|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Metadata Field | Description | Data Entry |
| Title | Title of Document | Sheila\_Hill\_With\_Bob\_Ransford\_110521 Complete |
| Accession Number | Catalogue Number of the File | (Administrator Only) |
| Interviewee | Name of Interviewee (SURNAME, given name(s), middle initial) | Robert John (Bob) Ransford |
| Interviewer | Name of Interviewer (Surname, given name(s), middle initial) | Sheila Hill |
| Interview Date | YYYY/MM/DD | 2021/11/05 |
| Interview Date (non-preferred format) | Eg. November 13, 2014 or MM/DD/YY | November 05, 2021 |
| Collection ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Collection |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Series ID |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Series |  | (Administrator Only) |
| Summary | Brief summary of the interview session (Copy and paste from Form 13 – Session Summary) | Bob Ransford begins the interview discussing his family origins and how they ended up in Steveston. He describes the discrimination faced by Italians in Canada, and how the marriage between his grandfather and grandmother was perceived in a negative light by the community. Bob covers his grandfather’s involvement in the dispossession of Japanese Canadians as the custodian of enemy property, and then reflects on what it was like growing up in Richmond and how it differs from today. He touches upon the farming era and approaching suburban development in Richmond during the 1960s, and goes over his experience as a welder, creating craft goods for the fishing industry. Bob highlights his involvement in politics, electioneering, news reporting, and his role influencing the development of Terra Nova and the signing of the order in council to remove the land from the agricultural land reserve. |
| Keywords | Keywords indicating interview subjects (Copy and Paste from “Keyword” section of Form 12 Interview Summary.) | Reston Manitoba, Ransford Family, England, Immigration, Ireland, Steveston Highway, Garry Street, Manitoba Street, Eighth Avenue, Kit Buildings, Hibbing, Minnesota, Winnipeg, Pointe du Bois, Manitoba, Great Depression, Lassam Road, Italy, Seaforth Highlander, Discrimination, Fishing, World War Two, Japanese Internment and Dispossession, Custodian of Enemy Property, Fishing Boats, Japanese Canadian, Trade, Economics, Gillnets, Suburban Development, Soldering, Spot Welding, Easthope Engines, BC Packers Cannery, UBC, Politics, Elections, Pierre Trudeau, Joe Clark, Richmond Independent Voters Association, Richmond News, Richmond Review, CKWX Radio, CISL Radio, Broadcasting, Television, Bill Lam, Tom Siddon, Brian Mulroney, Iron Ore Company of Canada, Conrad Black, Jerusalem Post, London Sunday Times, Gerry St. Germain, Hollinger, Mission-Port Moody, Social Credit Party, Bill Vander Zalm, Nick Loenen, Fantasy Gardens, Pat Carney, Garry Point Park, Terra Nova, Agricultural Land Reserve, Environment and Land Use Committee, David Poole, Stephen Rogers, Doug Sandberg, Asian. |
| Subject | Subject headings applicable to the Interview. The OHC uses Library of Congress Subject Headings. | Reston Manitoba, Ransford Family, England, Immigration, Ireland, Steveston Highway, Garry Street, Manitoba Street, Eighth Avenue, Kit Buildings, Hibbing, Minnesota, Winnipeg, Pointe du Bois, Manitoba, Great Depression, Lassam Road, Italy, Seaforth Highlander, Discrimination, Fishing, World War Two, Japanese Internment and Dispossession, Custodian of Enemy Property, Fishing Boats, Japanese Canadian, Trade, Economics, Gillnets, Suburban Development, Soldering, Spot Welding, Easthope Engines, BC Packers Cannery, UBC, Politics, Elections, Pierre Trudeau, Joe Clark, Richmond Independent Voters Association, Richmond News, Richmond Review, CKWX Radio, CISL Radio, Broadcasting, Television, Bill Lam, Tom Siddon, Brian Mulroney, Iron Ore Company of Canada, Conrad Black, Jerusalem Post, London Sunday Times, Gerry St. Germain, Hollinger, Mission-Port Moody, Social Credit Party, Bill Vander Zalm, Nick Loenen, Fantasy Gardens, Pat Carney, Garry Point Park, Terra Nova, Agricultural Land Reserve, Environment and Land Use Committee, David Poole, Stephen Rogers, Doug Sandberg, Asian. |
| Duration | Length of Interview Session (if applicable) hh:mm:ss | 01:03:33 |
| Interview # | Number of the interview (interviewees according to date) | 1 |
| Session # | Session # of the recording (X of all interviews in the session) | 1 |
| Location | Where the interview was conducted | Webex |
| Media Type | Audio or Video | Audio |
| Restriction Type | Open (Open access)  Restricted (Interview has some restrictions detailed below in “Restrictions”)  Closed (Closed/No Access) | Open [[1]](#footnote-1) |
| Restrictions | Details regarding any restrictions on the file’s use (as outlined in Form 6 –Consent) | N/A |
| Rights | Release Information regarding copyright and access through the repository (as outlined in the Release Agreement) | All rights given to the interviewer (Sheila Hill) and the Oral History Centre |
| Funding | Information on how the project was funded. | N/A |
| Equipment | Equipment used to record the session. (Brand and model number of recorder.) | H2N Zoom Recorder |
| Media Format | Digital format. Eg; .WAV, MP3, .doc, .pdf, .tiff, etc | MP4 |
| Language | Language(s) of the Interview or Document | English |
| Type | Document Type. Eg: Oral History Interview, Conference Proceedings, Presentation, Sharing Circle, etc. | Oral History Interview |
| Repository | Location where the project/collection will be stored. | The Oral History Centre |

**Transcription Legend:**

. . . = Ellipses used to indicate where an interviewee does not complete a thought.

