

Mr. Anthrom Green Jr.
Jacksonville, Florida
Interviewed by Le Roy Henderson

Mr. Anthrom Green Jr. was born in Soperton, Georgia on October 27, 1918 on the Gillis Plantation. He came to Jacksonville, Florida in 1938 and has lived there since that time. Green was introduced to the business of turpentine by his father, Anthrom Green Sr. at the age of 17 in 1935; he and his father worked side by side. Green guides us through his recounting the hardships of the various jobs he held in the turpentine woods. As he takes us from job to job and from town to town, he remembers various bosses and woods riders, and the process of turpentine, from start to finish.

Though he feels that he began his career in the woods far too early in life, he went on to master various aspects of the job. He relives his days on the Gillis Plantation, and life in the camps. He describes in detail for us camp diets, entertainment, share-cropping and payment, camp conditions, the house that he grew up in, and the treatment of camp workers in different camps.

Education, religion, playtime, avoiding snake bites, worship services and life for the women in the camp are all covered well by Mr. Green in this interview. Then, he recounts for us the some of the events that led up to his departure from the woods, as he decides to go to Jacksonville. This is his story; he is 85.

Going to work as a turpentine

In the year 1935, I don't think I was quite old enough at that time, but it was then when... I was introduced to it by my father. I was seventeen. I didn't know anything but what he had told me and what he had showed me.

Well, he did some of all of it, including starting new crops as they called it. 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. Every week they had to put a streak and the gum would run down to the cup. This virgin was used until it would get at least 3 or 4 feet; you chipping boxes then.

And who ever had it, these were called crops, and it may be 100, 200, no telling how many trees in the crop. Now, he would have to once a week make a streak with the hack; he had to chip it this way, and you done that until it was raised higher as it was higher.

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.

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. 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. Ah, 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.

Mules and Wagons

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.

They made their trails even if it was a new crop. He still would have to make a new trail. 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. Turpentine was a hard job.

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.

You would see a cat face, say from, well say from 12ft, 12 inches from the ground up at least.

The pull was a long stock. See once you got up to where you had to pull, you didn't use the short stock no more, you had what they call, ah, a puller for to pull boxes, the lower one was a hack.

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. Once these barrels were hauled in to the still it was gum. And ah, I know 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. Its been cooked, its not gum anymore its rosin. Its 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. 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 scrapping. 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, spring time come. That's when your turpentine business really started to work.

Woods riders and Youth in the Woods

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. It was a hard job and I believe....

it affected me being so young. I believe that's what broke this arm. I didn't even know it was broke. One Saturday I went to a ball game, you know how we had sandlot baseball. I went to throw the ball, naw, the ball got loose and it came over where I was standing. I reached and went to throw it, and when I threw it this arm fell on back-broke.

Jobs in the Woods

Cause in 1938 I had done some of everything to be done except pulling logs out of the woods, and so I know I needed to get Public Work, and I left and came to Jacksonville in 1938, and that got me away from turpentining.

Winter Turpentining

There were other things that we had to do during turpentining. 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 Top line, 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.

The Quarters...The Commissary...Food...Settling Up...Losing

The Gillis', they had a quarters with little shacks; people lived in them.

The quarters: all those people that worked for the Gillis' lived in the quarters. They were little, two room maybe three. You didn't hardly see one with three: two room houses. You lived in them. They had a commissary. That was a store. They carried bout everything you would need. Course you ate a lot of white back salt pork, you ate a lot of black eyed peas, you ate a lot of rice. And those that when they killed hogs, they would cure that meat, and they'd put that meat in the commissary. Now, you went, whatever you needed, you went to the commissary, and you bought it, and it was put on the book.

They'd settle up with you every first Saturday. Every first Saturday, all those people that had worked had to go in to be settled up. They would determine how much you had made when they would determine how much you might owe. If

you got any money you borrowed it from them. And at the end of the year when you settled up, we say, the first Saturday in December. He would determine whether or not you come out on top, or you still owed him. And you usually still owed him.

Sharecropping was something similar, very similar.

You take a sharecrop and you bring it up to where you lay it by. That's getting close to where you gonna harvest. And many times the owner would find a reason to fall out with you. And many times he would run you off his place, and you would wind up losers, and he would get the spoils. Well, turpentine was that. You was working for just about nothing, because you was always in debt to the man. If you wanted to leave, then another man had a turpentine farm. If you went to see him, then he would pay off what you owe this man, and you would work for him.

You go in in debt, and you come out in debt.

Conditions in the Quarters

The conditions were very bad. You might have heard statements that those were the good old days. But see, we lived in these little shacks, and a lot of times they would situate a well, they used to dig big wells, and it wasn't a well at every house. Ah, people had to gather round to get their water, or do their washing from that well. Now if it was a big quarters, there may be two wells but everybody had to get their water from that well.

There were others that, people really suffered. Sometimes a man could be sick and he would have the little, he had his foremen of all the different departments, and they may go and roust him out of, out of bed. I know one man died. He was sick, he had pneumonia and they made him get up and go anyhow.

