
Title: Gerrie SINGH

Accession code: SMA 96.007.23

Transcribed by: Diane Johnson

Date Completed: October 29, 2015

Disclaimer: The following transcript may contain errors. Please consult original recording as required. Views expressed in the interview are those of the interviewee and interviewer.

Interview follows:

[Tape One, Side One]

Interviewer: So, if we could just start by you telling your full name.

Singh: Gerrie Singh.

Interviewer: And your maiden name?

Singh: Gerrie Elizen [spells] E-L-I-Z-E-N.

Interviewer: And your address?

Singh: 4444-168th Street, Surrey.

Interviewer: Okay.

Singh: Cloverdale.

Interviewer: And your date of birth?

Singh: June the tenth, 1935.

Interviewer: And you were born in?

Singh: In Holland.

Interviewer: Could you tell me a little bit about your family in Holland and what they did there?

Singh: My dad was a bricklayer in Holland and Mom was at home looking after us and cleaning the house.

Interviewer: And when did your family come to Canada?

Singh: We came here to Canada in 1950.

Interviewer: And why? Like, what was the reason?

Singh: Well, Dad thought it would be a better place for his children to come to Canada. Not so much for himself, but for the, for his children.

Interviewer: How about your husband? Can you tell us his full name and date of birth as well?

Singh: Sarjit Mac Singh and he was born in 1929, May the eighteenth.

Interviewer: And when did they come to Canada?

Singh: Granny was sixteen when Granny came to Canada and Mac was born here in Canada. All her children were born here in Canada.

Interviewer: Okay. Were they born in, in Surrey?

Singh: No, I think Mac was born in Rutland in Kelowna.

Interviewer: Okay. And do you know when they came to Surrey?

Singh: No, I don't know.

Interviewer: But he did go to school out here.

Singh: Yes, he did. Yes, he went to Kensington Prairie School and then he went to school here in Cloverdale.

Interviewer: Okay. What was Surrey like when you first arrived?

Singh: A lot of gravel roads, yet, lot of bush, lot of trees, no, no, shopping centres or anything like that like Whalley, it was just mostly bush on both sides of the road. There was a few restaurants and gas stations and that's about it. And Cloverdale just had the one main street. I still remember that when we came out here, 168th Street was still gravel. If my kids had to go to school on a gravel road.

Interviewer: And how did you meet Michael or Mac?

Singh: We worked for Mr. Schultz at Sullivan, at first and then we were laid off in the summertime and then my dad got a job in Vancouver so, we moved to Vancouver and later on he got laid off there and then we were looking for a, for farm work for all of us, for the whole family so we posted our name on, at Unemployment Insurance in New Westminster and, at that time, Mac was looking for a big family to work on his farm. And that's how we met.

Interviewer: And so, where were you living then?

Singh: We were living in Vancouver at the time and then he hired us. We moved to 168 at the time and I, we all, the whole family worked for them, for him.

Interviewer: And was he the owner of the farm at that time?

Singh: There were three other, other fellows – Andy Setter, Gordon Cowland and his brother Sutch. They were – owned, owned Cloverdale Produce Farms and then later on Mac bought them out and they all went on their own.

Interviewer: What year did he buy them out in?

Singh: I – it was in the late '60's.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Singh: Uh huh.

Interviewer: How did you find Mac's family was different than the other families?

Singh: At that time, a mixed white and East Indian or any dark person did not mix very easily and I found him very hard to get along with. I wasn't accepted. But, later on in years, it turned out to be a real good family.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about the first time you met the family?

Singh: Well, I met some of the family when we got married. His brothers came to the wedding, but his mom and dad did not come to the wedding. And it took us about two or three years before we really met Granny and Grandpa. I had met them before, but to visit, that's when we had our own children. I think that's when Granny, especially Granny, softened up and from then on I sort of wiggled myself into the family and we're the best of friends now.

Interviewer: What kind of adjustments did you have to make to fit it in? Or did they have to make to let you fit in?

Singh: Well, no, I don't think. We didn't make any major adjustments. I accepted them the way they were and they accepted me the way Mac and I lived. The hardest thing was when there was company and they spoke their own language which I could not understand. I think that was the hardest thing.

Interviewer: How about for food and, and social life?

Singh: Oh, she showed me how to make roti and all the East Indian food and I just love it to this day. No problem with food.

Interviewer: When did you get married?

Singh: We got married in '59 in January, January the seventh.

Interviewer: And what was the wedding like?

Singh: It was a very small wedding. We had our closest friend and my [coughs] excuse my, my family came and, like I said, a few brothers of Mac did come, but that was all. So, it was a very small wedding.

