

Part Three: In the Woods

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“Them Jokers Could Work”

Turpentine work cycled according to the season of the year, the flow of the gum, and the age of the tree. Like any occupational group, turpentiners had specialized terms for the work processes and techniques. A group of 10,000 trees was called a crop, and when a tree was first worked, it was called a virgin. After the worked face was raised up three or four feet, then the tree became a yearling. Anthrom Green, who began working turpentine during the Depression as a teenager around Soperton, Georgia, describes starting a new crop as follows:

New crops was done in the winter of the year, and the first crew that they had to go in--these were pine trees. I don't know exactly what size, but they were good size. They had a crew called the blazers. They made a blaze on the right at the bottom of the tree. And in that blaze, another crew came with a broad axe, to cut a slot to put a tin in that the gum would run on, and then there was a cup nailed and put under that tin. And this crop, this tree, then was called a virgin crop. And they made a streak with a hack: a hack was, was a stock, oh, about 2 feet with a weight on the bottom of it, and the hack was a cutter that would cut. You had to chip with it, so the weight was to help him chip. And he would make a mark like a "V." The first mark like so, and there, the gum would run right into the cup.

Now, they had to cut a streak like this every week. And see, it become a face after it keep going, so everything you chip, it made what you call a cat face. Keep going up, keep going up, keep going up. And the tar would keep running down.

This virgin was used until it would get at least 3 or 4 feet; you chipping boxes then....Then they would raise the cup and call it a yearling. It begin to be 3 or 4 feet and they'd raise the cup up. Pulling boxes was the same

as chipping boxes. Because when it got up high, where you pulled, and you pulling boxes, you did that more or less by the weight of your body anyway.

Work in the turpentine woods varied according to the season of the year.

Although Green hadn't turpented since 1938, he vividly recalled the cyclical nature of the work year:

In the winter they done what they call raking pines. You had to rake about and circle around each tree. Rake the pine needles away from the tree, and each one, you got paid for so many that you raked per day. You had yourself assigned a number or you had some word. Some of them, some of them would have a word like Topline, some of them had a word like Four, some of them might have a word like Fifteen. Somebody had to keep tab of this to know how many you had raked. That was in order when seasons come, when fire hit the woods, that if you had raked around, it wouldn't ruin that tree.

There was another process when winter time came. As it get colder, the gum would stick on the face. So in the winter they had to do what they call scraping. Now this was hard. You had to scrape that off the face, and those cups would be full, and they'd dip them out into the barrels: that also made turpentine, and they would scrape that. Now the face is clean now and the tar can run down easier, and they loose a lot of it sticking on the face. So that's why they had to scrape it in the winter. And then, springtime come. That's when your turpentine business really started to work.

Now I forget exactly how long it took for those cups to fill. And when those cups were full, then a crew that we called the dippers, they would come in and dip the tar. And they done it by the barrel. Back in those days it was a very little bit they were getting per barrel to dip the gum. And whenever the barrels were full, each one would do so many barrels per day. If he was a good strong man he could do a lot of barrels a day. A mule and a wagon went all down in the rough, pick up the barrels and put them out to where the truck could get to them. The wagons would go down into places where trucks couldn't go. Then, them barrels was loaded on that wagon and brought out up higher, higher ground, that the truck could pick it up. They had to use skids to roll the barrels up on the truck. Turpentineing was a hard job.

To dip a man had to use a big can, but some call it a bucket. It was made from nail kegs. Finally as things progressed, they started really making them in factories. They made them out of metal, but the first ones were made out of nail kegs, and they put a handle on it so you could carry it, and your leg helped you carry that heavy bucket.

Yes, it was a hard job, ah; they had what you would call a woods rider. Usually, he was white--he ride a horse. Now, he would ride the route just like you worked it, and he'd ride to see if you missed putting your streak on. If you missed any he would let you know about it.

The final stage of the process was stilling, initially done by fire. As with the work in the woods, much of the labor at turpentine stills was done by African American men. Although Green didn't work as a stiller himself, he knew "about the still because the house that my father and I lived in was right across the street from the still."

And the still, the process was the same as the way they make moonshine. The still, they would load this big kettle. It was like a two story outfit; down below is where, oh, it was like copper tubing all the way around in a great big tub, and that was for it to run down through. But they had to cook it until the turpentine came all around through this big tub, and come out down below where your stiller took care of filling the barrels with turpentine. Ah, it be done cooked and cooked and cooked, until when they do turn it out to run it, to run the tar out, its rosin then. It's been cooked, it's not gum anymore its rosin. It's real hot. They had open barrels to put that in.

So they would keep stilling the gum to make turpentine, and they also was making rosin that came out of it: rosin, they could make glass, they could make ah, rubber, oh I don't know how many products they could make out of the rosin that came from the turpentine.

Though turpentine was hard physical labor, turpentine workers often claimed they were "born to work. The pride with which turpentiners relate their stories about the past stem from the life lessons they have learned about the value of work. Lore

surrounding George Music, Jr.'s great-grandfather's prowess and work ethic has been a source of familial pride since the latter part of the 19th century. Music family folklore has it that the man worked on the railroads with an eight and one-half pound axe at the end of a four foot handle; that he ate grits, ham, and a dozen eggs for breakfast every morning; that he once ate all of an 18-pound ham by himself in one sitting. In the woods, Music's great-grandfather could allegedly cut around the bases of trees all morning without any of them falling. Come midday, he would saw through one to make it topple and, by domino effect, all the trees he had been working throughout the morning hours would give way around him. To top it all off, he was a prizefighter and could topple men much like he toppled pines.

The Musics are a family in which a promotion to turpentine boss was seen as a detriment, for such a position would remove much of the physical labor from the job. Indeed, George Music, Jr.'s grandfather worked up to the position of woods rider on one South Georgia camp in early 20th century, only to long for his days as a turpentine hand. George Music, Sr. also believed himself born to work turpentine. He toiled from dusk to dawn among his cherished pines, and he demanded no less of his son. Working alongside his father, Music, Jr. recalls how he had few days off during his adolescence. Only on one occasion was work called off for anything other than a bad storm; on a sweltering summer day of 106-degree heat, Music's father postponed work until the next morning, hoping for cooler weather.