[?] = Used to indicate indecipherable words or unknown spelling of words.

START OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[00:00:21]

SHEILA

Thank you for joining us.

BOB

Thank you, Sheila.

SHEILA

Let’s actually start with your name because there’s another Bob Ransford who did an oral history, and that archival record is available in the Richmond archives online. It was in the 1970s I think, and maybe you can clarify what branch of the family he’s from.

BOB

That was my grandfather, Robert Gilbert Ransford. I’m actually the third Robert in a row. My dad was Robert Gary, but he used the name Gary. So, I’m Robert John.

SHEILA

Great. Well, thank you, that’s really helpful. Your family has a long history in Richmond. I was just wondering if you’d like to tell us about that. In our pre-interview, you mentioned your Italian grandmother and I just wondered if you’d share your roots.

BOB

Sure. My grandfather’s family, the Ransford family, came to Richmond in 1908. My great grandfather, James Arthur Ransford had emigrated from England in 1898. He originally settled in Reston, Manitoba where I think he met my great grandmother. Her family had come from Tipperary, Ireland. I think they were in Reston for a few years, and then they came to Vancouver, I think somewhere around 1904 or ’05 and they settled in a house where, today, Manitoba Street and Eighth Avenue and there’s a large park there now. That house was a row of houses that a former park commissioner of Vancouver donated when he died. It was turned into a park, and they lived in one of the houses there. My great grandfather worked at a stone quarry. Not a quarry, but a place where they actually milled the stone in Vancouver for many of the buildings that were being built in Vancouver out of stone at that time. I think what happened was he lost his job and they heard that there were opportunities in Steveston with the fishing industry. He came out there and they settled there in 1908 in Steveston. My grandfather was born in a secondary house that was at the back of a farm on Railway Avenue, just between Steveston Highway and Garry Street. They were renting from the owner of that farm at that time. That’s where my grandfather was born and, subsequently, they bought property at the northeast corner of Steveston Highway and Railway Avenue. That property, I still own a piece of that and that was in the family for a very long time.

SHEILA

That’s wonderful, and I think one of your grandfathers built a house that’s still on the heritage register. Is that not true?

BOB

That’s right. So, that property at Railway and Steveston Highway, they originally moved into a house that was right on the corner. That house was one of two buildings that were brought to Steveston in 1905 as kit buildings. They were pre-manufactured buildings that were assembled. There were two identical buildings. One of them today is the Steveston Museum building, which is on Moncton Street, and it was a bank at that time. The identical building of that was at the northeast corner of Railway and Steveston where, today, O’Hare’s Pub is located. That’s the property that my great grandfather bought and moved into that house. It would have been around, I believe, 1914 or 1915. I think the house was built there in 1905 and I think they bought it about ten years later with some farm property in the back of that. That’s where my dad grew up. When my grandparents married . . . My grandfather met my grandmother in Steveston. She was from a family that had emigrated from Manitoba, where my great grandparents had settled when they came over to Canada from Italy at the turn of the century.

[00:05:08]

Originally, they settled in Hibbing, Minnesota where there was an iron ore mine. I think there were a lot of Italian immigrants that worked in that mine and, I guess, they migrated north to a site just outside of Winnipeg, Pointe du Bois, Manitoba where there was a dam being built to generate power for the Winnipeg transit system. My great grandpa worked on that. I think when the Depression came and, the Depression started in 1929, they shut that down. They moved west to find jobs and they came to Vancouver, originally, and then moved out to a farm on Lassam Road. It was actually owned by the Lassam family. They rented them a small house, I guess, a small building where they came with their, at the time, with eight of their ten kids. They had a strawberry farm on Lassam Road, and my grandmother met my grandfather when they were in their late teens. They married. It was an interesting relationship because my grandmother was afraid to tell her mother that she’d got married. So, they lived apart, although they were married, for the first year before they admitted to their parents that they had married.

SHEILA

Why was she afraid?

BOB

I think a lot of it had to do with the way, culturally, people were treated at that time. The people that were the merchant class and the ruling class in Steveston at that time were mainly white Anglo-Saxon people. My great grandparents were from Italy, and they were considered, um, they called them peasants. They were considered second class. They were originally Catholics. They were not looked upon as people that were part of the mainstream of the community. This was the first marriage of its kind, I guess. There was only, as far as I know, one other Italian family in Richmond at the time. That was the Gamba family. In fact, one of the Gambas, Pete Louie Gamba, was a brave Seaforth Highlander soldier who was killed in a battle in Italy and is buried, still, in a Canadian war cemetery in Italy. He went back to the country where his parents came from and fought against the same people that were, you know, the kin of his parents. So, there was a lot of that. Of course, this was before that war but there was a lot of discrimination at that time. I was told a story by Wally Tufnail who I worked for when I was in my teens. I worked in a sheet metal shop in Steveston in the summers that he owned, and he was born in Steveston as well around the same time as my grandfather. They were very close friends. He said to me, one time, there was a bit of a scandal when your grandpa married your grandmother. I said, “Why is that?” He said, “She was from the peasant wop family that lived on Lassam Road and that was looked down upon.”

SHEILA

How was it received in your grandfather’s family, that he married this Italian woman?

BOB

I don’t know because they never talked too much about it. All I know is that my grandmother felt very affectionate about her in-laws and I never knew them, my great grandparents, because they both died before I was born. She looked after, my great grandmother, my grandfather’s mother in her final days, you know, in the few years, her final few years she lived with my grandparents. I don’t know how they treated them. I think, probably, fairly well. There was a tension I always felt between my grandfather and his in-laws, you know, his brother in-laws especially and sister in-laws. I think it was that whole cultural difference.

