

**Mr. L. A. Nelson**  
**Nashville, Georgia**  
**Interviewed by Le Roy Henderson**

Mr. L.A. Nelson was born in Spring Hill, Georgia on February 26, 1903. Spring Hill was a settlement started by Negroes from South Carolina. These newly freed slaves migrated to an area approximately 6 miles outside Thomasville, Georgia. They cleared a wooded area and established homestead farms on the cleared site. Nelson's biological father left the family while he was still quite young, but he and his younger sister were reared by his mother who worked several domestic jobs to provide for them. Nelson was introduced to the turpentine business by his stepfather, Mr. Will Brown, sometime between his 12<sup>th</sup> and thirteenth birthday (1915-1916). His first experience in the woods was as a pine raker.

Nelson's family moved from woods to woods over a fifty year period. They went from Murphy, Georgia to Fargo, Georgia and on to other locations in Colquitt County. Farming was also a part of Nelson's experience while turpentineing, and he worked the areas of Dahlonega, Georgia, Moultrie, Georgia, Macon, Georgia, Cordele, Georgia, Waycross and Blackshear, Georgia. Next, it was on to Florida as Nelson sought to work the woods in Jasper and Jennings. Then he came back to Georgia to work in Council, Needmore, Mayday and Tom's Creek.

Nelson's experiences in the camp and his acquired ability took him from raking pines, to chipping and mauling casks, to tacking tin and pulling boxes, and even to woods rider, and from there to driving trucks. His experience also put him in the employ of many different turpentiners. He began working for Poole and Langdale. Later he worked for S. W. Paul, and the Wetherington family. Nelson describes in great detail, sometimes humorous, and sometimes painful, his experiences over several decades as a turpentine.

At the time of this interview Mr. Nelson, or "Stick" as he was fondly called, was ninety eight years old. This interview took place in the summer of 2003, and shortly after its completion, Nelson died. He gives us an accounting of the lives of the people that he worked for, and of those with whom he worked. He gives us a vivid picture of life in the camps-covering camp conditions, bosses, entertainment, sports, money, self employment, food, education, religion, women and children.

This is his story.

***Learning to turpentine---first memories***

Well, when I first started it they did what you call rake pines. Get you a hoe, clean around the bottom of that tree, where the fire wouldn't catch it and burn it up.

Well, I first started working turpentine when a little boy on down further, place called Fargo.

You heard tell of the Langdales. Well, I started working for them. I started working for Langdale and Poole.

First job I had in it was weeding pines, next job in it was chipping boxes, and you chip them boxes, you hung a cup on the bottom of the tree down there, and you cut a streak across there and the gum would run out into that cup. That cup get full, dip it out, put in a barrel, carry it to the still and make rosin and turpentine out of it.

### ***Boss men---Woods Riders---Workers and Treatment***

I didn't do no special favor but work, and they didn't do me none. They like to beat on people, they tell you how they gon' kick you or hit you or something. I tell him don't you put your foot on me. I never got kicked by none and I never have got hit by none. Cause if you done something I didn't like, I told you about it then. Yeah, I told you about it then.

### ***Singing---Entertainment---Jukes***

They had pianos in a big house there and they called that a Juke Joint. I went in one of the Jukes a many night, all night.

### ***Women and work***

Chop cotton, hoe peanuts and gather corn and stuff like that. But now, in the turpentine business they could rake pine, theys some women would chip, do anything a man do.

### ***Work Ethic***

What did it teach me? Yes sir, tend to my business and leave the other fellas alone. Now that's the best teaching you can get. Don't give and don't take. That's what keep me in there.

### ***Life in the Camps***

The white folks, most, didn't too many people, white folks stay in the camp with colored folks.

But there'd be a white man or two in that camp; the man that owned the camp, and he had what they call a woodsman. And from time to time, camp what I mean, he had what he called a over rider.

If he was a good man, he was a good man to get along with. But some of them wanted to be kinds important and bigoted, and want to beat you or hit you or something. But if you stood up for yourself, you didn't have no trouble.

### ***Camp Life***

You see, you had your privileges.

I was a good ball player.

They had teams just like they do now, and they'd go from place to place like they do now.

Farmers have big plantations; 15-20 plows. Well, you take it that was a big camp, farm. And they'd go, they didn't let the niggers have but three days out the year to play ball and things.

Tom's Creek, place right below Valdosta down there where that Wetherington woman live there, that was one place, Fargo was another one. Short stop, right field, I could do a little bit of any of it. But it was one thing I didn't like was back stopper. Didn't want that man chunking at me.

You see, these old big shot farmers would let the niggers off the fourth of July, they play ball the twentieth of May.

Just a day kinda that they freed them niggers kind of. And that was his all day, the twentieth of May and the fourth of July.

### ***Holidays in the Camp***

Christmas, Christmas day you had a week off.

Thanksgiving, fourth of July, and the twentieth of May, them three days them big shot farmers would get together and the niggers could play ball. But then, I forgot; in turpentine, every Saturday and Sunday you could play ball if you want to.

Oh, it was alright. It was just a bunch of them get together and have fun.

Yeah, they'd have big eats, that's what they allow, now mostly that boss man would help them prepare a big dinner.

### ***Children in the Camp***

They went to school.

They had, what ah, way back then, colored went to colored schools and whites went to white schools.

The Langdales yonder in Valdosta got they start out, they daddy built a camp two miles out in the woods.