For George Music, Sr., a life's work in turpentine literally meant the difference between life and death. As he grew older, he developed heart trouble that would eventually take his life in September of 2001, but he would not go without a fight.

According to the doctor in Waycross who treated Music throughout his battle with cardiovascular illness, the old-timer's lungs had been enlarged as a result of his lifelong devotion to working turpentine. In fact, the doctor had to take two x-rays of Music's lungs, for one screen simply was not large enough to hold them. The doctor said the only cases in which this had ever been seen were in athletes and in a few elderly citizens that had worked exceptionally hard throughout their lives.

When the time finally came for Music, Sr. to have heart surgery, the doctor insisted that the chances of successful surgery were slim. But the doctor was clueless to the fact that his workhorse patient had been in the woods chipping turpentine boxes the entire day before. "I don't think you know who you're dealing with here," Music, Jr. told him. "He'll be walking in three days." The surgery was performed on Friday; on Saturday, Music, Sr. was off of life support; by the following Wednesday, the old man was plowing corn on the only piece of land he had ever called home. Music's fierce individualism, strict self-discipline, and innate devotion to hard work had enabled him to at least postpone the inevitable. His passion for working turpentine kept him going. Music Jr. thought his father literally born to work turpentine; every year, he looked forward to chipping and pulling in the thick of his treasured pines. But as work in turpentine declined, so too did his health. When the demand for the work disappeared, his father's passion for living had also vanished. He died at the age of 67.

Turpentiners, like other workers, tell stories, boasts, and jokes about either their own or another worker's performance on the job. "A black man, I'm going to tell you," C. J. Taylor begins, "He wasn't no educated man back then. There was mighty few, but them jokers could work, that's right." Junior Taylor recalls how he would come upon

workers sleeping against pine trees with a bottle of moonshine after a night of heavy boozing rather than return home and risk not making it to work the next morning. Some stories deal with pranks which serve as rites of initiation, as experienced workers break in a newcomer or otherwise put him in his place. Willie White recalls a boastful new employee named Nathaniel. When Nathaniel entered the Hoboken piney woods in the company of Willie White and friends, the boss man had already hyped Nathaniel to be one of the best dippers he had ever come across. The boss swore that Nathaniel could dip three barrels of gum a day and be home by noon. Skeptical, the workers watched Nathaniel closely throughout his first day in the woods. Though he didn't have three barrels full of gum until 1:30 in the afternoon, this was still an astonishing feat. Sensing his co-workers amazement, Nathaniel began to brag. It became clear that established members of the group needed to put him in his place. When White arrived in the woods the next morning, the men had devised a plan to trick Nathaniel into modesty. As would be expected, Nathaniel offered a cocky, "Y'all with me today?" to the workers when they began the day's chores. "Oh yeah," the workers laughed to themselves, "We with you, man." Nathaniel went to working as usual, dipping gum at a record pace. But as he worked, another worker stealthily poured a shot of 66 brand laxative in Nate's glass bottle of Coca-Cola. Thirsty from his record-breaking pace, he took a swig of the Coke and 15 minutes later had disappeared in the woods. The crew's prank put an end to Nate's bragging. "He come out there and try to show off," White remembers. "We didn't like that now. He can come out there and be like we do."

Although "showing off" was not appreciated in the newcomer, turpentiners did appreciate a veteran worker of exceptional skill. Turpentiners only became legendary in

their trade, according to Junior Taylor, by working harder than anyone else on the camp. Wilburt Johnson, known to his boss (Gillis Carter) as the “ringleader” of the other workers in the woods, explains that only the worker who had the most to show for his work – whether it was boxes chipped, cups tacked, or barrels dipped – was able to gain a title like “ringleader.”

Workers who were considered legendary in the piney woods were not afraid to let others know about it. While C. J. Taylor is not shy about recounting his own expertise (“I can *naturally* drive a nail, you can believe that,” he says of his ability to tack cups on trees with only one hammer’s blow to the head of each nail), he is unabashed in bragging of his brother’s legendary work ethic. Junior tacked more tin, chipped more boxes, and rosined more trees than any man C. J. has ever seen in the turpentine woods. “Everything he started doing, he would beat you doing it,” C. J. says of Junior. “He wouldn’t let *no* man beat him in the woods. They called him the little ‘Iron Man.’ I ain’t joking. You ask anybody where you go about Junior Taylor... ask any white guy, I don’t care who you ask... Everybody around this place here, they’ll know Junior. He was a lead man in work. That joker’s a *natural* worker.”

Everywhere he went, Junior Taylor received verbal and physical challenges of one-upmanship from workers who only seemed to get younger as Taylor grew older. Taylor would have none of it, however, and he repeatedly sent baby-faced workers home red-faced and angry. Junior’s trash talking is as passionate today as if he were still laboring among the South Georgia pines.

I beat them jokers doing everything, chipping and everything. I chipped more trees than any man on the job. I be dipping more gum too... Another thing, when you’re rosining them trees down off that bark, I was the onliest one that could stand it. All the rest of them that wasn’t dead

gave up. Because that's all I do in the wintertime, rosin that bark off the tree... I'd rosin every tree we put up; I'd rosin it down myself. Them jokers went to calling me "Iron Man."

Junior Taylor claims to have chipped 4,500 trees in one day and dipped 75 barrels of gum in one month. "I toted [C. J.] about 40 years," he guffaws. "I done all the work, and he'd just be out there most of the time... He couldn't take that work like I could. None of them could... Old Man Dukes³ told them, say 'Ain't none of y'all can stick with old Junior.' That's what the boss man told them." Taylor's local fame clearly expanded to areas outside of the camp, and to this day, some members of the community know him only as "Iron Man."

The "Boss Men"

***On our turpentine farm
On our turpentine farm
Where the work ain't hard
And the weather is warm***

- *On Our Turpentine Farm*, Pigmeat Pete and Catjuice Charlie
(Document Records, 1997)

The work of gathering and processing the raw gum was done chiefly by black men, and with a few exceptions, the boss men and overseers—known as woodsriders--were white. Not surprisingly, then, a masked irony pervades "On Our Turpentine Farm," as is the case with many of African American lyrics of the period. Working turpentine in the early-to-mid 1900s was one of the most economically and physically taxing occupations one could undertake. Labor lasted from sunup to sundown six days a week in many cases, and the pay was so low that climbing out of debt to the

³ One of Taylor's many turpentine bosses

commissary was nearly impossible. Woodsriders and bosses freely disciplined as they saw fit, as reflected in another lyric from the workers' perspective: "Boss man's a' ridin by/Look out, boy, look out" (Waldorf 1996:14).

