

This recording is from an interview with Gary Pooni, an urban planner, who was born and raised in the Queensborough neighbourhood of New Westminster. The main themes in the interview are his perspective on the Fraser River, childhood experiences, Queensborough, and racist bullying that he faced as a child.

Interviewer: Jackie Gootee

Interview date: 28 February 2014

Date Range: 1971 – present

Recording Time: 00:42:06

Gary Pooni is the president of Brook Pooni, a Vancouver-based urban planning company. He was born in 1971 at St. Mary's Hospital in New Westminster to a Punjabi family that had immigrated to Canada in the 1960s. One of Pooni's earliest memories of seeing the Fraser River from the top of the downtown parkade. He also spent time as an adolescent running along the Dyke Road in Queensborough and contemplating life, thinking about crossing the River to leave Queensborough and New Westminster. After completing his graduate studies, the first urban planning project was at Fraser Mills.

The interview was conducted as part of History 461 – Oral History Practicum at Simon Fraser University

Section 00:00 – 01:42

In this portion of the interview, Pooni talks about how his family immigrated to Canada from India (Punjab). He was the first member of his family to be born in Canada, and was born and raised in New Westminster. His father worked at Fraser Mills when Pooni was born, and Pooni's firm later did the planning for the rezoning and redevelopment of the Fraser Mills property.

Section 01:43– 05:36

In this portion of the interview, Pooni describes two early memories of the Fraser River. The first was observing the Fraser River from the Front Street parkade, as his family was on their way to the Army Navy discount store on Columbia St. The second was when he met Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau at a campaign rally outside of the King Neptune Restaurant when he was five years old.

Section 05:37 – 11:11

In this portion of the interview, Pooni talks about his family's house at 311 Louellen Street, in the Brow of the Hill neighbourhood of New Westminster. The area was a low-income area, and his father worked as a dump truck driver in the area. A third memory was observing the working river through his father and spending time in the Brow of the Hill industrial area. He contrasts the romantic image of the river with its working and industrial nature, linking this to his personal history of growing up in a blue-collar family.

Section 11:12 – 14:56

In this portion of the interview, Pooni talks about living in the Queensborough neighbourhood of New Westminster. He went to school, played soccer, and volunteered in mainland New

Westminster, but would spend most of his time in Queensborough. He talks about fishing in the Fraser River, and how moving to Queensborough strengthened his connection to the river. He tells how, as a teenager, he would run on Dyke Road, and contemplate life while sitting on a rock looking at the river and listening to Bruce Springsteen songs.

#### Section 14:57 – 20:17

In this portion of the interview, Pooni talks about how his parents wanted their children to have a different life than they had through education, and how they fought for their children and their values. He describes the Fraser River as the backbone and hope of New Westminster families. He describes summers in Queensborough and describes a tree house he built with his brother and some friends during the summer between grades 6 and 7.

#### Section 20:18– 31:30

In this portion of the interview, Pooni talks about the racist bullying that he experienced while growing up in New Westminster. He describes several specific incidents, and the impact of these early years on his life. He transferred schools after grade 4, and the toughest guy in grade 7 was also Indian and protected Pooni and his brother. He includes a brief commentary about his own son's experience growing up today.

#### Section 31:24 – 40:06

In this portion of the interview, Pooni offers his predictions for the future of the waterfront. He states that change will always happen, but the constant element for him will be the watercourse of the river. "Change that is within the cultural and social aspirations of the city and the people who live there should be encouraged". He talks about protecting natural environment of the river, the importance of public access. In accessing the current proposal to move coal through the Fraser Surrey docks, Pooni argues strongly that the current plan does not contain adequate measures to mitigate the risks of environmental damage to the Fraser River and its ecosystems.

#### Section 40:07 – 42:06

In this portion of the interview, Pooni summarizes how the river shaped him in four ways. One, being in awe of the river from the Front Street Parkade and the physical and emotional attachment he had to his hometown. Two, the interest he has for democracy and the public system as a result of meeting Pierre Trudeau by the river as a five-year-old. Third, the river has been a place of work for his family. Fourth, how the river was part of his teenage reflections about life when he sat on that rock listening to Bruce Springsteen.