be of residing in Canada for five years. But when I got it, the law had changed to three years. I didn't really consider or acknowledge becoming a citizen. But then I applied and they took my interview. It was in Abbotsford. And so my wife and I did it together and we both became citizens.*

KS: *In what year?*

ST: *Around '79.*

KS: *Do you have anything else you want to talk about regarding your mill life?*

ST: *What's there for my story? It was just that I came here from India.*

KS: *Did you like upon coming here from India?*

ST: *My work in India was along the same lines. My dad was working on a railway in Bombay and so the conditions were a little similar. In Punjab, the conditions were different, but outside of that was better.*

KS: *So you found it good upon coming to Canada?*

ST: *It's good. Here we have laws but there haven't been any from the beginning. Here we have to follow the expectation of abiding by the law. But there, if you are sick in India, the first thing you're going to need is money to get to a hospital. But because my dad worked for the railway, we had the support of the government for costs.*

MB: *It was a government job?*

ST: *Yes. It was a government job.*

MB: *As was yours, a government job?*

ST: *It was a government job. The 3-4 years that I worked there.*

KS: *And here in the mill, were all your benefits covered? For health?*

ST: *Yes.*

MB: *But your first mill was a non-union. Were you covered there as well?*

ST: *There was coverage there too. They covered us and paid for everything. They didn't want any interference with the other mills, for anybody to work there.*

MB: *So there was competition.*

ST: *There was competition. They covered everything and even paid for sickness. But I had never taken sickness or compensation. In all the years that I worked there.*

KS: *So you've never taken sickness or worker's compensation.*

ST: *No, never. I never went away on sickness. One or two times I had an accident so I stayed home for 5-6 weeks, but never after that.*

KS: Was the accident a result of working in the mill? Or something else?

ST: *It was just by car. I was going somewhere. Not after that. Nor have I taken any compensation or taken any cheques.*

MB/KS: Okay, that's all then.