During the era when most workers were living in company quarters under the commissary system, the labor differed little from slavery. The pioneering folklorist, Stetson Kennedy, who did fieldwork in Cross City, Florida Turpentine Camp during the late 1930s, wrote of his findings, "More than any other occupational group, these Negroes are denied the rights for which the Civil War was supposedly fought. As one who knows told me, 'A Negro who is foolish enough to go to work in a turpentine camp is simply signing away his birthright'" (Kennedy 1989[1942]:261). Former turpentine C.J. Taylor of Blackshear recalled, "Things was so bad back then, you was just *like* a slave....You was under pressure all the time. You don't tell nobody what you *wouldn't* do."

Former turpentiners tell various stories, called personal experience narratives by folklorists, about their work in the woods. Many deal with treatment by woodsriders, both good and bad. The purpose of the woodsrider was to keep a tally of the work's progression and to make certain that each worker was doing his job. If the woodsrider noticed that cups on a tree were tacked improperly, or if a tree had been skipped all together, he often demanded that the worker return to the tree. Both Junior and C. J. Taylor cite the same occurrence as the harshest treatment of a worker they have ever witnessed. It was late one afternoon. The woodsrider trotted his horse up to the tree where a black worker was chipping the bark off of a face. The woodsrider demanded that the worker return to a patch of three trees that had been missed along the way.

When the worker did not respond immediately, he suddenly received a blow to the back from the woodsrider's bush knife – a sword-like instrument of about three feet in length and used for cutting sugar cane. “He was bleeding like a hog,” C. J. said, “and that man just rode right on off with that horse.” The worker somehow dragged himself to a nearby highway where he was seen and helped to a doctor in Hoboken, Georgia. Such abuse also occurred outside of the woods. J. F. Wilcox recalls seeing “nasty” woodsriders beat their turpentine hands in the commissary and other areas of the camp. “They had you kind of in bondage like in prison,” C. J. recalls. “You break the rank, [the woodsrider] will go upside your head with a puller handle or a hack or anything.”

According to the Taylors, there were few tactics workers could employ to show resistance to the woodsriders and bosses. On breaks and when away from authority figures, whether in their homes or partying at the jooks⁴, workers would frequently fantasize about harming the woodsriders in some way. Out of earshot of the bosses, workers would share stories about the cruelties of woodsriders from camps on which they had previously lived. They talked among one another about current woodsriders, often deriding them for the way they looked or the way they talked. In a few instances, an especially intrepid worker would yell back at a woodsrider when they were being demanded to do something they felt unnecessary. This could be dangerous, however, as seen in the story above. Typically, the main form of worker defiance would be to purposefully leave trees un-worked after the woodsrider had gone home in the evening, thinking he had accounted for all of the completed work for the day.

⁴ “Shanty in quarters which served as the camp communal recreational center.” [Butler 1998:207]

Accounts of woodsriders' benevolence to their workers are less common, though workers and their families were rarely left hungry. Woodsriders were usually took their hands to town or to see a doctor for injuries or illnesses. Junior Taylor does recall one boss that was never anything but kind to Taylor's father. This boss gave Taylor's father two hogs to kill and bicycles for the children one Christmas on the camp.

Diversions in the Woods

The culture of wood's work included activities such as lunch breaks, nicknaming, jokes, or other things done for entertainment and enjoyment. Over the years, workers developed routines which defined them as a group. Customs regarding foods, entertainment, natural surroundings and the terms turpentiners give to these surroundings are all a part of the unique culture of the turpentine.

When turpentiners arose in the morning at or before the sound of the shack rouser's horn, they normally had a large breakfast that would hold them over until lunchtime. Common for breakfast were grits, eggs, bacon and sausage. When living in the camps of South Georgia and Florida, the Taylors normally carried their lunches with them into the woods in one-gallon lunch pails, metal buckets with a lid and a hinging handle. Typically, sardines were a staple in the camp diet, and workers usually brought pork and beans with them as well. Some called the lunch pails "syrup buckets," for often they would soak the bottom of the bucket in syrup and dip biscuits in it for a post-lunch dessert of sorts (Butler 1998:130).

Workers supplemented their diets with what was available in the woods. George Music recalls that, on his property, blackberries and huckleberries grew in the wild and

were enjoyed daily while working. On one Florida camp, Junior Taylor recalls workers eating fruit from orange groves adjacent to the woods. Additionally, both Music and the Taylors occasionally used the groundwater that gathered after a rain as a thirst-quencher. The water had a slight turpentine taste to it but was not thought to be dangerous to drink. Similarly, the water that accumulated in aluminum turpentine cups during and after rains was also a source of drinking water. Elliott West recalls that the top layer of the liquid was a thick film of pure pine gum that tasted pleasant. Ralph Wilkerson disagrees, though he drank turpentine water when necessary. "When it comes to needing some water," as compared with being "dry all the way from your stomach to your throat...,you gotta find some kind to get in ya," Wilkerson says. Music always preferred to bring a milk jug of frozen water out into the woods with him to drink as it thawed throughout the day. Similarly, Junior Taylor recalls workers bringing stone jugs of water with them in the woods and burying them underground to keep them somewhat cool, hidden from the afternoon sun.

The workers took advantage of resources in the woods for both food and recreation. Junior and C. J. Taylor used to participate in all night hunts with other camp workers a couple nights a week. George Music's land is so abundant with wild game that Music's father used to stand with a shotgun on the front porch of his home, all the while joking about how far he had to travel to hunt. A large part of Music's diet came from his father's front-porch hunting expeditions, consisting mainly of squirrel, rabbit and quail.

Fishing was also a popular pastime. George Music, Jr. used to fish every weekend on the Satilla River in Waycross, and he would gather his bait from the woods

surrounding his home. Gathering worms was sometimes as easy as just turning over a log in the woods or extracting them from tree bark, but other times Music would have to grunt earthworms out of the ground. The traditional practice of grunting worms out of the ground was sometimes called worm fiddling because of the reverberating sound that would result from vibrating a stake in the ground (Bureau of Florida Folklife 1987:16). Music would forcefully rub a brick over the stake in the ground to cause underground vibrations, driving the worms to the surface.