SHEILA

Your family was very active in the fishing industry and around World War Two.

BOB

Yes. My grandfather, like most people that grew up in Steveston, my grandfather started fishing at a very young age at fourteen years old. He was a fisherman and he did other fishing related things throughout his life. In the 1940s he would have been working for Nelson Brothers fishing company, which was one of the larger fishing companies in BC and largely based in Steveston. He was a production manager for them.

[00:10:15]

At the outbreak of the war, there was a real movement to try and, you know, at the time they professed they were protecting themselves, trying to be secure by moving the Japanese people out of Steveston. There was a large population of Japanese immigrants and, you know, some of them second generation at that time that, you know, they started coming to Steveston at the very turn of the century or just before. My grandfather was one of the people that advocated their removal from the community. That was something that I had many discussions with him about. I’ve researched a lot of the history at that time. He was quite outspoken about it. In fact, he was hired by the government as what was called Custodian of Enemy Property where he was responsible with other people for seizing the fishing boats of many of the Japanese fishermen that were sent away. We had a lot of discussions, as I was growing up, about whether that was the right thing to do and whether it was just or not. He often defended it and said that it was he felt threatened and felt that if, you know, if Japan was about to invade that his security would be threatened by these people of Japanese origin. I often questioned that. We had some heated discussions about it, but he felt very strongly that way. He later became a community leader. During the final years of the war, during that period of time he got elected to city council in, I guess, 1948 [corrected date from interviewee is 1946]. The people that were evacuated started coming back, I think, just after that in 1949 and 1950. He was a writer in the Marpole-Richmond Review. I read a column that he wrote around that time, where he wrote about the conditions upon which the community would accept these people coming back to Steveston. It was pretty harsh. It spoke a lot of some of the economic issues. There was a feeling, I think, and I had this confirmed by actually listening to one of the oral histories that he did in the 1970s where he talked about the issue of the Japanese workers taking jobs in the fisheries away from the people that had grown up in Steveston. The Japanese labour suppliers, the labour bosses, as they called them, could bring large numbers of people to a fishing crew or to a number of boats, and staff those boats. That would shut out anybody else because the others were not organized in that way. I think that was really the underlying motivation for making the move to move the Japanese out of Steveston at that time. It might have been masked by this suggestion that there was a security threat. I think it was more of an economic opportunity at the time, to try and seize some of the economic opportunity back from those people. Those were the underlying conditions that, I guess, were there that motivated a lot of the things that happened around that time.

SHEILA

That impacted your childhood, too, the way you were treated, didn’t it?

BOB

Yeah, it’s interesting when I look back on it because I never thought about it at the time, growing up. My grandparents were very close to me, and they insisted that my brother and I both attend Japanese language school when we were quite young. I think I started when I was eight. I never thought about why that was. In fact, ironically, my grandfather, after the war was one of the first people to establish a trading relationship with Japan. He got into the business of importing nylon gillnets from Japan that were manufactured there, and distributing them and selling them to fishermen right throughout British Columbia’s coast. He was one of the first people that set up a relationship like that with trade after the Second World War in Japan. It’s interesting how that evolved. I don’t know what, I guess it was part of the rebuilding of Japan where the industry started to, you know, North American investment and trade started to fuel the rebuilding of Japan. So, he had a trading relationship directly with a company in Japan. I think the idea of me going to school was, you know, one day maybe that relationship would turn into something really significant.

[00:15:24]

So, I attended Japanese school with a lot of my peers that I went to elementary school with and then high school. They were from the Japanese Canadian community. They went to Japanese school three times a week after school, and I went to that. I found that they treated me in sort of, a bit of a deferential way. It didn’t dawn on me why that was. I think it was because my grandfather had this reputation as a community leader on the white, you know, from the white Caucasian community and that he had a lot of power because he was one of the people that influenced what happened to them. The generation that I grew up with, their parents would have been in the internment camps, you know, as young kids at that time, and as teenagers at that time. I think the things that happened around the wartime had an impact on how people related to each other after that.

SHEILA

I’m sure. What other memories do you have of growing up in Richmond. Can you tell us, basically, the decades and then how’s it different from today?

BOB  
I was born in 1961 and I was born in a hospital in Vancouver, because Richmond didn’t even have a hospital at that time. The hospital came in 1966. It was one of the things that my grandfather championed when he was on city council. He was on council from 1946 to 1958. So, twelve years. He was one of the people that worked hard to get that hospital in Richmond at that time. It was a very different community. It was very much about farming and fishing, where I grew up. Steveston was the fishing capital at that time and, you know, most of the people that lived in Steveston had something to do with the fishing industry one way or another. If you didn’t fish in Richmond, if you were not a commuter, you were working in farming, basically. You had a farm or you had something to do with farming. At the time I was born, it was about just the time that the suburban development started happening. You know, the very last years of the 1950s and through the 1960s. So, it was an evolving community when I grew up but it was still very much rooted in farming and food. Steveston was a pretty harsh community compared to what it is today. It was an industrial town, a fishing industrial town with big production factories for processing fish, and most people worked in those factories. A lot of the . . . Steveston at that time was still controlled by the big fishing companies. They owned a lot of the housing and made it available to their workers or fishermen. They supported the fishermen by buying their equipment and, often, financing their boats and building their boats. It was a company town, an industrial, company, resource town. It was just starting to evolve when I started to be aware of what was happening in the community.

SHEILA

You sort of said that you grew up at the end of an era. Can you tell us about that, what you felt about the era before?

