

## Part Five: The “Spirits” of Turpentine: A Conclusion

**Timothy Prizer**

***“There’s been a lot of hard work, a lot of sweat dropped in these old piney woods around this area. A lot of people that’s labored and worked so hard that’s done forgotten. But the good Lord knows each and every one of ‘em. And they’re all counted.”***

*- Gillis Carter*

As work among South Georgia’s pine forests fades from the collective memory of the American South, many turpentiners express both deep concern and heartfelt sentiment for the only way of life most of them have ever known. Workers’ concerns encompass a variety of subjects: foreign production and technology, detrimental effects on communities in the South caused by turpentine’s removal, and the survival of the workers’ traditional agrarian lifestyles and customs. But this very real fear of cultural loss exists simultaneously with intense pride. For the men who have known little else outside of working turpentine, there exists no stronger source of identity; turpentiners remain turpentiners regardless of other occupations they have been forced to pursue, in spite of how many years removed they are from the work.

Technology, in workers’ minds, has threatened to undermine turpentine for an entire century now. Since the turn of the 20th century, when University of Georgia chemist Dr. Charles Herty designed the cup-and-gutter system<sup>6</sup> in the piney woods of Statesboro, GA, workers have resisted change and worried about the direction in which naval stores was headed. “To the great amusement of the local inhabitants, especially the Negroes,” Herty wrote of his initial experiments in 1903, “... the sight of the cups on

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<sup>6</sup> Method of extraction introduced by Dr. Charles H. Herty, in which clay (and later tin) cups were tacked onto the trees to gather the resin as it flowed through a system of tin gutters which were also tacked onto the trees.

the trees was at once novel and ludicrous.” When first proposed, turpentine producers thought the new system “impracticable, on account of the negro labor exclusively used throughout the turpentine belt, which it was thought could not be taught to work in any but the orthodox way” (Herty 1903:16-18). Of course turpentiners did adapt to Herty’s initiative, and the cup-and-gutter technique became pervasive across the entire “turpentine belt” for its drastic increase in production and profit. But aside from the introduction of sulfuric acid, more contemporary forms of technological advancement were met with serious opposition.

George Music remembers a congregation of “experts” who gathered at the annual barbecues hosted by the American Turpentine Farmers Association to discuss their research regarding methods for increased productivity and ease in turpentine production. Every year, Music recalls, the researchers would leave having been convinced by the workers that “there ain’t no easy way to work turpentine.” But the “experts” pushed on, persistently looking for ways to make the work easier and more profitable.

For Music, there is a direct connection between the decline of turpentine in the American South and in the mechanization of current times. The endless quest for an easier way of life is nothing more than a pursuit for laziness, a search for a way to get something for nothing, according to Music. Additionally, Music added, the work becomes less enjoyable, and much less productive, with technology. “There is no way to take the work out of turpentine,” Music confirms. “The good Lord and old Mother Nature are the onliest thing that’s going to control [the pines].”

Willie White attributes the departure of the industry from the United States to the commercial overexploitation of the woods. As the mills moved in and the trees went down, White says, “turpentine just went to getting slacker and slacker and slacker because peoples didn’t have nowhere to put the timber up at. ‘Cause it was getting scarce... I think if all them mills wouldn’t have never came in, turpentine would be here right on.” In his view, commercial pulp wooding and logging were outside technological players in turpentine’s disappearance.

Just when turpentine became more lucrative to workers, the industry collapsed in America. Following current global trends, turpentine producers, in search of cheaper labor, began looking elsewhere for turpentine production. They struck gold in places like South America, Indonesia, and China, and American turpentine operators continue to prosper from their foreign workforce. When C. J. Taylor hauled his last barrel of turpentine gum to the still only to be turned away, turpentiners in this country were making “good money” – about \$150 per barrel of gum. “When things got good,” Taylor remembers, “everything moved out from under us.” Junior Taylor feels that turpentine’s decline “makes for a lot of stealing and robbing and harming one another. Because the middle class people, they depended on turpentinig. They didn’t think that would never go out... Ain’t no work for the black man in the farming, ain’t no work in the turpentine.” Technology and urban greed, Taylor insists, has ruined the lives of rural blue-collar Americans. Willie White sees turpentine as a job on which the poor and uneducated could depend. Unlike jobs now, no one was forced to undergo drug screenings or provide proof of sufficient education. “You just go out there and tell the man you wanna work,” White states, “and he’ll put you to work.”

It's a lot of people around here right now that are wishing turpentine were here 'cause they would have a job. Some of 'em right now is on the streets. Ain't got no work or nothing. They're homeless. They ain't got no home. Ain't got no work they got to do. But if turpentine was here, I guarantee you them peoples would have a job and they would have food to eat.

Willie White, one of the younger turpentiners interviewed, has positive and nostalgic memories of turpentine:

During my lifetime in turpentine, I come to find out that I loved it and it was many more, many more people loved turpentine. Turpentine was a sort of job that you can always depend on. You didn't have to worry about this and worry about that because you could be your own boss... You go when you wanna, come when you wanna... You didn't have nobody to tell you this and tell you that. You knew what your job was... You wanna go out there and say, "I'm going to make half a day," you go make half a day... You didn't have nobody to tell you that you got to do this, got to do that on time, you got to be on the clock... You didn't half to be on the clock... Rainy days, you didn't half to worry about working if you didn't want to... The weather got too bad, you'd be home. Be too cold, you didn't go to work. You'd be home.