Interviewer: Was it here in Cloverdale?

Singh: It was in Cloverdale on 58th Street.

Interviewer: Okay, the church there.

Singh: Yes, we got married in a church and then we had a small reception at the Collins' on 58th Avenue.

Interviewer: How did the, the family react? I know they didn't show up at the wedding.

Singh: The brothers sort of felt sorry, you know, felt bad for us and, yet, they could see their mom and dad's point. My family, they were all there. I don't think Mom and Dad were the happiest parents when we got married, but they accepted Mac right away and there was no problem with my parents or, you know, my brothers.

Interviewer: How about the community?

Singh: Oh, the community was fine. They accepted us just like anybody else. No problem.

Interviewer: Where was your first home?

Singh: My own?

Interviewer: For yourself and Mac?

Singh: Oh, our first home was on 40th Avenue where Granny and Grandpa live now.

Interviewer: Oh. And that was right on the farm there.

Singh: Yes, and then we bought the farmhouse here, Cloverdale, what's Cloverdale Produce Farm is now. And we moved in the year, early '61, January, February in '61 into, onto the farmhouse.

Interviewer: How many acres is the farm?

Singh: We have about two hundred and fifty acres right now.

Interviewer: And is that including....

Singh: That's including renting also.

Interviewer: Oh, I see. And what kind of crops?

Singh: We grow lettuce, carrots, potatoes, onions, celery, turnips. We have started to grow artichokes; this is our second year of trying out artichokes and this year we, also, trying out green peppers.

Interviewer: Where were the local markets at the time when you started out?

Singh: We had to do our own trucking to get.....we had to take the loads into Vancouver to different wholesalers. Mac would phone in the morning about the orders and then we would put the orders up during the day and after supper, sometimes nine or ten o'clock at night, he would go into town, deliver to each individual wholesaler.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. And was that within Surrey or.....

Singh: No, that was in Vancouver.

Interviewer: In Vancouver, then.

Singh: And quite often he would stay overnight, get, get orders, early orders and come back the next morning, early in the morning.

Interviewer: What other property or farms did Mac own?

Singh: Mac had another farm with two other people on Fry's Corner.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Singh: I think it must've been about forty-eight, fifty acres.

Interviewer: And what was on that farm?

Singh: Potatoes.

Interviewer: Potatoes. How about labourers, what kind – did you hire any East Indian labourers at the time?

Singh: No, at the time, when we started out there was no East Indian people. We all had, pretty well all the farms had Chinese labour and young children, young adults from high school.

Interviewer: So, when were you children born?

Singh: Ron was born in 1959, March the twenty-fifth. Thelma was born January the nineteenth, 1961 and Tim was born April the second, 1962.

Interviewer: And did they have any difficulties growing up as children of interracial?

Singh: No, not whatsoever, not whatsoever.

Interviewer: Did Mac pass down any Indian traditions to the children?

Singh: No, not really. We kind of spoke English at home because we figured it was too hard for the children to speak East Indian and Dutch and English.

Interviewer: And what role did Mac's family play in bringing up the children?

- Singh: Just regular Grandmas, Grandma and Grandpa. They had them over, they had their sleepovers at Granny and Grandpa and they loved each one very, very much.
- Interviewer: Can you tell me about when other Indo-Canadian families started moving into, to Surrey?
- Singh: I think it was more in the late '70's, early '80's. That's when most of the Chinese people went out of, you know, labour work on the farm and East Indians came in. And to this day, that's all we have now is East Indian people working for us.
- Interviewer: How about the Singh family? Did they keep in touch with other Indo-Canadian families in Vancouver when they arrived?
- Singh: Yes, they go to church there to the Sikh temple and Granny and Grandpa, Granny's brothers and sisters live in Vancouver so, they do communicate a lot in Vancouver and Richmond.
- Interviewer: How was it – how did that happen at the time? How did they go to Vancouver and how long did they stay?
- Singh: They – by car and sometimes they stayed a whole day and they would go to the Sikh temple in the morning and then visit all their relatives and friends and made a whole day out of it.
- Interviewer: How about – did Mac mention any stories growing up in the Depression years, in the '30's?
- Singh: No, he didn't. No, no. I know when, when Granny and Grandpa were farming on 40th Avenue, Mac was very young at the time and he wanted to go to university very badly but, I guess in those days, they needed as much help as possible so, he stayed on the farm and helped on the farm and he always wished that he could've gone to university. Uh huh.
- Interviewer: Did he mention any difficulties about growing up as the only Indo-Canadian family?
- Singh: Yes, I think they, at that time, they had more difficulties than my own children had. I don't think that East Indians or any dark family were accepted as they are now.
- Interviewer: How about owning a business?
- Singh: No, I don't think it interfered with the business at all.
- Interviewer: Did Mac tell you any stories or anything about growing up as Indo-Canadian?
- Singh: No, not really. No, no, we just....
- Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about his childhood or his youth, being involved with the 4-H Junior farm movement in Cloverdale, the Jaycees?