BOB

Yeah, I think it was an era of a rural community, a resource based rural community that had, still, its roots firmly planted in farming. There was a lot of Richmond land was farmland. Steveston was still the biggest settlement area in many ways until the suburban development happened and Steveston was all about an industrial fishing town. It was a community that . . . Most people that grew up before me, they stayed in the community and worked in the community and it wasn’t until the early ‘60s when people started settling in Richmond to become a suburban commuter community. So, I saw that transition happen. My family, we farmed as a business up until I left high school. I think 1978 or ’79 was the last year we farmed. We farmed as a mixed market garden, I would call it. We grew . . . We had two acres on the original property where my great grandfather settled.

[00:20:25]

We ended up, eventually, with two acres. We had sold off land for suburban development and my grandfather had done some housing development on some of his land. So, what we were left with by that time was about two acres. Directly across the street on the southeast corner of Steveston Highway, we leased five acres from a developer that eventually developed it but was holding onto that farmland. We farmed a mixed farming and we had a roadside stand, where we sold vegetables. We actually sold vegetables to grocery stores as well. So, that was the end of the farming era through the late ‘60s and through the 1970s, basically, where that transition kind of happened as development started encroaching on the farmland.

SHEILA

You also talked about working in a sheet metal shop.

BOB

That’s right. I worked in Steveston sheet metal shop which was on Number One Road on the west side of Number One Road, just south of Moncton Street where Steveston bakery is today. It was the second generation of a sheet metal business there. It was run by Wally Tufnail, who was born in Steveston. He was born around the same time my grandfather was born. I think he was born in 1910, and I think my grandfather was born in 1912. Walley went to work in that sheet metal shop of the former owner before that when he was fourteen years old, as an apprentice. I worked with him when he was in his mid to late sixties. He had rebuilt a new building there. The building is still there today. That was the second generation of the sheet metal shop that was there. He was one of the last of the real craftsmen. He worked with his hands and, you know, he was, at that time, still soldering sheet metal using lead solder. It was just about the time I worked with him in the mid to late ‘70s that they transitioned to spot welding metal at that time. So, I learned some of the old craft and most of the sheet metal work that he did was in support of the fishing industry and the marine industry that was there. We made stovepipes for stoves on fishing boats. We made exhaust pipes for the engines on fishing boats. We made steel wraps that went around the drums that pulled in the nets. We made fuel tanks for fishing boats and all of that kind of thing, and general sheet metal work. I learned that craft with him. I started working there when I was thirteen and I worked for four summers, I guess, in that sheet metal shop, four or five summers with him, and during school holidays and that kind of thing.

SHEILA

You said you also worked next to the Easthope Engines.

BOB

Yeah, on that same street. That street south of Number One Road, south of Moncton, was a very industrial street at that time. So, there was some retail on the southwest corner of Number One and Moncton, and then as you move south down Number One Road [corrected from Moncton by interviewee] there was the sheet metal shop, and then there was Easthope Engines which took up about half of a block. They had a place where they actually manufactured, originally manufactured engines including, they had a foundry where they’d cast the engine blocks and everything there, and then a machine shop. They were still there when I worked there. They also had a business by then in Vancouver as well. As you move down that block, there was another building, I think where Prickly Pear is now. My grandfather owned a business there for a while making lead acid batteries for boats. That was much before I was there. There was some other kind of industrial business in that building at the time that I worked at the sheet metal shop. That street was very much an industrial street. Directly across the street, on the east side, was the loading dock rail line. Originally, the tram line and then the rail delivery line that loaded and unloaded supplies for the imperial plant, BC Packers Cannery, and then loaded canned salmon going out from the warehouse that was right across the street.

SHEILA

I’m just wondering, growing up in Steveston, you said you lived on a farm. I’m wondering if you could tell me where that was, and what school you went to, and what memories you have of that farm.

[00:25:36]

BOB

Sure, that farm was part of that original property that my great grandpa settled with the house that was on the northeast corner of Railway and Steveston Highway. At that time, you mentioned earlier that there was a house that still exists today at 10700 Railway Avenue that my Italian great grandfather, James Spargo, he built that house for my grandparents. He was a carpenter. He came from a port town outside of Naples called Puzzuoli in Italy. I believe he trained as a marine carpenter there because his fulltime job was working at the Britannia heritage, or Britannia Shipyard, we call it the Britannia Heritage Museum Shipyard today, but it was Britannia Shipyard which was owned by BC Packers then. He repaired and, I think, built a few boats there, wooden boats, but he mainly repaired them. In his backyard, he lived on Steveston Highway as well, further to the east in the 5000 block, and he used to build a boat or two, a fishing boat or two in his backyard every year and sell that but, he built the house on Railway. So, I first grew up in that. I grew up, first of all, in a house that still exists at 10720 Railway Avenue that my grandfather built for my dad in the late 1950s, early 1960s, and then the house that my great grandpa built for my grandparents, I spent time in that house and that still exists. That was built in, it started being built in 1932 and was finished in 1936 when my dad was born. Then we sold that house in the ‘70s and I moved into a house at 5071 Steveston Highway that my grandfather built. That’s where I grew up. We had, as I say, about two acres left of what was the farm that my great grandfather originally started there. That’s where we farmed out of there and then the property across the street.

SHEILA

What did you farm?

BOB

We farmed mixed vegetables at that time. We would have a couple of cattle in the back that we used for our own purposes, and some chickens and stuff like that. Prior to that, my great grandfather and my grandfather both farmed. They had a fur farm, a mink farm. They did some other mixed farming, but it was a very large mink farm at one time called Richmond Fur Farms. They grew mink for a number of years.

SHEILA

That was gone by the time you were . . .