On nearly every camp that the Taylors lived, the workers had specific names for certain areas in the woods. These names are passed on orally; all of the workers know the names of the areas from hearing them discussed so frequently but few know where the names originated. Only workers like George Music, who worked family land, know where some of the names began. Terms like “The Knob,” “The Hill,” and “The Pond” have been handed down through the Music family. “The Pond,” for example, is a patch of low land that tends to gather pools of water after a rain. When Junior Taylor worked on a camp nearby the Okefenokee Swamp, the workers had places called “Turn Around” and “Gator Roads.” Both of these are cautionary terms, the former a warning that one has gone too far into the swamp, and the latter achieving its name from the frequent sighting of alligators there. Elliott West’s longtime coworker and friend Eddie Lee Scipp likewise recalls an area nicknamed “Bear Hollow” on a North Florida turpentine operation. Yet another cautionary folk name for a dangerous segment of the woods was “Knee-Knocker,” a portion of a Nahunta turpentine farm on which Willie White worked for several years. White recalls that in “Knee-Knocker,” there are large natural fissures hidden under pine straw that men fell into unknowingly. Some of the

roads in Junior Taylor's camps had posted actual road signs displaying the names that turpentiners had created over the years.

Workers were also given nicknames. Willie White received his, "Coon," from Arthur Dukes, a relative of White's long time boss, Frank Dukes. Arthur Dukes delegated the name "Coon" to White when White was just a boy, and he assigned the name "Possum" to White's late brother. Dukes used to take Willie and his brother fishing when they were small children. "He would call me the coon," White says, "because I caught so many fish. He called my brother 'Possum' 'cause he always be trying to take 'em," he laughs. White's friends and neighbors to this day rarely refer to him as anything other than "Coon." Junior Taylor remembers nicknames such as "Gator," "Slim," "Spiderman," and of course his own, "Iron Man."

"It just sounded like a song, all day long"

With work in turpentine came the calls and hollers that resounded in the woods throughout the workday, the rhythms of the coopers' task of hammering together gum barrels, and other songs created and passed on by generations of turpentiners. "It just sounded like a song, all day long," C. J. Taylor reminisces.

Calls and hollers among workers alerted the woodsriders that a tree had been boxed. When each worker finished boxing a tree (i.e. hanging cups or tacking tin), he shouted out a call of his choice to tell the woodsrider that a tree had been completed. The woodsrider stood or sat on horseback with a tally sheet, marking off the number of trees each worker had completed. Workers could choose any call they liked, as long as it could be distinguished from others. Most chose either numbers or nicknames. Junior

Taylor's two main calls throughout his life were "Poor Boy" and "One," while C. J. held true to hollering "Thirty-eight" most of his life. Wilburt Johnson used the call "Can I Go?" His longtime boss Gillis Carter refers to him today as "Can I Go" when the two elderly men pass on streets of Willacoochee or meet in Johnson's carport for an afternoon chat.

A skillful worker could tack between four hundred and six hundred cups in a single day. Because some workers hollered all day long whether they had truthfully finished with a tree or not, other more honest workers became frustrated. "Someone would say, 'Hey man, stop hollering at the same time I do,'" C. J. Taylor laughs. "You know that man can't get all them trees!" Junior Taylor remembers another man who hollered "Automobile" throughout the day, whether he had completed a job or not. He recalls one worker who would shout "One More" all day long, eventually turning his call into a full-fledged song that drove the other workers crazy. Sometimes this sort of activity would get even the woods rider all riled up. Taylor remembers woods riders saying things like, "Shut up your damn mouth and let *me* holler! Y'all out there got a damn song going on!"

One of the favorite pastimes of workers on many of Taylor's camps was watching and listening to the sounds of other workers, both inside and outside the realm of turpentine. The sounds of cooper's hammering barrels fascinated the entire camp community. "It sounds like a song," Junior Taylor said. The cooper would hammer the staves around the barrel's rim, playing a steady rhythm that echoed throughout the camp. Some coopers would sing songs while they worked, the majority of which Junior says were spirituals from the days of slavery. The widespread African American

tradition of hambone was also practiced by African Americans. Gillis Carter recalls that blacks in his father's employ from "knee babies" on up would entertain themselves with what he called "beating the bones."

On one of the camps where the Taylors resided, the work songs of gandy dancers (or railroad workers) provided listening enjoyment. The turpentiners used to love to watch them drive steel spikes and crossties into the tracks and listen to the songs they sang in the process. C. J. recalls seeing convict railroad workers walk along the dirt road that ran through the turpentine woods. He remembers them carrying picks and shovels and the sound of the chains that held their legs and arms together. "They was like a slave out there in that hot sun," he says. "They called that hard labor, and they meant *hard* labor back then." In most instances, according to Taylor, even the turpentine made better money than did the railroad worker.

Music was also a source of entertainment, motivation, and inspiration to turpentiners as they worked. Many of the songs were those heard in jooks or in the church. Perhaps the best collection of turpentine repertoire comes from the fieldwork of Zora Neale Hurston and Stetson Kennedy (1937-1942), now available on-line in American Memory: Florida Folklife from the WPA Collection, housed at American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpabibquery.html>) Although African American workers culture of the period is most associated with secular repertoire like blues, religious songs also were common. The Taylor family is known for their singing of gospel, a family tradition that started in the pinewoods on southern turpentine camps. Junior and C.J.'s father kept the family together by forming a gospel group with his sons, known as

the Taylor Brothers. They had a regional hit in the 1960s called "Mother's Advice." One of the Taylor's brothers who worked all of his short life in turpentine was especially adept at singing. Jack Taylor, who drowned at the age of just twenty-two while wrestling an alligator in the Okefenokee Swamp, used to sing so well on the bed of the truck while traveling to and from the woods that all thirty-five workers riding along would be in tears at the sound. One of these songs is now on a CD sung by Clarence Taylor, former turpentine, pastor, and gospel singer.

O, when He calls me
I will answer
When God calls me
Yes, I will answer
I will be somewhere when He calls my name
O yes, I want to be somewhere
O Lord, when you call my name

Another song Jack Taylor sang that caused the workers to "go to crying," as C. J. remembers, is entitled "You Fight On." The song is meant to inspire listeners to keep fighting for a better life even in the face of hardship.