Singh: Yes, he did go to Jaycees and I went to the Jaycettes. And earlier years, he went to 4-H in Cloverdale, but that's about all. Don't know too much.

Interviewer: How about his involvement with the Co-op Association?

Singh: He was very much involved in the Lettuce Co-op. He got that going, you know, with other farmers, but he was the main.

Interviewer: What year was that in?

Singh: That must've been in the early '60's, somewhere. And he really got that off the ground.

Interviewer: Was he involved in any other growers' groups?

Singh: Yes, he was with the Vegetable Co-op in Richmond and then he's been the president of different groups.

Interviewer: How about his involvement in Surrey organizations? I know he was involved in the Cloverdale Board of Trade and the Surrey Parks and Rec Commission.

Singh: Yes, he was in both.

Interviewer: And did he – what else did he do in his spare time [laughs] if he had any?

Singh: I don't think there was much spare time. He did travel a lot, quite a lot to California and always try to improve, you know, our farming, the way they did it across the line.

Interviewer: Oh, I see.

Singh: Like, for instance, machinery; he would go and have a look at a piece of machinery and take pictures of it and would present it at the person that was supposed to make it and say, "Hey, listen, this is the way I want it and this is the way it's done across the line and that's the way we're going to do it." He did a lot of that. He was involved in a lot of meetings and different things.

[Clock chimes]

Interviewer: Do you remember in 1952, do you remember when the Opera House and the Athletic Hall in Cloverdale caught on fire?

Singh: No, I don't.

Interviewer: No.

Singh: No, I don't remember.

Interviewer: How about when, when the new hospital was built?

Singh: Yes, I remember that; Surrey Memorial.

- Interviewer: Yeah, that was in 1954. Did that make a difference to, you know, finding medical, the doctors around here?
- Singh: I don't know. None of us were, have ever been that sick, you know, so, I wasn't really aware of – it must've been a lot better than it was before. You know, because before we had to go to New Westminster. But, we've been one of the lucky families, that we haven't had much problems with that.
- Interviewer: How about later on when they opened up the Deas Tunnel and the Port Mann Bridge, did that affect, change the landscape at all? Did more people come into your area?
- Singh: Yes, and also a lot easier for our farm, for all the farmers trucking into Richmond. It was a lot quicker and a lot faster.
- Interviewer: So, did, did the business expand in that sense?
- Singh: Well, I think everything else expands a little bit if you're going into a bit of more modern.
- Interviewer: Yeah.
- Singh: And, a lot more people would be on this side, lot more cars than it used to be.
- Interviewer: How about the postal system when that changed over? The small post office closed down in 1969.
- Singh: I didn't like that, because now we have to go to White Rock.
- Interviewer: Oh.
- Singh: And, to pick up our parcels and it was a lot nicer to have it in Cloverdale and I still think they should keep it in Cloverdale. [Laughs]
- Interviewer: What changes have you seen happen to Cloverdale since you arrived?
- Singh: Nothing. Not much, it seems like Cloverdale doesn't grow very much. It just sort of stays the same. The outside, outskirts of Cloverdale have grown, like, houses, but in Cloverdale, itself, it really hasn't, hasn't changed that much.
- Interviewer: How about the rest of Surrey?
- Singh: Oh, Surrey really has grown with houses, like, people moving into Surrey, roads. Actually, I can see – I don't know if – Michelle's Winery, it's on 152nd, well, I was never able to see it and now, at night, I can see the lights of Michelle's Winery. It, it seems to be getting thinner and thinner the bushes, bushes disappearing.
- Interviewer: How do you, how do you feel about the changes within the communities? There's a lot more Indo-Canadians. Do you find that Mac's parents are happier now that people are close by?

Singh: No, they aren't because they find that [whispers] no, I shouldn't. To me it doesn't make any difference.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Singh: It makes no difference. I've always got along with, with East Indian people and I have no problem whatsoever. Of course, some of the people are – and that's no matter which country they come from, some are good, some are bad.

[Laughter]

Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about when you visited India with Mac.