BOB

Yup, it would have been shut down just about the time I was born in ’61 or 1960. There were still a couple of other mink farms nearby. There was a next door neighbour that had a mink farm as I was growing up that was still on Railway Avenue. I think, that was the last of the mink farms in that area.

SHEILA

Okay

BOB  
Mink farms came to the Steveston area because of the availability of the waste from the salmon processing that was used to make the feed for the mink. They would grind up the salmon carcasses and the waste from the salmon industry, and they used that to feed to the mink.

SHEILA

So, your family had a large mink farm?

BOB

They did have a very large mink farm. I don’t know how many furs, but they would produce a few hundred minks every few months, I guess. I can tell you a story. In the late 1990s, I did some renovations on my grandmother’s house, and I built a garage at the back. When the contractor was building the garage, he had to excavate a little bit. He came to me, quite alarmed, and he said “There’s a huge cemetery of cats back there. What did I dig up? I found all these cat skeletons.” I said, “I don’t know what that would be” and I mentioned it to my grandmother, and she said “Those aren’t cats, those were the mink. When we skinned them we would throw them into a big pit and just bury them.” That was what was in the backyard.

SHEILA  
Interesting. That must have been a surprise.

BOB  
It was.

SHEILA

You graduated from high school in Richmond.

[00:30:23]

BOB  
I graduated in 1979 from Steveston High. So, I attended originally an annex called the James McKinney Annex, on Lassam Road, was my first school, grades one to four. That was an annex of Lord Byng School in Steveston. So, I attended Lord Byng School in grades five, six, and seven. That was the same school that my grandfather attended when he went to school, Lord Byng School. My dad didn’t. He went to school at a private school in Vancouver, but my grandfather went to Lord Byng. Then, I went to Hugh Boyd Junior Secondary School, and then I graduated from Steveston Senior Secondary.

SHEILA

Do you have memories from that period?

BOB

Yeah, I mean, there was only two high schools up until, um, yeah, there was only two senior high schools in Richmond at that time, Richmond and Steveston. There was always a rivalry between the two, especially sports rivalry. The Steveston high school had the Steveston Packers football team and basketball team. Richmond High had the Richmond Colts football team and basketball teams. There was always a strong rivalry between those schools. I guess, McNair High School came after that. I don’t think it became a senior secondary school until after I graduated. I can’t remember for sure on that.

SHEILA

That rivalry is talked about still. And then you went onto university?

BOB  
No, well, yes, I did. In fact, I wandered around UBC for about six months and decided that university wasn’t for me. I won some scholarships to attend university, and I was originally going to go into law. I started in a bachelor’s degree and one day I just felt I was wasting my time there and I had other things that I wanted to do. I got involved politically quite young. When I was about fourteen or fifteen, I started getting involved as a political volunteer. When I was about sixteen or seventeen, I started volunteering for what then was a community access television channel that the cable companies ran. So, we had a local TV station and I started covering the Richmond City Council meetings as a reporter, and it was before the council had live television coverage. So, I would do a weekly, or a bi-weekly I guess it was, sort of play-by-play roundup of what happened at the council meeting for broadcasts on that television station. I was quite involved in following what was going on politically, at the time. I got involved in provincial politics when I was in high school and campaigned for the 1979 election, I guess it was, for the Social Credit Party, and got quite involved in that. That kind of led me to thinking about I wanted to get more involved in politics and that kind of diverted my attention away from what I was doing at university at the time because, at that time, there had been a few elections that happened in the course of a few years. There was the ’79 provincial election, there was the 1979 federal election in which Joe Clark got elected, and then there was a 1980 election after that, which Joe Clark got defeated and Pierre Trudeau came back. All of that electioneering that was going on, I kind of got caught up in and it diverted my attention away from university. That’s when I decided to leave UBC and try and do something else. I started actually getting paid to work in politics. That’s kind of where I went.

[00:34:32]

SHEILA

Which is a remarkable achievement. When you were working in politics, was it on the ground in Richmond?

BOB

Well, my first paid position was for the Richmond Independent Voters Association, which was a civic party that had just formed to re-elect Gil Blair as mayor and a slate of city councillors. That was in 1979 civic election which I was the campaign manager for that. I was eighteen years old. I got paid to run that campaign. Then, I got a job in . . . Richmond had a radio station that started in 1980. It was called CISL radio. There was a competition among a couple of groups to get a license from the CRTC to set up a radio station in Richmond. The radio station got started and I had just graduated from high school, and through politics and things I was doing as a reporter, I was still doing the volunteer work with the cable station, and I got hired in the news department of CISL Radio when they went on the air in May of 1980. I worked there for about nine or ten months, and then I moved on to work for a couple of . . . I worked for CKWX Radio and I worked for Broadcast News as what was called a stringer reporter that got hired, basically, story-by-story. I worked in that for a while, then I went to work as editor of the Richmond News. Richmond News was a start up newspaper at that time as a rival to the long-established Richmond Review. I guess it started in about ’77 or ’78 by Bill Lam who was an Asian fellow who had emigrated, actually, from Central America. He was born in Central America but he was of Asian extraction. He came to Richmond and started the Richmond News. I worked with him as a reporter and then edited that paper in 1980 and ’81.

SHEILA

How was it different then? What were the issues? What was it like covering Richmond?

BOB

Local politics were really heated. The city government was fighting some really big battles over, you know, what was happening with the real burgeoning development in Richmond, the suburbanization of Richmond at that time. The council was very much split left and right. You know, a five-four split either way. There was a lot of heated debates over some big issues at that time. I actually became a columnist and I weighed in on a lot of those issues with some pretty controversial columns at the time.

SHEILA

Well, that sounds fascinating. Then, what was your next move?