You fight on
You fight on
Keep your sword in your hand
You fight on (*Spirits of the Pines* 1978)

When Jack Taylor passed away, the Taylor family had trouble singing for a long while. Eventually, the urge to sing would return in full force, and the Taylors are as passionate as ever about it today. The New Taylor Singers, comprised of two generations of the family who have worked turpentine, perform standards like "Never Heard a Man Speak like This Man" and Thomas Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" as well as original material.

To hear Willie White's demonstration of his former hollers in the woods, there is no doubt of the significant role song played in his life as a turpentine worker. From the time he was a small child in the woods of Hoboken, Georgia, White both wowed and soothed his fellow workers with his voice. Raspy yet powerful, his vocals rang out through the woods not only in his calls and hollers, but also in the form of traditional blues tunes, spirituals, and popular religious hymns. The secular – or “devil” – music in White's catalog eventually gave way to strictly religious music, and he now sings and plays guitar at his church near his home in Hoboken, where he is also a Holiness preacher. Having not sung the blues since becoming saved, he cites his mother and father as his greatest musical and vocal inspiration. He remembers hearing his mother singing spirituals as she did her housework each day, and it took him years to realize the power contained in these songs and in his mother's voice. When he began singing them himself while working his daily routine in the turpentine woods, others' reactions to his singing alerted him to the power of the songs. “When I go to singing in the woods, like when us little boys were together and I'd go to singing,” he says, “a lot of 'em go to standing up and listening, you know.” White and black men were equally moved by White's singing, and they were especially fond of his self-accompaniment on harmonica, a talent he learned from his father.

Back in Waycross, George Music, Jr. and his father used to do their own fair share of crooning in the woods. More than anything, Music remembers regularly hearing his father whistle tunes like “Wildwood Flower,” “Down Yonder,” and “Red Wing” from well across the woods. Many of the songs were learned over the radio. Songs by Hank Snow, Hank Williams (“Senior, of course,” he stresses), and Ernest Tubb were

always favorites of the Musics. His family did not have television until 1977, and the major form of entertainment on Saturday nights was listening to the Grand Ole Opry via radio. He says that people used to joke him that his family lived so far back in the country that the Grand Ole Opry they heard on Saturday nights had actually been performed the Saturday night before.

For turpentiners, song was a powerful emotional release. It provided an outlet, an escape, from the stress of supervised and difficult labor. Most of all, it made them happy in a job that often made happiness difficult to achieve. Singing, J. F. Wilcox believes, was a “consolation thing.” This significance is not lost to Ralph Wilkerson either. “Sometimes, you know,” he says, “you get to singing, it makes you feel good, you know. Makes you feel like doing something. That means you lift up, your spirit lifts up. It makes you feel like working.” Gillis Carter’s father, Era, always judged his workers’ morale by their singing, even to the point of sensing the social and economic changes that marked the slow death of the turpentine industry:

Daddy’s saying was this: “People aren’t happy anymore.” And you’d say, “Why is that, Daddy?” “Well,” Daddy says, “I remember when the colored men down around Wilsonville would be in the woods a’ dipping.” Daddy says, “You could hear him for a mile or two when he’d dip a barrel. He’d take his dip paddle and hit on the side of the barrel and holler out a tune. Just letting everybody know everywhere that he had got a barrel of gum.” You know, he had accomplished a feat, you know. But Daddy says, “People’s not happy anymore.” And really... you don’t see people out singing much anymore. It’s not that their voice has changed; they just don’t have the prodding.

The Turpentine Mule and the Pickup Truck

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, barrels of turpentine gum, many times weighing as much as six hundred pounds, were transported from the worksites in

the woods to the still by mule-drawn wagons. A worker would sit on the wagon bench and direct the mules using a variety of verbal commands. Also used for numerous other tasks in the woods, the mules were a crucial aspect of everyday operations. Turpentine mules are still remembered as some of the hardest workers and thus an essential character in the turpentine woods, even though pickup trucks largely replaced them.

Most workers on turpentine camps, according to Junior Taylor's recollection, had their own mules. A mule was usually selected for its reputation of intelligence and good behavior, and it did not take long before some workers had developed strong emotional and work-related bonds with the animal. The first mule Wilburt Johnson ever employed in the turpentine woods carried with him the name "Pet," perhaps a testimony to the fact that many of the animals were treated more as companions than merely working animals. Mules often became as attached to their owners, opting only to obey commands delivered from the worker with the most familiar face, voice, or touch. Willie White remembers that a mule named "Dan" would only follow his owner's commands:

You'd try to get him to do it, and he wouldn't do it. But [Dan's owner] could get up under that mule. He'd get up under that mule and tell that mule, say, "Now, lay in my hand." And that mule would lay his head down in his hands. He had that mule just that trained. And he could take that mule a' loose, and tell that mule to go off. He'd send that mule off. And he'd tell him, say, "Now, come here! Come here, Dan!" And all he'd have to do is say the word, and he'd be right there, turn around and come right back.

Turpentine mules were also taught commands for "stop," "go," "come," "turn left," and "turn right," among others.

Another example of workers' companionship with their mules is clear in the memories of George Music, Jr., who used his mule "Diner" to farm his entire property by

himself for two years beginning in 1972. At just 12 years old, Music quickly grew to love this mule as any child does a special pet, and Music speaks fondly of “Diner” to this day. The Musics used to carry logs out of the woods to be used as firewood or sold to timber companies, and “Diner” would move back and forth between trees all day long to transport them as she heard her name called from various locations in the woods. “Diner” stood patiently while Music or his father loaded the wagon with timber, and then she waited to be called to another tree. Music says turpentine mules were smarter than a lot of people, in that most would at least listen when they were told to do something.

Aside from being one of the best workers in turpentine that Music has ever known, “Diner” had personality. She took a liking to stealing food right out of people’s hands the moment they had diverted their attention elsewhere. “Diner” cared little about food that was lying around; she only wanted it if she knew someone else did too. The more he worked with her and the more time he spent with her, Music developed a wonderful friendship with “Diner,” and he says that she really became “part of” him over the years that she was alive.