For others, there is little room for nostalgia. J. F. Wilcox says that he would never return to a job like turpentine if it returned to his country. "I wouldn't want to go back through that anyway if I had a chance," he says. "It's nasty. That ol' gum get all in your hands, your clothes be gummy... See, now, you can't get people to work turpentine now. It was just a lot of hard work for no money. To make a long story short, that's what it was."

It was something I had to do. It wasn't enjoyment. See, you do what you have to do. What you got to do for a living, you do it. Make yourself content at it. Not to say you *enjoy* it. Nobody ever enjoyed going out there and working in grass knee-deep and water and mud and things. There wasn't enjoyment in it...I learned it was a hard way to make a living. And that's what you had to do to make a living. It was just something that had to be done. And back in those days, that's all we knew... Anybody who come up back in them days, they learned you had to work for a living, wasn't no way out. Wasn't no scheme to pull like they do now... Work, there wasn't nothing else. I was glad to get out of it [the

turpentine industry]. I didn't miss it... I didn't miss it at all. I got out of it quick as possible.

Despite conflicting memories of the industry during its prime, many former turpentiners fear that the loss of the industry will mean that their memories will die with them. Junior Taylor wishes that he had pictures of himself in the woods so that he could "make a movie" in order to educate the youth and future generations on the importance of the work that he and so many others performed. Wilburt Johnson feels youth today have lost the respect for work. "You take these young boys now," Johnson says. "They don't want to do nothing but smoke that ol' crack and stuff. They don't enjoy getting out there and working in the woods, working like we used to." Gillis Carter hopes that, "Maybe someday, somebody will open a little piece of literature and say, 'Here's a guy north of Willacoochee that worked, actually *did* this type of work.'"

Nostalgia and pride both may run deeper in Gillis Carter's bones than they do in those of most former turpentiners. Carter is one of the last people in the United States to continue to use pine trees for the extraction of crude gum and for the production of turpentine. In his front yard, he keeps in operation four trees and a total of six faces:

I reckon, next to my love for the Lord Jesus, I just love turpentine. Not that I know anymore than anybody else about it, but I was raised up in it, and it was my dad's livelihood all of his life. And I just grown a fondness for it, and I just wanted to cut those trees out there and chip 'em for people that passes this highway out here, that they might stop and show it to their kids... It's something that I would like to see kept alive 50 years down the road... Because the time has done passed since 1978 [the year Carter and his family ceased to work in the woods as their primary source of income]. We've got a generation of children that's 22 or 24 year old that's never seen a face.

Carter says that the trees in his yard are principally to remind people who may forget that the turpentine industry once occupied such a central role in the lives the region's

people. He is a self-proclaimed “advocate of the turpentine industry,” and part of his current pride in turpentine stems from the fact that he knows how to do nearly everything involved in turpentine labor. Today, it is something very few people can do. He enjoys when people are interested in his involvement with the turpentine industry. He likes when people say, “They tell me you used to dip tar, or you know how to pull, or you know how to chip, or you know how to tack up a tin.” Turpentine, he recognizes, is a “gone art.” Carter’s barn has a collection of old agricultural tools and pieces of equipment, many of which are specifically from the turpentine industry. Carter hopes to one day get his display in order enough to where he could have the public come look at and learn about the artifacts free of charge. The tools of the trade captivate him as much as the trees and the work itself:

I don’t know what intrigues me so much about shovels and hoes and axes, but I can’t go by one without buying it at a antique market or either picking one up in a junk pile and cleaning it up and putting me a handle in it. I know I’m not gonna be able to swing that axe right on, but I like to have several of ‘em anyhow. But I’ve just enjoyed my little collection. I got a lot of my grandmother’s stuff there and my grandfather’s. And it’s just a bygone era if you don’t have somebody to tell ya, ‘Why did you use, what did they use with this old, these old shucks and this old mop looking thing?’ Well, they couldn’t go to Wal-Mart and buy a mop. They took that and they used it. They kept the old floors plum slick using that thing.

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George Music, Jr., lives to this day on a vast acreage of pines. Occasionally, he will walk into his woods, puller in hand, and slash into the tree just for “the joy of watching the resin run,” and because he knows his father and grandfather would have it no other way. “It’s still amazing to watch,” he insists, “even though I’ve done it all my life.” Most of the real effort Music expends on his land today is in guaranteeing that it

remains standing in the face of the commercial and residential development. The property, in the Music family since 1922, has never had a mortgage, and, according to Music, it never will. "I just don't need the money bad enough to see the timber cut off of it," he says. "Daddy always wanted it to where his grandkids could walk through and say, 'Well, this is grandpa's natural standing timber.'" Out here, Music can stay in touch with nature. These trees--covered in hardened scrape; rusted gutters; cups filled with congealed resin--are the real "spirits" of turpentine; ghosts of his father's past, of his own past, of the industry's past.