They took a fella, beat him, they tied him to a tree, a pine tree, and beat him to death, and left him tied to that tree. Another one in that same settlement, this white fella was using his wife, and he, this fella got kind of drunk; up and jumped on his wife-beat her up like Saturday. That white fella met him down the road on Sunday, shot him dead right in the road about his own wife.

School

We walked to school.

Six miles one way to school, that was twelve miles round. We walked while the white children rode the bus and throwed things after us as we walked along the road.

We knew they had a better situation than we had, cause the school I went to was only two rooms to it. They went in a big school.

I never will forget Ms. Evelyene Beasley that was my teacher. The first teacher I went to was my aunt. Aunt Maggie, ah, my mothers sister. She was teaching up in Adrian, Georgia, and that's where I went to school. The first year I went to school under my aunt. Little old, this was a one room school and ah, it was just like the churches. The schools and the churches were all, you know, wood, no paint on them; seats that were made by men who thought they could drive a nail. That's the way, that's the way we come up.

Church

Church was like church ought to be today. They had what they called, ah, circuit preachers because he'd have more than one church. Cause in our area there were two churches in the area; the Methodist church, Pendleton Springs, and Pendleton Springs Baptist church. And if when services was at the Methodist church we went, when it was at the Baptist church we went cause neither one of them had church every Sunday. And at one point we lived in a place where we were close to a school called, a church called Outler Grove.

Playtime in the Camps...Clothes

We had our own way of playing. Ah, we made whatever we had to play with. We'd roll a car tire to death, or we'd get a hold of a wheel with a iron guider and we'd roll it. We could roll it for miles, just running along with that guider. An old tire, we may bat that, I don't know how far. Ah, and we played a lot of games: ring around the something, and we used to use the whip and the different kind of games we played. We had a lot of fun with the way we played. Ah, we didn't have the things we have now.

The clothes; I wore overalls, they had the jacket. The overalls, all that went together, and you had one you kept special. You kept that ironed, starched and ironed. You wore that on the weekend. And through the week, ah, your brogan shoes you had, and to work in the woods, you had to wade a lot of water.

A Tough Job

There were people who didn't live as long as me, I'm 85 years old. There was a lot of young men didn't make it that long, because they worked wading in the water in the winter, ah, with that heavy work. Those barrels, rolling them up onto the truck.

Dipping tar, that was no easy job, and a lot of them died early-young.

Rough For Women... But Some Rocked

Ah, for women, it was, it was rough in the quarters.

Well, what made it so rough, now you know how women are? They ah, first of all I learned a lot when I was a little fella. Those guys would be running one another's wives, and I saw one get slashed good with a razor, cause the other one was running with her husband. All of that kind of stuff was going on. Now, there was some spiritual folks in it. On a Wednesday night, they ROCK-they would sing songs, hymns, and some of them would pray.

They would do that on Wednesday nights; now it might be at our house tonight, and next Wednesday night it be at somebody else's house. It went round and round and round. And ah, they would do that on Wednesday night. They called it a ROCK: but ah, those people who believed in God, they would all be involved.

Dangers in the Woods

And let me tell you something about the woods. If I had a crop I knew where I wanted to start my work. If I started pulling my boxes right here, I'd run a certain way, a certain way I would go. Now you'd be surprised, you'd very seldom run in to any kind of, like, a rattle snake. But sometime I take a notion, to say well, I'm gonna start over here this time, come back this way. You bound to run into him.

He knew your regular route.

But if you run it another way, you subject to run into him, because he know how to stay out your way. If you run it the way you always run it, he knew how to stay out your way.

Work Clothes

You know what? When you wear turpentine clothes, they're stiff. And the teeth out of one of them, his teeth got hung in them and he didn't get loose. And the guy jumped and runned so (laughter), he was about dead when he stopped running, this is no joke. So, it was many things that you had to contend with in working in the woods.

The Bible...Gambling...Moonshine...Jukes

Those that, those that ah, believed in worship service, they would like meet around each others house, sat and talk the bible or stuff like this. The others that didn't, if they were drinking moonshine, they got together and drank the moonshine. They shot dice, they done the gambling and all that kind of thing.

They would like, if they were gambling or drinking, it would take place, like they buddies, certain ones buddied together and you'd find them at the same place drinking moonshine; that's what they had moonshine.

We didn't know nothing about no juke joints.

Not unless you went in to town, and that was a little old place, shucks, 10 or 12 people, it was loaded.

They had people who could play an organ which you had to pump it with your feet. Ah, later they was able to have a piano, but way back it was either a guy with either a guitar or a harmonica.

Now if you had a dance, it was either at the school, and ah, the school if it had a platform, then he would come and play the music, and the guys, that's how most of us learned to slow drag; behind guitar or harmonica music. And they knew how to play for you to dance.

It was tough, but I learned something.

Turpentine was tough and I feel like I was put into too early.

The one thing that it did teach me was that I was to earn whatever I received. Other words, if I worked for you, I needed to give you a day's work for a days pay. That stayed with me; that stayed with me even until this day.

A Song---Pass Me Not O Gentle Savior

(out cue at 1h 06m 34s)...*END*