Gillis Carter and family handled their mules with special care. In Willacoochee, Carter’s mules were kept in barbed-wire pens built in the woods, and Carter carried corn and hay to them frequently. Gillis’ father, Era, required that each mule have fifteen ears of corn, and he expected his sons to shuck it for them. In addition, the boys were expected to chop each ear in half to prevent the mules from choking. Each was given a large block of hay and a barrel full of water. In order to satisfy Era Carter, Gillis had to be sure that the mules were well-kempt as well, their manes trimmed and their fur clean.

If a mule became ill or injured, the Carters always called a veterinarian out to the property to care for it.

Turpentine mules exhibited their worth in the woods the same way all who worked in turpentine did – by demonstrating their work ethic. One of Gillis Carter’s workers, a black man named J. W., had an exceptionally strong mule named “Doc.” When Carter bogged his truck down in a stream of water known as Mill Creek one day, he had six men wade into the water and push until red in the face to try to dislodge the truck from the muddy creek floor. J. W. recommended “Doc” for the job. Though doubtful of the mule’s ability to tote such weight, Carter took his chain and hooked it from the back of the mule’s wagon to the front of the truck. J. W. stepped from the wagon with his reins and clucked “Doc” firmly. “Doc” tightened up and felt the load. When he realized the magnitude of the task at hand, his tail stuck straight out and his body became tense. With Carter giving it the slightest bit of gas, “Doc” pulled the truck from the creek and onto dry land. So many years later, Carter remains astounded by the mule’s demonstration of brute strength.

Though most turpentine mules were not only hard workers but also tame and personable, there were a good number that epitomized the “stubborn” stereotype. Junior Taylor recalls some mules getting a sudden wild hair and tearing away in full gallop, scattering splinters of wagons throughout the woods. Other mules were prone to kicking, and Taylor remembers a mule busting the seat off of a wagon with a sudden forceful kick. Some mules so misbehaved that, as recalled by J.F. Wilcox, workers placed “jaw-bone breakers on them because they’re so unruly you couldn’t stop ‘em

unless you had put something on them to near 'bout break their jaw. They'd be bleeding around the mouth to keep 'em under control."

Some turpentine mules became fatigued in the sweltering afternoon sun, laying down and refusing to budge. As goes the traditional joke heard often on turpentine camps:

Being told to write an essay on the mule, a small boy turned into his teacher the following effort: "The mule is a hairier bird than the goose or the turkey. It has two legs to walk with, two more to kick with and wears its wings on the side of its head. It is stubbornly backwards about coming forward." [Gerrell 1997:67]

Elliott West's longtime friend and fellow woodsman, Eddie Lee Scipp, remembers workers telling this joke of the mule and the ox, paraphrased as follows: A mule and an ox are standing around the camp one morning just before time to go to work in the turpentine woods. The mule, bending to the stubborn stereotype, refuses to go to work. Frustrated, the ox demands, "You got to work today." The mule quips back, "One day, they're gonna butcher you." The ox replies, "And after they butcher me, they'll use my hide to whip you for the rest of your life."

Mules have a nearly four-hundred-year history in working turpentine, dating back to the beginnings of the naval stores industry in America. By the mid-1900s, they were increasingly replaced by pickup trucks; eventually most barrels of turpentine gum were hauled to the still on truck beds rather than wagons. Many turpentiners resisted this technological transition for both practical and sentimental reasons. For some woodsriders, the southern Georgia and northern Florida scrub was much too thick to even consider using trucks in place of mules when navigating the woods. More importantly, many workers protested the change in an attempt to keep their valued

mules in the woods. Though trucks did become more commonplace than mules in the woods by the end of turpentine production in the U.S., mules never disappeared completely from the southern turpentine forests (Butler 1998:153-8).

Knowledge, Innovation and Coping with Danger

The thick woods of the Southeast was full of hazards related to dangerous wildlife, occupational techniques, and weather. One of the biggest threats in southern Georgia and northern Florida is rattlesnakes; in most of the literature on turpentine, the role of these reptiles is emphasized. However, according to the Taylors and George Music, Jr., rattlesnakes posed little real danger to the workers even though many feared them above all other animals. The old adage regarding the dangers of wildlife, “They are just as afraid of you as you are of them,” goes a long way in the woods. As Music explains, all forms of wildlife, rattlesnakes included, learn the patterns and cycles that both humans and other animals take in the woods, making it easier for them to avoid each other. Turpentiners worked in a regular cycle throughout most of the year and would rarely see rattlesnakes at all. The only time workers had trouble with snakes is when it came time for dipping, during which workers backtracked and reversed their cycle. It was while dipping that Junior Taylor remembers the only two workers in his sixty years in turpentine being bitten, one of them his brother C. J. The majority of serious injury or death from rattlesnakes in the turpentine woods came only to those who handled them for entertainment. Working in the woods with Willie White and Ralph Wilkerson was one such man who caught snakes, kept them in cages, and sent the

shed skin to his son in prison for the crafting of belts and billfolds. The hobby finally caught up to the man when he was struck on the hand and died of a heart attack before reaching the hospital.

More common than snakes in the woods were hornets and yellow jackets. Hornets' nests were highly respected by workers, and at the first sight of such a nest workers "made tracks" in another direction. The most prevalent danger of hornets and yellow jackets, and one that was largely unavoidable, was when they gathered underneath workers' cups on the trees. Junior Taylor and George Music, Jr. both remember being stung under these circumstances. Music was stung seven times at once; "My mouth wasn't big enough to let all the racket out," he remembers.

Mosquitoes were also a problem. Taylor remembers two or three different kinds of mosquitoes preying on the workers, and one 57-year-old friend and coworker of Taylor's returned to his camp shack one night to die suddenly from their bites. After this happened, paranoia swept through the camp and workers added protective nets to cover their heads and faces.

Occasionally, workers would see a bear or two in the woods of South Georgia while working turpentine. Junior Taylor remembers seeing bears and feeling the hair stand up on the back of his head. Likewise, George Music's biggest fear of all was encountering a group of cubs in the company of their mother. Music's fear was realized on one occasion, and he was quick to "[leave] her some tracks to look at." Junior Taylor remembers one man who used to tranquilize the bears around the camp, placing them in cages for residents to come see. After a few days, he would release the bears back

into the wild, and Taylor says that he refused to be anywhere nearby when they were released.