Singh: Mac and I went to India in '67 and that was a great experience. We stayed in Delhi for a few days and then we went, by train, to where his grandfather lived. Well, this train had chickens and it was so full, we, we used to hardly could get on the train. The people were on top of the train, hanging out of the window and we wanted to get something to eat. And we, we had our suitcases with us, okay, and so Mac says, "Well, you go and have something eat first." I said, "How do I get something to eat?" because I didn't know the language so, there was a problem. And then next to us a gentleman was sitting next to us and he says, "Well, you go ahead and I'll keep an eye on the, on your suitcases." Just as fluent English as we could. He must've really laughed and chuckled when we had that problem. And at Grandfather's place it was really nice, it was absolutely really beautiful. They welcomed us so much and it was really nice. The biggest problem was the bathroom.

Interviewer: Oh.

Singh: That was kind of strange.

Interviewer: [Laughs]

Singh: They had never seen a white person in Grandfather's village and Granny, Granny's brother was here in Canada. And he said, "Gerrie, if you come to India, I will build you a toilet, especially for you."

Interviewer: [Laughs]

Singh: So, of course, that's what they did. But, they forgot to put a roof on. [Laughs] So, when I had to go to the washroom everybody went on top, like, they have flat roofs on their houses. Everybody went on their top of their roof and looked down into the, to the toilet. So, I said Mac, I said, "That's the last time I'm going to use that toilet. I'd rather go in a corn patch."

[Laughter]

Singh: But it was a good, it was a nice experience. I would just love to go. If it wasn't for the language, I would just love to go again.

Interviewer: Do you still keep ties with people there?

- Singh: No, I don't. I think they're pretty well all here except one of Granny's youngest brothers. He's the only one that's still in India and Grandfather has passed away.
- Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about their family that has come to Canada since you've known Mac?
- Singh: Granny's three sisters are here, two brothers are here. Grandpa's one brother was here, but he went back. He stayed here for, probably, about fifteen years and then he went back to India.
- Interviewer: What years were those? Was that recently, or -?
- Singh: No, no, no. This was probably in the '60's, early '60's. And now Granny's grandpa, Granny's brothers they all travel back and forth. They'll stay in India for half a year and then they come back here again.
- Interviewer: Can you tell me a little bit about how the Singh family, how you have seen them adapt to Canadian ways of life?
- Singh: I think Granny and Grandpa always have adapted quite well to Canada. You know, language, they tried hard. At first they had a hard time, of course, but in shopping and dressing, you don't see Granny in saris or Grandpa in, you know, in their East Indian suits. In the house, yes, they do have some pictures, East Indian, you know, East Indian pictures and a few little things, but they are really Canadianized and so are Mac's brothers. They're all – well, they were all born here.
- Interviewer: Yeah. Is Mac the oldest?
- Singh: Second oldest. Mac had a sister and she passed away.
- Interviewer: Oh.
- Singh: But, they still make their roti, you know, the East Indian food and, also, they eat – Granny's not feeling very well now so, they don't eat roti much anymore or any spicy food so, it's all Canadian food. Yeah.
- Interviewer: How – can you tell me the difference between the more recent immigrants and how they adapt as opposed to Mac's family?
- Singh: I think of East Indians now know a bit of English and I think that is a big help when you come first here in, in Canada. Which, in those years, anybody came to Canada, I know, Granny's sisters or brothers, they couldn't speak a word of English when they came here. And now, I find, even people that come in fields, you know, they, they can speak a little bit of English and I think that makes a big difference. But, clotheswise or dressing, it's still the same.
- Interviewer: What can you tell me about Mac's life, I mean, living on the farm and owning all the businesses and just a little bit about what you guys did on the farm?

Singh: Well, we – Mac was a hardworking man. He worked, well, if you have your own business, they always say, day and night. And we both, together, we built up Cloverdale Produce Farms and when we bought, paid off Cloverdale Produce Farm, we bought another farm down the road, one house in between here on 168th. We bought that and then we bought this here, the one that, the place that I'm living on. And, like I said, years ago we used to work hard on the farm, like, we'd put up our orders during the day, have supper, and then get the loads loaded and then grate carrots. Wash carrots and grate carrots till eleven, eleven-thirty at night. And start again at seven o'clock in the morning. And Mac would be well up before seven o'clock. He had everything ready for the people, you know. We always tried to, when the children came along, we always had a week or ten days in the summertime and went on holidays just for the kids. That's all we did. You know, what the kids enjoy. And then we tried to take a holiday for about a month in the wintertime when the farm was slack and slow.

Interviewer: I think I'll end it there, then. Did you want to add anything, any stories or any memories?

Singh: No, I can't, no, not right now.

Interviewer: Okay, well, I

[Tape ends]