Judge Langdale's daddy he raised a bunch of people out there. He had a way to carry them to school. He had a school right there on the job.

When school started, white children always had to go to school. Black children didn't.

Well, I went to school all around. Every where we went I went to school a little bit.

They didn't compel you to go to school then. You go to school if you want to, and then, if the boss man was willing for you to go to school, you go to school.

Teachers come up just like they come up now.  
White children had a good school to go to.

Poor people had just some old broke down something or other. Had a school now out there to Thomasville, that's where I done the biggest going to school. We got wood, didn't have no lights, and things in school like it is now; and heaters and all that kind of junk. You heated from a wood heater, and then the boys would go out in the woods and cut that wood up. They go out there and cut it long and bring it to the school house and cut it up. Then us little children would tote it in. And there'd be 2 or 3 certain children had to be there when it was cold, every morning to build a fire in that big heater; warm up the school. Out there where I was telling you about, Spring Hill, wasn't but two families out there and they both run a store. One on this end and one the other end. But now you want to get in trouble, you go out there and mess with one of them niggers then. Them two crackers get together and get their crew and run you.

### ***Camp Life***

Everything just about in them camps come to be as one.  
Yeah, just like family.

Church time, my momma was a church lady, now my dad wasn't too much of a church man until he died.

I wish I could count the dollars I heard her sing. All them good old religious songs. Her favorite song was "Gimme That Old Time Religion.

And them old sisters would get in there, having revival. Sisters would go in there and open up, have their little prayer meeting, then turn it over to the brothers. It was some good times back in them days and it was some bad times. Yes sir.

### ***Money***

President Hoover, he come in here and cut the wages down where a man wouldn't make but a dollar a day, and little boys, young men fifty cent. I was making just as a man.

Well, that dollar a day wasn't in there then. See, you worked by piece in the fall of the year, you raked pine by the hundred.

Hoover come in there and we was getting two dollars a hundred to rake them pines. He cut it down to fifty cent.

Where we was getting \$2.50 a thousand for chipping and pulling, he cut it down to a dollar.

I had rented me about 30,000, and had hired two men to help me work mine.

Make some money.

I had been doing it for 3 or 4 years for the other fellow and I decided I'd try to do something for myself. And then I'd done left home but I went back and I talked to my daddy about it. He say Kid, he say Kid, say that's a good idea, you can make some money.

I said I wasn't gon' work for that.

I had all them boxes ready to dip out, and had dipped about half of them. And that Saturday morning was pay day and I walked in the commissary to get paid for all that I got out, where I could pay my mens off. Old man Boyd, the captain, the man that run the camp, say Nelson, I say, Yes Sir. He say, you heard the latest ain't you:? I say yes sir. I say, but what about it? What y'all go do about it? He say well, ain't nothing we can do about it. I say what you say? Ain't nothing we can do about it. Says ah, I say captain Boyd. He used to be a convict captain.

He was a good man, and calm.

He was the camp man then, but he had been a warden on the chain gang for several years. But he seen in the paper where Langdale and Poole wanted a woodsman and a camp manager, and he come and traded with them. And I say Captain Boyd, I say, now there 25 barrels on the platform, say you gon' cut for them too? He say yeah, everything. I say, now I could see if you was cutting everything in the woods, but that on the platform, I don't see where you oughta cut that. Ought to let that go just like it always been. He say no, I can't do it. I say well, just wait. I start to walk out. He say, ah, Mr. Langdale just call me, told me he's on his way up here. I say well, I'll be waiting on him when he gets here.

Mister Langdale the old man, not none of them that's in Valdosta now. He drove up there and got out; he drove up to that store. I just stepped to one side there on the porch, and when he got in there he say hey Nelson, I say Mr. Langdale, I say, Mr. Langdale I want to talk to you. He say ah, you done been over to the commissary? I say Yes Sir. He say you want to talk to me over here, or you want to go over there to the office? I say, I'll just wait and go over there to the office. So, we went over there, I explain to him like I did. He, say well, he say, I'm just like you, but I got this to do just like the government say.

Say, well, when he got through paying for that, I had enough on the platform to pay my boys off for all the work they had done. And for that what was back in the cup in the woods. I called them all up there to the commissary. I say, alright captain Boyd, pay them off, just like you paying the rest of them off. He did and he paid off, had about 3 dollars left see, for my whole months work and that was, we got paid off once a month, and that's what I got out of it. So they went on and that next morning, Monday morning, I went up there and the boy say to me, say Stick; I say what? Say, what you gon'do? I say, he say, what you gon' do this morning? I say now, I tell you what, y'all go over there and start where we usually start, if y'all want to. But I ain't doing a damn thing myself. Say, you ain't? Say, naw. Say well, what you gon'do? I say I don't know. Bout 10 o'clock, I stayed out on the far end of the quarters; I come on up through the quarters walking, all dolled up like I was bout ready to go to church. Met captain Boyd, he had these old pacing horses going. Met me, say whoa! Say, where you going looking like that? Say, I don't know.

He say, you going to that far piece like you always start, ain't you? I say, yes sir. I said, they is, but I ain't hitting another damn lick.

### ***Woods riding***

Well, the way I tend my own business and left the other fellas alone. And you do like that and the man out there got two-three little things he need done. He figure you could take somebody and get him to do it. That's how I got my start.

I treated them just like I'd treat a white person.