Several times, panther tracks were seen along the sandy roads around George Music Rd., and occasionally the jet-black animal would be seen crossing the street. Within a few days of first spotting the tracks, one of Music's cows or hogs would nearly always disappear, and it was usually assumed that the panther had carried it off as a meal.

Former turpentiners relate various anecdotes and pranks related to workers' fears of wildlife. Before Willie White's and Ralph Wilkerson's friend died from a snake bite, White also made a hobby out of snake handling. "They used to call me 'Snake Man,'" White says, "because I used to mess with so many snakes. You know, I catch 'em, scare peoples with 'em." White says he used to catch harmless king snakes and put them down the front of his shirt and let them sliver out to give his former woodsmen the creeps. But these pranks also served to demonstrate the harmlessness of some of the creatures that the workers most feared. Willie White also once used his hands to make what looked like bear tracks in the sandy soil of the woods and then called everyone over to look at them. He had everyone convinced. One man brought his shotgun. Others ran in the opposite direction. White did all he could to keep from laughing, but he eventually confessed to the prank. Gillis Carter's uncle, Cecil, pulled similar pranks. He strategically placed a stuffed bobcat in the woods on occasion to scare the workers into respect for the animals:

He'd put him right where [a worker] could see him, right in the edge of the bushes. And Uncle Cecil would get over there behind him and he'd wait 'til the man would start to chip the tree. And Uncle Cecil would growl like a tiger or a bobcat, and automatically, the guy would stop and he'd go to

looking around. And about that time, he'd see that thing... and he'd "part the bushes," as the saying was.

By far the most unusual form of "wild" life workers had to deal with in the woods was "Wild Men." According to C. J. Taylor, these "beasts" were believed to be barbaric and savage, rough, wild and hairy. In truth, "Wild Men" were runaway prisoners, taking to a life of solitude and hiding from the law. They would roam the woods, at night mostly, wandering down to the train depot to hitch a ride with the rest of the hobo culture. "That's when he'd make his moves was at night," C. J. Taylor says. "But that man was dangerous, I believe." One night while hunting gopher with Junior near the camp commissary, C. J. looked down the stretch of railroad tracks and spotted a "Wild Man" in the glow of a light beneath the train trestle. C. J. whispered to Junior, "Hey man, there's a man out there. He's got hair all over him, Junior." Junior whispered in response, "I bet that's the same man that was running in them woods this morning." The brothers started walking toward him, and the hobo prisoner ran away, disappearing into the darkness. Supposedly, one of the "Wild Men" would come by a house in the camp on occasion to beg for some water and a piece of bread.

During most of the turpentine era, workers used traditional methods for predicting weather. George Music learned from his late father how to predict rain by watching the smoke come out of a chimney. If the smoke rolled out of the chimney and drifted upwards to the sky as is expected, rain would almost certainly bypass the area, no matter how threatening the skies may appear. However, if the smoke commenced floating upward and suddenly veered back toward the ground, rain was sure to come. Likewise, Willie White and his coworkers oftentimes stabbed a stick or a fallen limb into the ground and believed that the rain would come from the direction indicated by the

shadow of the limb. White recalls that these and other such traditional methods were part of the teachings of an old Native American friend of his named Charlie Hodges. These methods, which proved true on countless occasions, testify to turpentiners' acute knowledge of their environment.

After spending countless hours working the same acreage, turpentiners developed finely tuned navigational skills. George Music knows precisely where he stands at all times simply by looking up at the canopies of the pines. Junior Taylor needs only to look at the treetops as well to know his location at any time. Likewise, C. J. Taylor claims, "You put me in the woods out there, I guarantee you I can go anywhere in them woods in the *night* and I'll come back." This skill became very useful when workers from the camp would gather at night to hunt in the woods. Taylor also implemented the use of familiar sounds to orient himself with his specific location. Sounds of roosters crowing and trains moaning in the distance provided C. J. with directional clues to his own whereabouts. Turpentiners also determined their positions by using the stars and by examining their shadow at a particular time of day.

C. J. Taylor's remarkable navigational knowledge of the piney woods of South Georgia and northern Florida helped him immensely in during his military service in Korea. Taylor recalls with much pride that though he lacked formal much education, his life in turpentine had prepared him for battle better than the college-educated men in his unit. "I knew how to train. I knew how to use a compass. I'd go in places the other ones couldn't go," Taylor recalls. "And every time they wanted someone to go [somewhere others could not or were afraid to go], they would call 'Taylor, C. J.'... I can go through a swamp or anything," he continues. "See, the Okefenokee Swamp, that

was my home. [Other soldiers] would say, 'Man, how'd you do that?!' And I'd say, 'Well, I was raised like that.'"

Turpentiners also employed more practical methods to assist them in their navigation of the woods. Elliott West kept from becoming lost in the woods with a technique he called "joining your work." This method involved moving from tree to tree in a circular or horseshoe pattern that brought a worker back to his starting place and reoriented him with his surroundings. Willie White practiced a somewhat similar method. "The best thing to do," White recalls, "is mark your way in and mark your way back out." Though this occasionally involved skinning trees with a bark hack while moving through the woods, there were other systems as well. Rather than scarring the trees, White and others used to cut palmetto bushes and tie the leaves around the trees as indicators of their path through the woods. With this method, when a worker was ready to depart the woods for the day, it was simply a matter of following the line of palmetto leaves back to the point of origin. J. F. Wilcox uses a simple but accurate analogy describe turpentiners' ability to navigate the thick of the woods:

That's just like you go in town. You know that town. You know every street. You can go anywhere you want and you know where you at... It's just knowledge. Wisdom, knowledge come from the woods, I guess. You grow up in it. Sometimes we might go in them woods six or seven or eight or ten miles back in them woods, but we'd know our way around in there... Just like you know the town, you knowed the woods the same way. There were signs and everything...

Not all dangers of working turpentine involve nature. The work itself can prove extremely dangerous on occasion, as can be seen with a technological advancement that took effect in the early 1940s – the use of sulfuric acid to increase the trees' gum yields. While this chemical solution did work to increase gum flow, it also made

turpentiners' work more hazardous. One of the dangers of acid was its lack of viscosity, which caused it to splash back on workers as they applied it to the catface. The wind could cause the same danger. "Sometimes, you'd be out there and it'd be blowing," Wilburt Johnson recalls, "and you'd look like somebody done shot you with buckshot where that acid done eat through your clothes." In the words of one worker, "Anything that will eat the pants off a man will surely kill a tree or cow. And I'll bet it will give you cancer too" (Wright 1979, 103). Sulfuric acid also made it extremely dangerous for workers to chew on old rosin as they so often enjoyed before, and it reduced greatly the use of turpentine in medicines (a topic to be discussed in the next section).