BOB

Then I was offered an opportunity to go to Ottawa in 1981, late 1981. Tom Siddon, who was a member of parliament at the time, a Conservative member of parliament, he approached me. He was looking for a research assistant to work out of his Ottawa office. So, I decided to go to Ottawa. I just turned twenty at the time, and I went to work on Parliament Hill for him.

SHEILA

And then?

BOB

Well, then I was pretty much up to my neck in politics, and I committed to go down there and work for him for a year. I never thought about living in the east and I never thought I would want to, you know, permanently live there. So, I committed to working for him for a year. Just near the end of that year, there was a lot happening in the Conservative Party with Joe Clark’s leadership being challenged after he lost the 1980 election. I had the opportunity to meet Brian Mulroney while I was working in Tom’s office. Mulroney, at the time, he was the president of a mining company, the Iron Ore Company of Canada. Living in Montreal, he had contested the leadership for the Conservative Party in 1976 and lost. With Joe Clark’s leadership being under fire by his own caucus, there was a lot of talk about trying to unseat him. Brian Mulroney came to Ottawa one day, and met with Tom Siddon and I was introduced to him. Then, Tom and I were asked by him to fly up to the mine at Labrador City because Tom was the mining critic for the Conservative Party, at that time, in Parliament. We went up to Labrador City on Brian Mulroney’s private jet. We met with a number of the workers up there. I was so impressed with how much they believed in this guy as a leader.

[00:40:09]

You know, the people that he was leading in the company. It was pretty much known, at that time, that in a few months after that he was going to be entering a leadership race if the membership of the Conservative Party decided that they were going to call for a leadership review. So, I made it pretty clear that if that was going to happen I’d like to be a part of that. In early 1983, no, sorry, I’m just trying to get these dates lined up properly. In early 1983, a leadership review was called at a convention in Winnipeg that I attended. That’s when Brian Mulroney entered the leadership contest. Interestingly, he sent someone out to Richmond, one of his people that was working with him, and putting together a team to lead a national campaign to become elected leader of the Conservative Party. He sent a fellow named Peter White out to meet with me and see if I wanted to be part of that. I didn’t know who Peter White was. He asked me what I had been doing. I said I’d been working with the Richmond News, and he said, “I actually own the rival newspaper. I own the Richmond Review.” I didn’t realize who he was, but he was a partner with Conrad Black and another fellow named David Radler, who owned a chain of newspapers across the country including the Richmond Review. They went on to become Hollinger, you know, which became one of the biggest news conglomerates in the world before the downfall of Conrad Black. They owned the Jerusalem Post and the London Sunday Times, and a few other newspapers; the Chicago Tribune. They became a very large newspaper conglomerate. Peter White, at that time, was a close friend of Brian Mulroney’s and he recruited me to work on the campaign. I did work on that leadership campaign and ended up in the leadership convention in Ottawa, in June of 1983 when Mulroney was elected leader of the party. I went on to work for one of his members of parliament after the election. He got elected in a by-election in 1983. There was another member of parliament that got elected in that same by-election in Mission-Port Moody riding in British Columbia. His name was Gerry St. Germain. I went to Ottawa with him to establish him in his first office in Ottawa and worked with him through that period until the election in 1984, when Mulroney got elected as prime minister. Then, I worked there in the government caucus chairman’s office in Ottawa. Gerry became the chairman of the Conservative caucus. I worked there for the next two years after that, and then came back to BC.

SHEILA  
And then?

BOB

I came back and I was going to get out of politics. Politics is a funny thing. Events happen and they just, kind of, snowball into bigger things. At that time, Bill Bennett had resigned as premier, and a leadership contest was called in the Social Credit Party. They had never had a leadership contest before. They wanted to put on a leadership convention, and they looked for people that had had any experience in leadership conventions. I had been fresh off the convention in Ottawa that elected Mulroney. So, I got hired to help organize the convention in Whistler in 1986, at which time Bill Vander Zalm got elected as the leader of the party, and, because I was involved in that, he became premier, of course; and because I was involved in that, he asked me to come and work in the Premier’s Office. So, I actually moved to Victoria and worked for a little over two years in the Premier’s Office.

SHEILA

Bill Vander Zalm owned Fantasy Gardens in Richmond, and you were also from Richmond. Were there any implications, of both of you being from Richmond, on provincial politics?

[00:44:41]

BOB

Well, you know, of course he was one of the two Richmond MLAs. Nick Loenen was the other Richmond MLA. He had established Fantasy Gardens as a business, but when he got elected in politics it became very much, they called it, an attraction, in many ways. It was a place where, you know, he actually continued to live in Fantasy Gardens. Fantasy Gardens was a fantasy garden. It was quite an interesting development. It was a place that, you know, it was a commercial center, it was a botanical garden, and it had some residential. He lived in one of the residential units there, in a castle. It was developed as a theme park, and the building that he lived in was developed, kind of, in the shape of a castle. He lived in an apartment in this castle. So, when he wasn’t in Victoria during the week, he was at Fantasy Gardens on the weekend. It became a place where, if you wanted to talk to the premier, you went to Fantasy Gardens because he was very much part of what was going on at the attraction. He was there, out front and centre. If you wanted to talk to him, you would walk up to him because it was a regional attraction. People went there to the restaurants and the shops that were there, and he was there. They could meet the premier face to face. It was quite bizarre because he would meet people and have impromptu meetings over issues and things that they wanted him to work on for them. He would come back to Victoria on a Monday morning with a paper bag and he’d dump this paper bag on the desk, and it would be a bunch of notes that he’d scribbled from people he’d met with, and letters that they’d given him, and telephone message slips. He’d dump it there and say to me and to the secretary, and a few others in the office, “Well, this is what I dealt with in the weekend. You guys are going to need to follow up on all of this.” It was a pretty unconventional way of dealing with that. Normally, you went to a constituency office and met with your MLA and there were staff at the office, and all of that. That’s not the way he operated. He operated one to one. He had an office in Richmond, but he rarely visited it. He did his retail politics with the people that showed up at Fantasy Gardens. I remember once incident. At the time, one of the big issues that was being dealt with was a decision made in the United States to impose a countervailing duty on softwood lumber that was being exported to the US from Canada, and it was really having an economic impact. We had to appeal to the federal government to try and do something to lift this burden that the US had imposed on us, this trade burden. We were working closely with the Mulroney government, and because I was, you know, I had some ties to them, I had worked there, I was often, kind of, caught in the middle between that or asked to be part of that. We got down to some delicate negotiations, and Pat Carney was a member of parliament in Vancouver, and she was the trade minister at the time. She was dealing with some trade negotiations over that, and it was on a weekend, and some decision had been reached in her negotiations with the US. She needed to brief the premier on that. The media also knew that there was something happening. So, he asked me to come and meet him at the gardens. The premier asked me to come and meet him at the gardens because he needed to do an interview at, I think it was CBC Studios in Vancouver. His driver, Bill Kay, was not available that weekend, and I was in Richmond. He said, “Can you drive me to the studio and we can talk about the issue before I go there,” and so on. It was around Christmas time, and I went to the gardens to pick him up and there was a huge lineup because they had quite a display of Christmas lights in the gardens and so on. People paid an admission price to go and see that. I got there and he was at the front admission gate taking his photo with people that were waiting in line to get into see the gardens and the light show and, you know, glad-handing and saying hello to people and everything. There was a call come in. They said, “Minister Carney’s on the phone, premier, they want to talk to you.” He was at the front gate where they were paying to get in. He didn’t want to be pulled away because he loved glad-handing with the people. I said, “Premier, you’ve got to take the call. The minister’s on the phone.” So, he kind of stepped a little bit away from the cash register and there was a phone back there. He was talking to her on the phone and there was a parrot in a cage that was screaming. There were people streaming in that were yelling at him and saying hello to him and he was yelling back at them, and he was cupping the phone with his hand so he could say merry Christmas to them while he was talking to the minister on the phone about major trade negotiations for Canada. It was quite bizarre. I had to pull him away and get him in the car, and get him downtown to get on TV to talk about what was going on with these trade negotiations.

[00:50:19]

SHEILA

I’m sorry, Bob, the call just dropped there for a moment or two. You were just at the front gate when I lost you.

BOB

Oh, I’m sorry. He was at the front gate and welcoming all of these people that were coming in to see the Christmas display and, you know, there were people taking money at the cash register, and he was right beside it and he was greeting people. “Hi. How are you? Merry Christmas!” and talking to people, and glad-handing, and so on. Somebody came to me and said there’s a call on the line from Minister Carney wants to talk to the premier. I grabbed him and I said, “The minister needs to talk to you.” He said, “Well, I’m meeting people here.” I said, “No, no, you’ve got to take this call.” He stepped back away from the cash register. There was a phone on the wall. He grabbed the phone and he started talking to her. There was a parrot in a cage that was beside him that was screaming, and there were people that were yelling at him. “Hello. Merry Christmas.” He was cupping the phone and saying hello to them and trying to talk to the minister at the same time about these delicate trade negotiations that she had been trying to undertake.

SHEILA

That’s pretty funny. You were saying that, when you were covering politics and working in the premiers offices, there were a couple of specific issues that you covered. One was Garry Park and the other was Terra Nova. I’m wondering if you could tell me about those.

BOB

Garry Point’s a different one and we’ll go back to thatTerra Nova was a really big issue in Richmond in the, um, I’m trying to get my dates so that I’m clear on what dates, in the early to mid 1980s. It was a large tract of land. Today, it’s a big subdivision in the northwest corner of Richmond on the riverfront between the northwest portion, north of Westminster Highway and west of Number One Road right up to the dike. It was a few hundred acres. I think, probably, 4-500 acres that was in the agricultural land reserve. It had been bought by **Milan Ilich** who was a local Richmond developer. He planned to develop it and he needed to get it out of the agricultural land reserve. There was quite a battle, first of all, at Richmond City Council. The council had to agree to back the application to the Agricultural Land Commission for the removal of the land. It was a battle at Richmond City Council over that. That preceded the election, the provincial election, in 1986. Vander Zalm got elected premier. The Agricultural Land Commission had recommended against removing the land from the agricultural land reserve. It was appealed to the cabinet. There was an Environment and Land Use Committee of cabinet that actually made the decision on whether it should be appealed or not. Ultimately, the premier needed to sign the order in council that would enact the decision of the Environment and Land Use Committee of cabinet. Premier Vander Zalm had a cabinet meeting, and that was one of the items on the agenda. I gathered that, I didn’t sit in cabinet meetings, but I gathered there was a heated discussion in the cabinet. Some of the ministers were not in favour of it, and some were. The premier was not in the habit of taking votes at cabinet. He would listen to the consensus around the table, and then would either summarize it and say, “This is the direction we’re going,” or he would simply not make a decision and go away and sign the order in council for whichever way he thought he should. He came out of the cabinet meeting where that discussion took place, and we were sitting in David Poole’s office. That, at the time, was his chief of staff. Principal Secretary, I think, was his title. It was the premier and I, and David Poole just after the cabinet meeting. They kind of relayed it to me that they had both been in the meeting. They relayed it to me that it was a bit of a tough meeting because there was quite a debate over this Terra Nova land. He had the order in council in his hand and he said, “You know, I have to sign this. I don’t know which way I’m going to sign it.