After turpentiners were introduced to sulfuric acid and began to learn the dangers of it, they began using a substance they called, simply, "paste." The paste, which served the same function as the acid, was thick, gummy, and immune to splash and wind. Though in this way it was a safer alternative to acid, it was stickier and the method of its application required more direct contact with it. It was thus commonly transferred from hands to eyes. Elliott West remembers thinking that he would rather have the acid in his eyes than the paste that burned and irritated his on several occasions. West considers himself lucky to still have his vision after the times the paste got in his eyes.

George Music and his father, as they did not reside on a camp or have overseers, were able to make their own decisions regarding their techniques in the woods. The Musics never used sulfuric acid on their trees, mainly because they were resistant to any type of change in the woods. Music always felt that the acid only became necessary if (1) the streak made was not deep enough into the vein of the tree,

and (2) if workers were really so lazy that they refused to chip the trees on a weekly basis. Music and his father firmly believed that facing⁵ the entire tree, even at its base, made for higher gum yields without having to use the acid solution.

Gillis Carter recalls another innovative method that his workers employed in order to assure a more productive yield. By gazing at the tops of the trees and noting which side of the tree had the thickest branches and limbs, workers believed they could determine the best location on the tree in which to cut a face. The side with the thickest branches was healthiest and would produce the most gum. “I don’t know if that was of any value or not,” Carter says, “but the old-timers always said it’d run better with the cup on that side of the tree.”

Nature’s Best Medicine: Pure Turpentine

“For a crick in the neck, wrap Spanish moss around it. The chiggers will soon make you forget the stiff neck. Rub turpentine on the chigger bites for relief.”

- *The Illustrated History of the Naval Stores (Turpentine) Industry*
Gerrell 1997:129

Over the generations, people who lived near the piney woods used turpentine for a variety of home remedies. As the sign reads at the Carter Turpentine Still in Portal, Georgia: “Nature’s Best Medicine: Pure Turpentine.” George Music, Jr. was treated with turpentine so regularly that he was taken to the doctor no more than twice before he was ten years old. Music recalls that when people from “in town” saw cuts on his hands or arms, they would tell him to go to the doctor and get stitches. But what’s the point in

⁵ The act of cutting V-shaped streaks into the lower area of a tree to prepare it for the installation of cups and gutters

going to a doctor, Music asks, when the world's best natural healer – raw turpentine – is so readily available in the area?

If a worker cut himself in the woods, rarely would he stop working to secure medical assistance. Instead, he would soak a rag or handkerchief in turpentine and then wrap it tightly around the wound to restrict the bleeding. The wound took just a few days, in most cases, to completely heal. Music says that putting turpentine in an open wound does sting a little but nowhere near as bad as the more common rubbing alcohol. Ralph Wilkerson's mother used to apply turpentine to an open wound and wrap it in spider webs to expedite healing.

Turpentine's application as medicine was commonly used in association with colds and fevers as well. Music's father used to smear a dab of turpentine on his upper lip, just below his nose, to clear head and nose congestion. One of the few benefits of working turpentine in a camp, according to the Taylor brothers, is the proximity of the still and the pleasant aroma that blanketed the camp community after the "charging" of the still. Junior Taylor explains, "It smells good, that steam do. All that steam would be coming off that gum, and I'd go get right in that smoke. It'd get up your nose and everything... It'd open you up." Junior Taylor also applied a few drops of turpentine to a spoonful of sugar to cure a cough. The same concoction was often used to break fevers. Music has heard of turpentine working wonders on bee stings and even stomachaches, though he has never personally used it for either. Eddie Lee Scipp's mother used to tell him that the sap from a pine tree would cure nearly anything, even heartburn.

Though younger generations of people in South Georgia know little or nothing about turpentine-as-medicine, Junior Taylor is often visited by elderly members of his Blackshear community who want to purchase some. Wilkerson says that he also received numerous visits and requests for turpentine by the barrel from members of the local community while working at the turpentine still in Hoboken, Georgia. The old folks that desire turpentine for these purposes today use it for aching joints associated with arthritis. According to Taylor, turpentine will work to assuage pain anywhere that hurts.

Turpentine was also used as a type of veterinary folk medicine. If a turpentine mule was injured or if a farm animal was wounded, turpentine was applied to the gash in the same manner that it was used on people. Junior Taylor used turpentine to kill off screwworms when they infested the heads of dogs and pigs on turpentine camps. If the worms were not destroyed quickly, the parasite would drill a hole directly through the animal's brain, killing it slowly and painfully. Turpentine, sometimes mixed with kerosene, was poured directly into the head wound, killing the worms and leaving the animal unharmed.

Turpentine as a medical supplement declined after the introduction of sulfuric acid in the woods. To ingest raw gum was a safe practice, but when the gum yields had been enhanced with acid, it became dangerous to consume. But workers continued other traditional medicinal practices. One of these was the ingestion what workers called "trumpet root" to relieve stomach aches. Workers uprooted the plant, which looked like a miniature potato, and took it home to clean it and store it. J. F. and Bernice Wilcox continue to swear by a product known as "Hog Hoof Tea," which was supposedly common on turpentine camps throughout the country. When a hog was

slaughtered, its hooves were placed in a pot of boiling water. The cooled water was later consumed. Though the taste left much to be desired, the Wilcoxes recall that “Hog Hoof Tea” was a reliable cure for colds and similar sicknesses.

Despite the financial and geographic limitations that hampered turpentiners, they were able to remain surprisingly healthy through the use of traditional methods of treatment and healing. Wilburt Johnson explains:

They tell me – people who worked turpentine, you know – they live a long time. They say that smelling that there rosin and that water and stuff, you know. And said it was good for you, healthy for you. And you know, you take a lot of them old turpentiners, they lived until they got way on up in age... My daddy used to turpentine all his life, and he was around a hundred years old when he died.