[00:55:24]

I don’t know if I’m going to go . . .” I believe he told me that Stephen Rogers, and I’m not sure that I’m correct on this but I’ll say that I’m not sure and correct, I believe he told me Stephen Rogers, who was the minister responsible, at that time, I think minister of environment, so, he had the responsibility for that committee of cabinet, I believe he said Stephen Rogers wasn’t in favour of it, but that a number of other ministers were. So, we were sitting there and he said to me, “What do you think I should do?” I said, “I think you should sign it.” He said, “Well, why do you think I should do that?” I said, “Because Richmond Council asked you to do that, and the majority of council asked you to do that.” He said to me, “Well, you know there’s this allegation that **Milan Ilich** is a friend of mine, and because during the leadership campaign, I used his helicopter, I flew in his helicopter, he donated a flight on his helicopter to me.” He said, “I don’t really know him. I know who he is but he’s not a friend of mine but, you know, they’re going to blow it all out of proportion. If I sign it, they’re going to say, oh, he bought me off and all of that.” I said, “I don’t think they will. I think what’s more important is you say that Richmond Council asked you to do it and you’re following what the local government decided.” He said, “You know, that’s probably a good argument.” So, he signed it right in front of me. That’s how the decision was made whether Terra Nova got developed or not.

SHEILA  
Wow, that’s remarkable.

BOB

I told **Milan Ilich** that story a number of months later and he couldn’t believe it.

SHEILA

What about the story for the creation of Garry Point Park?

BOB  
That goes back to an earlier era. That’s kind of how I got first involved in municipal politics. In 1977 or so, there was a move to develop Garry Point. A West Vancouver developer wanted to build some apartments on it, and it became a very controversial issue in Steveston. There were people led by Harold Steves, and Doug Sandberg, who was a councillor at the time, and a few others that really mounted a campaign to stop that from happening. My grandfather owned a lot right at the end of Seventh Avenue, at the south end of Seventh Avenue, right now where the concession stand is for the Garry Point Park and the caretaker’s house. My grandfather had owned a lot there for a number of years. He bought it and dreamed of one day building a house there because it was right at the end of the developed part of Steveston overlooking the river, right out into the Strait of Georgia. He was opposed to, um, there was a suggestion that a park should be made of all of Garry Point, and he was opposed to that because he knew that that would include his land. If a park was going to be there, it was going to be his land would be taken for a park as well. He opposed that. I got active in studying that whole issue and then writing about it, and eventually, you know, working for the Richmond paper writing about it. That kind of got me involved in the political debates and so on. I was in favour of developing it and, subsequently, the decision was made not to develop it. It was a five-four vote of Richmond Council. It ended up being that the city actually expropriated my grandfather’s property. It became part of the park. It was a sad day for him because he always dreamed of building a house there. He got very little for it. When I look back on it today, and I told Harold Steves this not that many years ago, that I think I was wrong and he was right. It was a good decision to do what they did because I think it’s one of the most magnificent parks in Metro Vancouver. It certainly is something that’s very much enjoyed by the people of Richmond. I walk there often. I think I was wrong, and he was right.

SHEILA

That’s an interesting piece of history as well. Thank you. What about after your days with BC politics and just reflections on Richmond, because you’ve been in the Richmond community for a long time. What about just, how it’s changed?

BOB

Well, you know, I got out of politics in the mid 1980s or late 1980s and got into the development business. I’ve seen development happen. I actually was involved in one project working for a developer, at the time, that I did in Richmond. It’s the only development I did in Richmond. Richmond has changed enormously in that period of time.

[01:00:26]

Our fastest growth, I think, has taken place since 1986, probably, with a decision that was made to, um, in Hong Kong, basically, with Hong Kong reverting back to the Chinese government and the exodus of a lot of people from Hong Kong that came to Vancouver, and then the sale of the expo lands to Li Ka-shing. Both of those very much changed what was happening in Metro Vancouver and changed Richmond dramatically because of the influx of Asian immigration to Richmond. It’s transformed our community unimaginably when I think back to the time of the 1970s and ‘80s when I was most involved in the community, and I think all for the better. When I think about the kind of town that I grew up in as a kid, as I told you, it was a . . . Steveston especially and Richmond largely was a pretty rough town. Steveston was an industrial town and Richmond was just coming of age as a suburban place. There was a lot of commuter traffic problems getting to Vancouver as it started to grow as a suburb. Today, it’s a complete community. It’s got transit back. When I say back, we had a tram up until 1958 and I prize this one clipping I have of the Richmond newspaper. It’s a story of my grandfather in 1958, he was still a councillor at the time who had lost an appeal in court to try and stop the tram from being shut down. He said, “I believe, within fifty years, we’ll have a tram back in Richmond.” Well, in nineteen or, sorry, in 2009 we had the SkyTrain back. He was right. Rapid transit came back to Richmond. I think Richmond’s changed dramatically, but it’s changed in a way that it’s a very modern city and, probably, most advantageously positioned in the world where the geopolitical changes transforming the world today, with the Asian focus and the Asian geopolitical power that’s there now, we’re on the leading edge. We have a community where more than half of the population has Chinese roots. Seventy-five percent of the population, or just thereabout, has Asian origins of some sort. We’re a community that’s well positioned for what’s going to happen in the world as it changes over the next decade or two.

SHEILA

Bob, thank you so much. This has been a really fascinating interview. I really enjoyed it.

BOB

Okay, thank you, Sheila.

END OF TAPE PART ONE OF ONE

[01:03:29]

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)